Brechtian Alienation in Video Games

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Abstract

Immersion is constantly being broken in video games via the intrusion of mechanics and features that cause endless distraction, breaking the player's engagement in both the game's narrative and in the gameplay. Yet these breaks are an integral part of games, whether through loading, saving or any other mechanical system that detracts from the playing the core game. While the current literature offers little analysis of these phenomena, Bertolt Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt," or distancing effect, provides a much-needed foundation for the analysis of these sections within games that provoke a feeling of alienation.

Keywords

Brecht; Alienation; Immersion; Jenette

Brechtian Alienation in Video Games

Introduction

Video games, while often sold on the basis of their interactivity, branching stories, and graphics, actually rely on one aspect more than any other to bring players into their worlds: immersion. Immersion is the sensation of being lost in a different life or world so completely that audiences forget they are just experiencing an abstract representation or simulation. As a result of this both players and developers, generally prefer the mechanics and underlying systems to be unobtrusive – when these elements call attention to themselves (through a loading screen or poor user interface) they break the player's immersion by calling attention to the artificiality of the game worlds (Clarke et al, 2006, pp. 6-8; Johnson & Wiles, 2003). This can result in the player feeling that their agency is only illusionary, an increased desire to circumvent many of the game's puzzles and cause for some players a complete disregard for the plot. However, these moments do not always need to be understood in wholly negative terms. Alienation, or the "Verfremdungseffekt[1]," conceptualised by Bertolt Brecht (Brecht & Bentley, 1961, p. 130, p. 136; Willet, 1964, p. 91) provides an insight into how this distancing of the audience from a text can offer the possibility of new audience interactions and further analytical insights. This idea of alienation when applied to video games can further extend and improve the quality of an audience's interaction well beyond that of prior media.

This is of particular interest currently as video games with the increase of computational speeds mean that loading times, installation processes, and background saves have increasingly hidden the mechanical nature of video games. While allowing for the narrative and the gameplay of the game to shine through, this development ignores the self-acknowledgement that other mediums have in relation to their performance or depiction. The cultural significance of these alienating effects (while in some cases negligible for the games that do implement them) show much depth in understanding the position they occupy in gaming's cultural world.

In order to understand the value of alienation, that is the wilful breaking of an audience's engagement with a text, it is useful to understand how immersion, or audience engagement, works within media as both

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[1] "Verfremdungseffekt" is a performance effect that makes evident, in a performance, the performative aspect, breaking the diegetic of the production and making the performance strange. This is done in the hope that the audience will take notice of themes, and theatrical devices, instead of the content of the performance.

concepts affect the relationship that an audience has with a text. Furthermore, immersion and alienation can work together to push and pull audiences in to and out of each piece of work.

Context for the purposes of this essay will be broken up into two sections: immersion, and alienation, exploring how both of these ideas interact within video game academia. Brecht's alienation will be then looked at historically citing examples from different media types. Finally specific examples of alienation in games will be examined, analysing how alienation works to give players a better experience overall with their video games.

Context

Immersion

Immersion within video games can be linked to the idea of "Flow" from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1972; 1992; Chen, 2007; McGonigal, pp. 35-58) in that both deal with a player state to which they are caught in the moment. Flow is backed up by empirical research (mostly in the scope of psychological studies [Csikszentmihalyi, 1972; 1992]) and has a broad range of use outside of game studies. Whereas immersion is a relatively new term in comparison and borrows much of its definitions and findings from Flow, though with particular attention to video game studies (Mäyrä, 2005). Immersion is best expressed by Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) "Immersion is the metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water." (p. 98). Murray broadly describes immersion as the psychological submergence into an alien world or experience. The player is involved to such an extent in the game that their senses are, to a large part, entranced by the electronic display in front of them. The idea of immersion is all encompassing in that everything (both player reception, and game output) can be integrated into it, as such there is no delimiter on what it is to have such an experience, or if there are certain conditions for it, at least using Murray's definition. Immersion and Flow however can be seen as an expansive term. This is something to be wary of in academia since it does not allow for discerning analysis as the prerequisites of both Flow and Immersion, are pervasive. Still Murray does give some direction for analysis of the term, especially in relation to narrative success in a game "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality…" (p. 99).

