

A Theatre of Ethics and Interaction? Bertolt Brecht and Learning to Behave in First-Person Shooter Environments

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Abstract. This paper explores the nature of player behaviour in game environments in relation to the methodology of the dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Firstly, a conceptualisation of how manipulation of both a players actions, and their affective state is achieved by contemporary first-person games will be described. It will be questioned whether such game experiences can be reconfigured as spaces for complex and ethical learning experiences or whether their formal characteristics preclude this. Brecht's theatre, in particular the *Lehrstucke* (learning plays); *Verfremdung* (the alienation effect); and his exposure of the mechanics of the theatre experience will be introduced as a means of further exploring ways of delivering FPS experiences.

1 Introduction

What follows is an examination of whether the formal characteristics of first person shooter (FPS) games render them incapable of being utilized as spaces to develop and deploy socially rich and ethically complex learning experiences. FPS games, typified by such titles as *Doom*, *Quake* and *Half Life*, generally take a simplistic line on ethics and interactivity; i.e., ethics are reduced to a head-to-head conflict between good (the player) and evil (the majority of all other agents within the environment) and interactivity is likewise reduced to little more than the act of aiming and repeatedly pressing fire.

Progressions in the structures of FPS games share a common underlying theme: that narrative, storytelling and drama acts as enhancements to the central ludic experience, and that the transportation of the player into the world of the action is deemed an important factor in the effectiveness of the experience. This may be compared to the fourth-wall removed, proscenium arch theatre as practiced in the first decades of the 20th century by Ibsen or Chekhov [1]. Transportation, which finds parallels in the sector of virtual reality research concerned with presence, lies behind even more abstract, representative theatre, such as Strindberg's symbolism, even Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty [2]. In all of these models, the content is designed to override the form: the audience will be transported from their seats into a distinct synthetic reality. The parallels to developments in virtual environments (VEs) and games are self-evident: the quest

is to provide more immersive, more engaging and more affective experiences, to override the formal characteristics of the medium.

Possible actions within an FPS game occur within a narrowly defined corridor of allowances. It is this that separates games from what have been conceptualized as more ‘open’ VEs [3]. It has been argued, however, that this distinction is not formal grounds but can only be made on the criteria of currently available or utilized technology. Further, the narrative structures of game environments actually offer much to enhance sense of presence [4]. In other words, although games establish a tighter corridor of potential, their capacity to engage subjects is empathically and subjectively greater. The relationship between signal fidelity and supported action has long been recognized as central in creating strong levels of presence and engagement in VEs; by increasing the capacity of both, it is theorized, the user ever more present. In games as well as VE research, this is generally assumed to be a ‘good thing’.

Social interaction currently sets unachievable demands for systems of even moderate fidelity. Even recent games that boast the ability for players to develop and follow a personalised path within the overall narrative structure, such as *Deus Ex* [5], limit this to a relatively narrow set of possibilities. A player may switch allegiance in response to the unfolding conspiracies that make up the game’s story, but allowed action still essentially reduces to pulling the trigger at most given opportunities. There is no space for complex dialogue to emerge. Collaboration, debate, co-operation and compromise are disadvantaged in such a system and, in this way, a very specific corridor of behavioural response is suggested and rewarded. This narrow band of acceptability and reward, it could be argued, is a fundamental limitation to FPS games as a medium, anchored deep within their structural nature.

Traditionally, games stand apart from other art forms, such as theatre, in that engagement with them requires “non-trivial effort” [6]. What is interesting about games in relationship to theatre is that this non-trivial effort is combined with transposition, or presence as a design goal. Whilst on the one hand, the increase in stimulus fidelity suggests a fourth-wall removed representation of reality, such as is evident in the dramaturgy of Ibsen and Chekhov; the call to action inherent in ludic experience suggests an exploration of radically different and highly politicized performance methodology: Bertolt Brecht’s *Lehrstucke* and Epic Theatre.

2 Narrative and Drama

The sophistication of narrative within games has increased considerably over the last few years, typified by the move from the critical storypath model, towards distributed and integrated narrative devices that do not disrupt the flow of play. Essentially, the critical storypath model enables a more complex overall game narrative to be overlaid upon goal-orientated episodes of play, without any additional features being required within the play episodes themselves. As game engines increased in sophistication, allowing for increased use of in-episode

devices, be they visual, audio or agent based, the need for narrative cut-scenes diminished. Now, play continues almost totally uninterrupted, whilst an engaging and sophisticated narrative develops.