This broad terminology highlights this type of immersion as a feature that is commonly perceived to be unique to the video game medium and constantly emphasised by game media and promotional packaging, as argued by Evan Torner and William White (2012). Immersion in many cases has been turned into a gaming buzzword. Immersion, when looked at commercially seems to be lacking in any consistent terminology. This can be seen in particular in regards to Lionhead Studios, under Peter Molyneux, as they cite immersion many times for

their products including Black and White (Immersion Corporation, 2001), as well as Fable II (Lionhead, 2014), with small results besides creating an emotional impact, and increasing consumer interest (Rose, 2012, pp. 275-280). The term immersion is inconsistently used by game developers, marketers, and journalists in a promotional manner, not in a manner that reflections the immersive experience.

Douglass Yellowlees, attempts to build on Murray's analysis by highlighting different methods of framing immersion (2000) through the interlacing of interface and narrative, which unfortunately only focuses on the narrative side of immersion. Dominic Arsenault further explores this definition of immersion in *Dark Waters: spotlight on immersion*, (2005)[2] dividing the experience of immersion into two categories: challenge-based immersion and imaginative immersion. However this distinction (especially imaginative immersion) leans too much into a player centric reading of immersion, rather than one which developers can design and improve upon.

Charlene Jennett's research *Measuring and Defining the Experience of Immersion in Games* (2008), is much more applicable for developers to use within design. Jennett uses both a mixture of subjective and objective tests to highlight that immersion is a measurable and quantifiable feeling that occurs in relation to video games. Jennett manages to readdress what this term means "Immersion … is the prosaic experience of engaging with a videogame," ignoring notably the mostly empty empty applications of the term offered by games media and promotional material that Evan Torner and William White (2012) argue is the norm for the discussion of immersion.

In all of these descriptions of immersion it appears that there is a divide between experiences that are passively experienced (like reading a book, or watching a movie), and those that are actively experienced like sport, craft, or video games. Csikszentmihalyi does not go into detail about which types of activities stimulate Flow, or the differences between types of activities, but he does suggest that simply reading books, or watching television, are less conducive to this idea of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi et al, 1977, 1992), and in so doing, suggests that they are a different form of immersion than active pursuits or activities. With this in mind the differences between the immersion of video games compared to other activities such as reading books, watching TV, or even active immersion such as sports or crafts should be more apparent. While reading and watching are mainly passive pursuits, and sport or crafting are active, video games combine this strange in-between space where they are both passively and actively immersing players in the act of playing video games. Jane McGonigal (pp. 58-60)

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[2] See Mäyrä, F., & Ermi, L. *Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion* (2005) for further discourse on Arsenault's immersion types.

hints at this through her discussion of 'phasing' in World of Warcraft, in that the activity coupled with the feedback provides the most satisfying experience of Flow. Though this analysis doesn't specify the differences in types of immersion, merely that feedback reinforces immersion. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä's work *Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion* (2005) tease out some of these differences between different types of immersion, following on from Csikszentmihalyi's work, but still do not solidly present a clear notion of what immersion is, aside from the fact that it is desirable and detectable in video games.

What is interesting to note is the delineation that Jennett (2008) puts forward for video game immersion, as "immersion clearly has links to the notion of flow and CA [cognitive absorption]," but is not the same as those ideas of Flow, and cognitive absorption. Although, Jennett argues, immersion can lead to Flow, it does not always equate to that. Immersion simply regulates the player into a lower state than that of Flow. With immersion there is:

- A lack of awareness of time
- Loss of awareness of the real world
- Involvement and a sense of being in the task environment.

Jennett's point here seems to be that Flow relies on the success of an action (which in video games is not always possible), and that immersion, delineated in her paper as something that can take failure into account, is something always present within a video game. This point is interesting to note, but what I would put forward is that rather than setting up a divide between immersion and Flow that it be a state which (following on from Csikszentmihalyi's work) simply raises the stakes for which a player can seek out the Flow state. Indeed from using Jennett's own definitions of Flow and of her idea of immersion it seems possible to map out the relationship between the two as there are overlaps of concepts. This is a simple mapping of Csikszentmihalyi's definition of Flow (1992) to Jennett's idea of immersion, with Jennett's definitions of immersion in bold, with Csikszentmihalyi's definitions of Flow situated underneath.

- **A lack of awareness of time**
    - A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness (sense of serenity)
    - Distorted sense of time

- **Loss of awareness of the real world**
    - High degree of concentration
    - Sense of personal control

- **Involvement and a sense of being the task environment**
    - Direct and immediate feedback
    - Balance between ability level and challenge

- o Clear goals
- o Intrinsically rewarding

These experiences, whether described as immersion or as Flow, do share similarities, and so Jennett's delineation does nothing but further separate game immersion, from other activities. However there is room for dividing up this idea of immersion, since the difference between passive and active immersion is something that does exist - especially since there is usually a challenge to overcome rather than simply viewing a problem.

Immersion is a unique phenomenon in games. The Flow state Csikszentmihalyi presents is focused upon having the optimal method of achieving an action. With reading, or watching that is simply being receptive to the text or image, with games it is a more complex series of actions. Although Jennett is the first to delineate immersion as separate from Flow, and other cognitive states, the difference should be noted as something that is a reality of the difference between games and other traditional mediums. These traditional elements, more passive and linear in their method of conveying entertainment, are at odds with the mishmash of entertainment that video games offer. This mix of different immersive experiences is accurately highlighted by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore in *The Experience Economy* (1999) in that this mix of immersion, of both passive and active, create an entirely new experience that surpasses the sum of its parts. Video games are a configuration of many different elements; some quite active in terms of player/audience interaction. As such immersion in games can be broken into two processes active immersion (to do with action) and passive immersion (viewing).

Active immersion results from a player's deep engagement and interaction with gameplay rules and mechanics i.e. the actions that they perform as an element of play. Through the physical interaction, mental interaction or a combination of the two, the task itself become immersive through the audience/individuals process of doing. With this in mind challenge and imaginative immersion (which can be thought of as gameplay and narrative interaction respectively), are addressed. (Mäyrä, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1977).

Passive immersion results from deep engagement with the reception of content in a far more traditional sense, like theatre, movie watching or reading. Audiences view the work in a most literal sense, viewing, reading, watching, though these are actions of a sort, the audiences' interaction with their immersive object is far more abstract than the aforementioned active immersion. Passive immersion causes players to be more like an audience than participants. As a result of this as long as there are no interruptions, or 'breaks' within the passive experience immersion is rarely broken. With this in mind sensory immersion, but

also imaginative immersion are addressed. (Mäyrä, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1977).

So video games while great examples of their own individual idea of immersion, cannot be placed next to other forms such as reading, or watching media, or other activities due to the number of breaks present. As such, describing game immersion as something akin to the Flow state achieved by reading or watching is deceptive, and unfair to the medium. When referring to the immersion of a book, the immersion of a sport and the immersion of video game, each one has a different connotation for what immersion means in relation to their media.

It may be argued that immersion in video games is caused by the core of the game, presenting gameplay, narrative, various aesthetic components (graphics, sound), or a combination of the elements into a holistic experience (Clarke et al, 2006, pp. 6-8; Johnson & Wiles, 2003; Wood, 2004). This is what the developers would point to in public relation exercises "here is our game, here is the immersive experience," (Roberts Space Industries, 2012). The developers do not show loading screens, linger too long on menus, or even show the process of installation[3]. Those features are not considered part of the 'core game,' and so are not focused upon. It should be noted that, especially in the pre-release of games during the video game's promotion, when the key systems or unique features of the game are mentioned they are provided as quick summaries, not in-depth looks into the actual mechanics of their product. Although not all of this immersion quality can be attributed to the "core of the game," it is often what game critics point to in order to explain why a game succeeds, or does not (Hocking, 2007).

This obscuring of game features, while desirable in order to recreate a traditional, or passive sense of immersion, ignores the necessary steps required to play a video game. These breaks can be seen in the setup process required to play (turning on the machine, installing, troubleshooting, and watching introductory videos), navigating different menus or user interfaces, and even in the interplay between story and gameplay. In video games there are quite a number of breaks in immersion that divorce the player from this state of Flow. However video games do provide a proving ground for the application of their own immersion.

Alienation
Alienation refers to the events or sections of media that break the audience away from the emotional impact, or immersion, breaking the

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[3] For an example about these issues see Robert Space Industries forums, "Loading Screen," problems. <https://forums.robertsspaceindustries.com/discussion/145369/stuck-on-loading-screen>

suspension of belief. Alienation is often done in order to draw attention to an overarching theme, or movement that would otherwise be ignored in the medium. Alienation allows the audience to not simply empathise with the character or situation, but to critically analyse the overall media construction and message.