A classic instance of the critical storypath model is Id Software's *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* [7]. Little or no narrative is delivered through the play episodes, and the story is pushed on through cutscenes and text-based briefings. *Deus Ex*, in contrast, uses less cutscenes, preferring real-time delivery of the narrative through text-based radio transmissions. The game also makes extensive use of posters, book and computer files which can be read to deepen the story. Exploration is actively encouraged: the story is left deliberately incomplete at surface level, prompting the player to seek out further clues. *Deus Ex* also delivers large amounts of narrative through conversations with agents during which play is broken and perspective converts to perspective. Finally, the player's responses to agents, as well as their in-game actions, appear to affect the narrative. Not only does *Deus Ex* offer three completion points, but a number of sub-narratives are also embedded within the game, frequently manifesting as goal-orientated tasks. Whilst these have no impact upon the overall completion points, the inclusion and distribution of these parallel sub-narratives does more than simply add depth; it controls the very nature of play itself, suggesting and imposing a style of perception, interaction and exploration upon the player.

The scope of player impact upon narrative is reduced greatly in Valve's *Half Life 2* [8], even as the sophistication of the narrative devices used to drive play onwards increases sharply. *HL2* is highly linear, with little or no control over the fate of supporting characters, or ability to project, a personal approach onto goals. Rather than branching, choice-based conversations, *Half Life 2* relies more upon the overheard -characters talk to the player, each other and themselves, without disrupting play. Although agents communicate with one another in *Deus Ex*, text is used to bring this to the players attention, which layers an additional abstraction upon the game reality. By contrast, *Half Life 2*'s use of speech means the player has to enter into close proximity with characters in order to hear them - if the environment is noisy, speech can even be obscured. The relationship between player and agent is thus changed significantly, encouraging a closer physical and emotional link between them. As with *Deus Ex*, the nature of this background narrative encourages a type of interaction and perception. Its content is significant too: in-game agent dialogue in *Deus Ex* is principally used to give feedback upon play, acting as warning or reward; by contrast, there is a greater degree of non-specific dialogue in *Half Life 2* which, rather than offering choice, operates on an emotional, influential level or as an explicitly directive device.

The tactics used in the game demonstrate how effectively a combination of Jenkins' [9] four-cell taxonomy of environmental narrative models (evoked, enacted, embedded and emergent), distributed throughout the ludic space, steer not only a players' actions and emotions, but their perceptual behaviour and conceptualisation of events. *Half Life 2* thus raises the bar for a distributed, environmental approach to in-game narrative whilst reducing interactivity. This

raises an interesting question: does more efficient narrative control reduce the need for visible player-impact upon overall game narrative? In other words, does the increase in sophistication and subtlety of narrative mean a greater degree of control over player expectation and behaviour, delivering to the player what appears to be a more rewarding interactive narrative whilst actually removing it?

Schechner [10] distinguishes between drama and theatre thus: drama is a "score, scenario, instruction, plan or map", whereas theatre refers to its enactment. One could draw a parallel with Jenkins' embedded and enacted narrative respectively: drama is a latent set of actions and responses, loaded into a media artifact and able to repeatedly initiate a controlled set of outcomes. Theatre, on the other hand, is this interpretative act. Narrative underpins both and is created in real time by the act of theatre. The more effective the drama, therefore, the more influence is likely to be exerted upon the narrative outcomes. A distinction between narrative and drama in FPS games can therefore be drawn. Narrative is a type of information structuring that yields a coherent and linear experience [11]. Drama is a mechanism to control this; dramatic structures set up and deliver heightened experiences leading to pre-determined outcomes. Games follow these models with the limitations placed upon the engagement with narrative cues and the scope of exit points from the dramatic narrative being highly explicit and formal.

A drama can be split into three linear segments: Complication, Development and Resolution [12]. This basic structure can then be nested recursively, thus rendering the overall structure effectively non-linear in appearance, though the enactment of this potential drama will, of course, always take a linear form. An initial state is disturbed, a course of action is taken to restore equilibrium and the dramatic sequence ends with an appearance of restored balance, usually with a progression from the initial state. Single player FPS games apply this model without fail. The genre relies heavily upon established dramatic schema being present in the player in order to heighten response and engagement, and suggest appropriate courses of action.

Drama is crucial to games because it focuses expectation: it very deliberately controls affect and empathy to draw the player, user or audience to specific instances, cues and actions within the unfolding narrative. In contrast to Aarseth's cybertext, which ensures the reader is "constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard", drama in theatre and games draws us away from such considerations. The audience are rarely expected to stop and consider the alternatives: the drama seeks to pull them onwards with the promise of resolution. Oedipus has no choice but to follow his destiny; the player of *Half Life 2* has no option to put down their gun. Or, rather, the lack of option is never considered.