In regard to video games, alienation can be linked to the idea of paratext, in that there is a blurry divide between the process that allows the player to access the core game (what is considered to be the most alienating in games) and the core game itself (the actual play aspect). Paratext here is a term used from Gerard Genette's analysis of literature (1997), pointing out aspects that while not central to the text, still originate from the text in such a way as to influence the audience's perception of it. While paratext can offer a positive addendum to the core game, alienation could be defined as the aspects of a game's paratext that distract from the core game, often considered to be unwanted, yet necessary. This is due to the fact that many of these processes of access are alienating: the loading screens, clunky menus, options, system files, downloads, or updates. These are sections which no developer or player would want to sit through any longer than necessary, since it detracts from the main "core of the game." Brenda Laurel in her *Computers as Theatre* (1991) first introduced this notion of performance theory to video games through a refocusing of Aristotle's poetics, and applying TV story structures to games. However not much has been done to work with the alienation effect of Brecht, at least from a design point of view.

For other media such as theatre or literature these types of alienating effects – that is to say ones easily taken for mistakes or errors - have been easily "over-looked" by the audience at least, due to a knowledge of the medium that allows them to know when something is placed to enhance the performance/literature, and when it is simply there as a mistake. While originally these alienation devices, because of their originality were able to shock their audience, after a while these techniques became another tool for the media and as such became part of the norm. Therefore, one could argue that alienation is now an accepted technique in both literature and theatre as part of the post-modern. So while other mediums are expected to make use of these alienations as devices in their presentation, in video games these alienation elements are considered to be (and usually are) bugs. Typos, missed lines, bad lighting, and small font size, as well as many other errors, can be overlooked in traditional media as long as they are not constant. This is due to the fact that the audience has been brought up to know what to expect with each type of media. For video games such uniformity does not really exist, partly as a result of their relatively young age, but mainly due to the lack of standardised presentation.

Breaking the fourth wall has become a short hand for many of these deliberately alienating sections within video games (Conway, 2010). The

phrase borrowed from Denis Diderot (Stevenson, 1995) refers to the invisible fourth wall of a performance; that is to say, the barrier that prevents the characters on a play or television show from realising that they are in a performance. This terminology of the fourth wall is not the same as an alienating experience, since alienation simply "makes strange," refocusing the attention of the audience away from a diegetic understanding to one that is much more critical. By contrast, 'breaking the fourth wall' is an ill-defined term that seems to be as blunt as a menu screen in that it directly addresses players, dropping the realist pretence of performance. Alienation seems to cleverly redirect attention to alternate forms, while also paying heed to the diegetic (Farman, 2010). Both may draw attention to features of the overall structure, or themes that are not simply occurring in the text, but in the audience's world as well. Alienation is much more complex in the way that it achieves this, though this will be explained in a later section.

Since video games exist across a variety of platforms, genres, gameplay types, controllers, even programming languages, an audience that is familiar with one video game will not necessarily enjoy, let alone be able to access, the entire spectrum of games. That is not to mention the potential for these processes of access (loading, downloading, installing) to fail, and thus have what might be a minor annoyance into an inability to access the core game. Comparing this to other forms of media analysis, say literature, or film, which require far less interaction from an audience, one can see why these alienating elements are more common within video games. As such the unease regarding alienating sections are here to stay. Alienation in regards to enhancing the plot, Brecht's alienation, will be discussed further on. It should be noted at this stage there are alienating effects that are made out of error, and those, like Brecht's, that are born out of a conscious decision.

Synthesis

Both immersion and alienation are elements that affect us in video games to a great extent. A simplistic approach to this issue is to view immersion as bringing out the "core of the game," and alienation obscuring it with its multilayered aesthetic experience. Developers who focus solely on presenting the "core of the game," seem indebted to Derrida's misconstrued line "There is nothing but the text[4]," (1976) choosing to ignore many elements of the medium that could enhance the player experience. It seems strange that a medium that constantly needs to address these alienating aspects chooses to ignore or obscure them, rather than incorporating their effects into their design. Unlike film, theatre and books the game medium cannot avoid moments of alienation, it is a part of playing games. Installing, loading, saving, troubleshooting, cheating, changing resolution, turning on, resetting, are all alienating aspects involved in playing a game. Although suitable for

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[4] Really the translation is "There is no outside-text," meaning that a text's context is its own.

other mediums, due to their established backgrounds and standards of presentation, in video games this distrust of alienation, seems to go against what can be gained by incorporating it into a game. Alienation, while counter intuitive for many, can highlight important elements of a medium, as Brecht discovered in his own plays. The difference between immersion and alienation does not have to lead to lesser enjoyment of a game.