The FPS experience can thus be defined as a 'Corridor of Affect' and, in doing so, an argument can be advanced regarding the functional and formal tendencies and limitations of the medium. Drama, in games as in traditional theatre, is used to control the player. Narrative is a defined set of reduced options for behaviour, linked to environmental affordances, pre-identified media

schema and player expectations, and both explicit and implicit calls to action distributed throughout the ludic experience. We can safely put away the discussions of branching structures and interactive narrative - these concepts do not find precedent in the real world; behaviour is fundamentally linked to, and controlled by, affordances and actions, within a framework of constraints. As Lakoff and Johnson have persuasively argued [13], the entire framework of mind can be anchored within perception, thus lending weight to extrapolations of Gibson's ecological perception theory [14] that can be found within presence research [15]. These arguments also contribute to the idea of an essentially narrative reality. In other words, Dennett's notion of consciousness as a "centre of narrative gravity" [11], the linear output of a massively parallel system, finds a natural parallel in the idea that the mind arises from a process of conflation and combination of sensory information. Schank has also arrived at this conclusion [16], arguing that mind is best summarized as the stories that are told, to oneself as well as to others.

Subscribing to the notion that mind is a process of building narratives from available combinations of incoming information and allowed actions, anchored within a dynamic cycle of perceptual and schematic feedback, as theorized by Neisser [17], the issue of ethics and learning within FPS environments is thrown into stark focus. Rather than considering the options available to a player as explicit branches in a narrative structure, with dramatic tools deployed to make the process more engaging or immersive, it can be argued that a player quite literally learns how to behave in a game environment, and this behavioural learning process begins at a perceptual level. It is not an argument for a different type of content being used in such games, essentially a call to drop the 'S' from FPS, but a question of whether the nature of FPS environments is a tendency towards acceptance of a vastly reduced set of allowances; an inherent passivity in terms of choice; a reduction in expectations of what the player must deliver themselves. Coupled with the innate lack of permanence in any game environment, one could argue that FPS environments are fundamentally inappropriate for any kind of complex, ethical learning experience.

3 Brecht and Epic Theatre

In this discussion, FPS games are singled out for two reasons. Firstly, they are currently the closest mass market application to virtual reality, that is, the mapping between perception/action of avatar and player is closer than any other form of game. Secondly, they are already being utilized for purposes other than context free gaming. Ubisoft's *Rise of a Soldier* [18], marketed as "The official U.S. Army game", allows players to virtually advance through the ranks and specializations of a soldier. It was developed in partnership with the U.S. Army and is widely considered to have potential as a powerful recruitment tool. This combination: a mass medium with an established global appeal, the capacity for high levels of presence and an innate tendency towards limiting behaviour, creates something of a challenge. On one hand, first-person games offer an

unprecedented opportunity to enable users to experience alternative and usually prohibitive experiences with a high degree of perceptual realism. On the other, the form of the medium can be argued to be implicitly tied to a redistribution of control and culpability from player to environment. Brecht's dramaturgy followed a period in 20th century theatre when immersion was a driving aspiration for avant-garde and mainstream practitioners. Whether this aspiration took the form of an enhanced reality, as evident in the fourth-wall removed naturalism of Stanislavski (the contemporary equivalent maps across to television soap operas); or the symbolist theatre of Strindberg and his contemporaries, the outcome was in many ways similar, if couched in radically different terms. Strindberg moved from naturalism towards an attempt to create psychological, spiritual realities upon the stage. Such works aimed to transgress the traditional expectations and constraints of theatre and initiate a transformation within the audience. This is, of course, an idea that traces right back to Aristotle and catharsis, but demonstrates the importance of transcendence to early 20th century theatre practitioners. The notion of symbolic environments, loaded with response constraints and embedded narrative structures, which effect transportation in the audience, should sound very familiar. There is an alternative history of virtual reality, based upon ritual and theatre, rather than cinema and technology, still waiting to be drafted [19].

What Brecht identified in both naturalism and symbolism was an innate tendency towards individualism and passivity. Although he shared an interest in the expressive representation of objects and events, rather than naturalistic recreation, he distrusted the capacity of theatre to effect spiritual change and instead looked to invoke a political one. Brecht's defining characteristic as a practitioner, it could be argued, is pragmatism. Whereas naturalism sought to recreate reality and symbolism sought to present the deeper reality to be found behind the faade of normal existence, Brecht used theatre as a means of interrogating the world, without ever allowing the experience of his productions to enable the audience to escape into immersive passivity. In order to achieve this, his theatre utilized alienation, confrontation and direct communication. The nature of the theatrical experience was to be exposed and held to task every bit as much as the protagonists and actions of the plays themselves. The devices used to achieve this find parallels with those used within older FPS games and may provide alternative models the experience of play within FPS environments, circumnavigating the problems identified above. Without fundamentally altering the theatrical form, Brecht embedded devices within the experience that made visible its innate tendencies and allowed for a greater and more explicit exploration of ethical and political content, effecting and attitudinal shift [20].