Immersion, while often heralded as the zenith of video game success, is relied upon far too heavily in video games to obscure alienating qualities. Developers mainly use this effect poorly when trying to mitigate or extend the use of mechanical functions to improve the experience of the game. Most notable are the examples of in game references in loading screens (*Call of Duty* [Infinity Ward, 2003]), displaying concept art (*Fallout 3* [Bethesda Game Studios, 2008]) or quotes (*Dragon Age: Origins* [Bioware, 2009]) to further the notion that there is "nothing but the text," to further draw the player in. This, while essentially an obscuring of detail, does little to add to the complexity of the game. This will be discussed further in the section Alienation and games.

The next section will focus purely on alienation as a holistic method of bringing greater themes into the perception of the audience. Discussion about Immersion, while important will be taken mostly from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work and some aspects of Charlene Jennett's idea of immersion.

Alienation in-depth

Alienation and traditional mediums

Brechtian Alienation theory, or "Verfremdungseffekt" is the presentation of a play through making evident its performative aspect, breaking realism, making the performance strange, or highlighting the falseness of the act (which most conventional performances would be loath to do). Through this Brecht found a way for the central emotive or intellectual themes to cut through the artificiality of acting. Even though the initial reaction was one that created a disconnect for the audience, such techniques enhanced the overall experience of the play itself. This was, as many performance scholars point out, an argument against the diegesis[5]/mimesis[6] divide of Aristotle's theory of performance in Poetics (Verdenius, 1972), there would be no stage, actors or script for the audience just an experienced 'Flow,' state.

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[5] Diegesis – that is having the audience exist in the play's world occupied within the mind-set of the characters on the stage.
[6] Mimesis – truth or mimicry, for these ideas Aristotle saw no need for a poet to interpret it, since truth was the domain of philosophers.

Brecht's use of alienation however is not so much a complete rejection of Aristotle's diegesis but rather "The alienation effect does not in any way demand an unnatural way of acting… on the contrary, the achievement of an A-effect absolutely depends on lightness and naturalness of performance." (Willet, 1964, p. 95) That is to say an improvement on the already established normalcy of theatre, Brecht by using the 'dirty' elements of a theatre production and incorporating them into the act was able to bring big notions forward to the audience in a relatively simple way. Brecht did not aim to completely remove elements of diegesis from his performances, as he had no qualms about mixing the diegesis with the mechanical aspects of plays: in fact he encouraged it.

Brecht originally made use of this Verfremdungseffekt with his play *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* (1936), creating a satirical anti-Nazi performance where the horrors of war, or class/race discrimination and manipulation, were made humorous – incongruous with the idea of the Aristotelian drama (Robinson, 2008; Willet, 1964). Brecht further made use of alienation with *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938) presenting Nazi anti-Semitism, with various satirical scenes, and props used to highlight Brecht's disagreement. It was only with *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941) that the alienation process was realised to such an extreme that the very set, and character changes were not hidden from the audience, but was instead left out in the open, on the one hand to display the ravages and sparseness of war, but also to force the audience to focus on the anti-war message that permeates throughout.

By highlighting alienation in his plays Brecht was able to enhance the performance, by getting to the heart of the play (e.g. Fascism in *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*). He did not present his narratives through a mimetic appreciation or diegetic presentation (that is to say from the point of view of the characters themselves), but by making clear the events that were occurring on stage, and how they affected the audience (not the actors).

Examples of this method of alienation are easy to identify in literature. *Trainspotting* (Welsh, 1993)*, American Psycho* (Ellis, 1991) and others, all play with this break from normativity to present something more than just a straight text, using different language and writing conventions (writing phonetically, or refusing to break up text into distinct paragraphs), to enhance the audiences interaction with the text. Although sometimes thought as more of an oddity than experimentation (and so easily ignored) these different presentations of text, which delve into alienating territory, manage to bring out deeper themes of the books.

In film this breaking of conventions is best represented by the formal breaking of the fourth wall, the proposed camera in the cinema for *The*

Truman Show (Weir, 1998) probably represents one of the best alienating devices, suggesting that the audience too was part of the narrative, and like Truman powerless to stop it. *The Room* (Welsh, 1998) too brings this alienation effect by breaking all the norms of filmography to create a film that embraces the disconnect of alienation to the extreme, encouraging audience interaction through its badness. Although one method presents a drawing in of the audience through immersion, *The Truman Show*, the other, *The Room,* presents the extreme of bad technique that repulses the audience. Both display an element of alienation, unsettling the audience enough to think outside of the conventions laid out in cinema.

Brecht's distancing theory though can not only explain the why of this inevitable alienation (that performances, literature, movies are staged, and are prone to being in their own universe, regardless of how high-brow they are), but offer suggestions of how to improve upon these necessary, if sometimes ungainly, aspects of video games.

Alienation and games

Video games in many cases suffer from this Verfremdungseffekt distancing effect as well, but choose to either shock, or entice their audience with its use, making use of a combination of immersion and separation. Instead of using alienation as merely a process to get to the main text, or a necessary adornment to frame a player's involvement with the core text, the alienation effect pushes players into interacting with their "core game," in ways they had not thought of previously (Kirkland, 2007). Many video games however do not capitalise on this distancing effect enough to bring further insight into their particular games. Instead they choose to remain with traditional narrative and gameplay techniques to introduce their players to their core text experience.

Gonzalo Frasca, in *Rethinking agency and immersion* (2001) has highlighted the potential for a further development of this alienation theory, but has only done so through a modification of *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) and through a conflation of non-immersive acting, and non-immersive play. Both of these notions, while an improvement on Brecht's theatrical themes, are not necessarily an improvement upon alienation. That is not to say that there are no links between what Frasca proposes and what Brecht has written on, but the notion of alienation that Brecht originally coined in his work *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,* (Brecht & Bentley, 1961; Willet, 1964) is definitely different from the Theatre of the Oppressed, that which references straight from Augusto Boal's idea of audience interaction (2002). Certainly alienation can make us aware of the oppressed (Schrank, 2014), with overarching themes of class and race, however these are only part of what Brecht's Alienation theory was concerned with. However the proposals that Frasca and Schrank have put forward do

have some bearing on this idea of alienation, and are worth considering in an analysis of Brecht driven methodology.

It should be noted that literal alienation, the alienation which caused when the game breaks or fails, will not be included in this argument – simply because of constraints of length, and the fact that such problems in games, are simply that: problems.

There are mechanisms within gameplay that break immersion, such as, loading different scenes, death and respawning (Adams, 2000), saving, tutorials (Bateman, p. 133), and HUD clutter (Clarke et al, 2006, pp. 6-8). Each of these individually are interesting in their own right, but unfortunately cannot be discussed in detail within this paper. In short, these mechanical functions are structurally required for a game to operate (either based upon convention, or through the success/failure dichotomy that is a basic function of video games [Juul, 2005]). If too much attention is brought towards these mechanical functions, then the aforementioned "core game," is forgotten in the place of these overbearing functions and immersion is lost. For the most part these mechanisms are minimised in the scope of video games, or circumvented (*Planescape: Torment* in regards to death [Black Isle, 1999]*, The Last Express* in regards to a lack of tutorial [Smoking Car Productions, 1997]). Nevertheless the presence or absence of these mechanisms is important to video games and their immersion or alienation. Some of these elements will be analysed in the next section, but not as in depth as they could be.

 Alienation within games can be separated into two categories aesthetic alienation, which are elements which simply appear to be alienating, but do not change the game at all; and System alienation which affects the game's narrative or gameplay in such a way that it makes strange what was before normal.

Aesthetic alienation
In some cases games used this distancing effect as an essential game element, the bugs and glitches were made part of the world. Some games use this in a slight way, *Bravely Default* (Square Enix, 2013) being deceptive in its use of game mechanics (in having what appears to be a 'restart' of the entire game), whereas *Saints Row IV* (Volitional Inc, 2013) represents this aesthetic of 'bugs' with its game being one set in an electronic simulation (similar to the *Matrix* [The Wachowski Brothers, 1999]*)*. Both video games appear to have 'glitches,' but all are placed within the diegesis of each game's world, thus highlighting the unfairness of bugs, or glitches and how they can disrupt, or improve gameplay. Although this depiction of alienation does not alienate directly (in interacting with the audience in an immediate fashion) both games draw attention to the fact that the player is playing a game, and that realism is not an aspect that is present in games.

Conker's Bad Fur Day (Rare, 2001) is another example where the fourth wall is broken, at least for the main character Conker. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is a mature parody of many 3rd person platformer/adventure games like *Banjo Kazooie* (Rare, 1998) and *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD, 1997)*,* where players take the role of Conker trying to get through his bad hair day – with a lot of pop culture references and parody thrown in. This knowing satire and self-conscious humour allows for a lot of meta-narrative discourse including that of alienation, specifically making a conscious effort to break the fourth wall. This can specifically be seen towards the end of the game, where the game experiences a "glitch," and freezes before the final villain can be defeated (this ties into the parody of *The Matrix* which was in the previous section of the game); Conker, however, is left unaffected. What is revealed through a programmers debug script is that the programmers had not finished the final level of the game, leaving the results of the boss fight to be dictated by the foul mouthed squirrel – so of course Conker gains the upper hand and "wins" the game. Although purely aesthetic in its representation of a 'bug', the event itself addresses the limitations faced by many developers, the idea of 'crunch time', the need for a boss fight, and the almost *deus ex machinima* miraculous victory of many in-game heroes against "undefeatable odds": the entire event is a construct.

Although purely aesthetic in its alienation, only appearing to have crashed or to have bugs, the effect, as in theatre is the same, an alienation that focuses the audience to think of a larger theme. That is not to discount alienation elements which simply go out of their way to make-strange the game-system itself drawing attention to sections, previously not presented as part of the "Core text" of a game.

System alienation

System alienation is simply the alienating effect that is brought on by games via the use of the system, or its files to interact with the audience. In short the non-expected use of the system, the game, or any of the peripherals in relation to the experience and enjoyment of playing a game. *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001) and *Metal Gear Solid* (KCJE, 1998) make clear this 'making strange,' by addressing out of game elements such memory files and the alteration of the in-game time or date, in a diegetic sense, bringing gameplay, or system framing devices into the very narrative of the game itself.

Animal Crossing for Nintendo Gamecube is a simulation game in which the player assumes the role of a person living in small town populated by animals. Set in real time, a daily limit is placed on the events in which the player may take part. In *Animal Crossing* the system alienation, which accesses the in-game system clock, is intended to make sure that the player is not cheating by altering the time (in order to access more events, instead of waiting for each season/time period to come around). If players try to circumvent this by changing the Gamecube's internal clock they are verbally assaulted by an in-game

character named Mr Resetti. If the player's tampering continues, their gameplay experience suffers from having to go through Mr Resetti's diatribe every time the game is reset without saving.

Metal Gear Solid (*MGS*) is on the surface a third person stealth game, where players take the role of Solid Snake as he makes his way through different operations to complete his mission. *MGS* makes references to and plays around with the notion of video gaming, diegesis and form, and also alienation. This can especially be found true in the battle against Psycho Mantis where the player is told to place their controller on the ground, to have it move (using the controller's vibrate function), under the apparent control of Psycho Mantis. Furthermore Psycho Mantis during the battle reads through your previously saved games, taunting you for particular titles, and extended saves – something that a lot of video games do not do. On top of that Psycho Mantis through his 'telepathy', is able to read the player's moves on the controller. The only way for players to defeat Psycho Mantis is to plug their controller into the Player 2 port, confusing Psycho Mantis and allowing the player to play without a handicap. This alienation is multi-layered, in that it makes use of a lot of physical aspects of the console and looks through system files, thus forcing players out of their immersive experience of playing as Solid Snake. It also enables a more complex understanding of the game, and how different elements, such as the controller and save files are part of the gaming experience in more ways than one.

Although somewhat a minor feature in the scope of most games (indeed, *Animal Crossing* would only show Mr. Resetti if players tried to cheat), system alienation still carries through and subverts player expectations over what should happen in a game. In the case of *Animal Crossing* players might encounter Mr Resetti from forgetting to save, but for the most part, repeat offenders are most likely cheaters and are actively berated for their subversion of the game's rules. For the most part the event is alienating in that Mr Resetti actively addresses the player, the fact that they were most likely cheating, and that what they are doing is not part of the game. On the other hand, addressing the player, their actions and their intentions is intended to immerse those players that have sought to interact with the game through a non-diegetic sense. In regards to *MGS* the alienation was something that acknowledged the separation of avatar and player (in its accessing of game files) and dual interaction with both the character Solid Snake and the player. If unexpected, the event becomes alienating since it draws the player out of their immersion, and instead points to the console, the controller and prior saves as components of the game (although instead of solely structuring the experience, they are now part of it in the diegetic). Players, after realising this, find the resulting *MGS* experience far more complex in its depiction of play, since *MGS* has demonstrated that its diegetic is wide reaching and affecting than what was previously thought.

From this idea of system alienation, that of games accessing more than just the immediate, blurs the line between game and system quite well, and provokes thought in players about how they interact with their games.

A combination

There is a cross over between these two systems of alienation, when what is considered to be a game bug or glitch is presented not in a purely diegetic sense, or as an aesthetic touch that forms part of the game world, but also at the same time addressing the game system itself.

The Bureau: XCOM Declassified (2K Australia, 2013) addresses this effectively in its reframing of narrative and gameplay as a co-existing event. The game eventually reveals that the avatar for most of the game is in fact controlled by an alien – you – through a change from third person perspective to first. In this the gameplay systems are explained in a diegetic sense (the psychic abilities to communicate with your squad), yet at the same time, the sudden shift towards diegetic analysis causes the gameplay of the game to change also (in its first person viewpoint), resulting in not only a perceptual difference for the audience, but also a relational difference to the game itself. This portion of the game is quite strange, literally alienating the audience such that they have cause to question the avatar-player relationship, and also the idea of an unwilling protagonist. This is something which distances players from the entire notion of simply playing a game, and forces them to consider that they are playing with people's lives.

In this the combination of aesthetic alienation, seen in the change of visuals, and system alienation, seen in the change of user interface, allows for the audience a new interaction with the text. This simultaneously makes the game more complex, as well as alienating the audience out of their comfort zones to further appreciate the game in its entirety. This segment forces the audience to think about the control structure of the game, the privileged position of having an avatar, and the change of viewpoint and story.

Findings

Summary

Although alienation can be considered to add to the immersive qualities of the game, it also forces the player to rethink their entire approach to video games, in the same manner that many audiences of Brecht rethought their approach to theatre (Farman, 2010). It may play into the diegetic strengths of the game's narrative, but this is not essential (Pinchbeck, 2006). The most important aspect of the alienation is that it draws the players' attention away from the conventions of the medium, and towards a different message or theme.

Alienation, on the one hand forces players away from established conventions of play and immersive experience, shifting the player into an unfamiliar, an alien ground. This brings into focus the larger picture but does so through breaking players out of a Flow state. Certainly it could be argued that of these "larger pictures" are indeed nuanced and shaped enough to be immersive the audience/player would be gradually brought to consider new themes, instead of the shock commonly associated with Brecht's alienation technique. Regardless, Brecht's techniques when applied to video games do force the player to rethink their entire approach and interaction with games, either through drawing them in or out of the game experience.

Both methods of bringing to the fore, or reducing, alienation in video games are effective depending on the end goal of the game designer. Most do not address the issue of directing their audience through alienation or immersion, but for the games that delve into the fringes of their game the medium of the game becomes that much the richer.

Conclusion

Brecht's alienation theory provides a much needed explanation, and further use for many of the breaks in video game play. Players and developers have frequently managed to juggle and apply new narrative, gameplay, even new conceptions of structures all in the name of keeping up immersion. If alienation was more prevalent in games obtrusive and difficult themes could be made present and offer up to the audience different and more critical ways of thinking.

Both aesthetic and system alienation is a unique feature of video games that hasn't really been explored in much detail. Although certainly making an impact upon both narrative and gameplay they have rarely been used to improve design elements of games. Although an integral part of video games, instead of being embraced these alienating methods have been avoided to instead maximise some aspects of alienation. This while effective at prolonging immersion in the diegesis of video games, ignores the larger picture of themes and structures inherent to video games. Much like Brecht's wishes to push the audience to think about wider themes than just the characters on stage, so too can video games push their own audience to analyse more than just what their avatar is doing on the screen.

Further research can easily be taken up using alienation theory to analyse the impact of various distancing effects within game mechanisms, especially given the diminishing presence, due to increased computation power, of a lot of alienating mechanics in video games. As this feature of video games is becoming marginalised there is an increased need in which to research this element of video game play.

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