The *Lehrstucke*, or learning plays, are perhaps the most explicitly radical experiment in this program of centering the form and function of theatre. Audience participation is demanded to realize the narrative of the plays, which are used as a platform to proselytise Brecht's Marxist beliefs. In some cases, a branching narrative was suggested, as in the coupled playlets of *He Who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No* [1930], offering alternative resolutions to a single crisis. In other

cases, the audience were supplied with a set of responses to questions they will be asked during the performance, as in *The Baden-Baden Cantata* [1929]. In both cases, the action of the play is a means to establishing a critical debate about the issues they foreground. Equally, both can be seen as instances of structured interactivity.

More subtle are the devices used in the less didactic Epic Theatre plays [21]. Central devices included extensive use of narration, projections, placards and masks to establish a series of reflective relationships: between the audience and the play and, tellingly, between the form and the content of the theatrical experience. One may offer a summation of the its aims as a critical distancing, a jolting of the audience from the innate tendency towards passivity Brecht saw as both integral to the theatre, and actively encouraged by the naturalists and symbolists. The narrator in Brecht's plays did not operate simply as a device to move the narrative along, but to actively draw attention to the functional aspects of the drama, to ethical and political issues being discussed. Likewise, the frequent use of songs draws attention to the artificiality of the experience and provides means for another distanced perspective upon the action. The practical business of stagecraft was also highlighted and no theatrical illusions or magic were tolerated, exemplified by his use of the half-curtain.

Together, these devices, operating both inside and outside the actual narrative constitute perhaps the defining principle of Epic Theatre: *Verfremdung* or alienation. In direct contrast to his predecessors, Brecht demanded distance between the audience and the play, that they must never be coerced or seduced into immersion and, by extension, passivity. The alienation effect, therefore, was a goal state in which empathic proximity was actively discouraged in order to achieve an intellectual, political and ethical reflexivity upon the action of the play. Critically, it sought to present the familiar in an unfamiliar, to disenable the audience from falling back upon preconceptions. Brecht wanted to force his spectators into questioning the things they took for granted, including their relationship with the theatrical experience. Equally critically, he did not consider that this distanced experience should be any less entertaining, a stance borne out by the longevity and popularity of plays.

Brecht's criticism of the prevailing tendencies and goals of his immediate predecessors that finds immediate parallels with the question of FPS games as ethical learning spaces. Successful immersion implies, by definition, an acceptance of the rules of the artificial experience at a perceptual and behavioural level. In theatre, as in games, these rules are both vastly simplified and highly structured in order to deliver a coherent and targeted experience. These have important, subtle, ramifications for ethics and learning: users are steered towards an uncritical relationship with the affordances of the experience, even though these affect the scope of available actions as much as the content. Drama in both media serves to detract attention from the manipulation towards an increased engagement with the reduced corridor of affect of the narrative structure.

One thing that Brecht understood was that before theatre could be used to address political, social or ethical issues, prior to its use as a learning activity, the

nature of the activity itself had to be placed under scrutiny, and the underlying tendencies of the medium made explicit. It was not simply the content of mainstream theatre that Brecht saw as being problematic, but the form. Likewise, any discussion of the constraints and capabilities of FPS games must begin at a formal level, exposing the perceptual, political and psychological frameworks of the experience. Since Bartlett, schema have become an accepted device for understanding knowledge acquisition and management, and have been discussed in relation to media and presence specifically [19]. If one is to accept a model such as Neisser's then, as behaviour in FPS environments codifies, the potential for complex learning is lost (Orwell suggested a similar effect would result from the reduction of linguistic consciousness in '1984'). As with most skill based activities repeated over time, action tends towards the automatic, and the concept of acting differently becomes more alien. At the same time, the content must work harder to grab the attention of the player, perhaps evidenced by the increasing level of graphic violence in FPS games. This turns the question of violence in games around, suggesting that perhaps violence is an outcome of the calcifying of schema, rather than a cultural trend.

So what does an Epic perspective offer the conceptualization of FPS experiences? On one level, it calls for an end to smokes and mirrors; an Epic Game would likewise expose its workings, be this a running, visible console, or coordinated in-game devices drawing attention to the mechanics of play. With the *Lehrstucke*, Brecht saw no problem with literally stopping the action for a debate, indeed, the action was really just a primer, essentially redefining the goal of the experience. Little structural alteration would be needed to use FPS games in this way, as the immersion is deliberately broken in order to allow an intellectual discussion to occur. FPS game are an ideal format for exposing the control exercised upon players and users by virtual environment designers; a highly relevant and important political issue.

More complex Epic devices may also be used to expose this manipulative process. Epic theatre attacked the assumption that immersion and entertainment were necessary partners; suggesting that not only is artifice no obstacle to entertainment but allows additional levels of engagement to occur. In other words presence can be seen as a limitation: breadth sacrificed for depth. Using the alienation effect, Brecht hoped to force engagement with what was taken for granted, often to highlight the human cost of the everyday. Within the uncanny valley [22], one might argue, a perceptual *Verfremdung* is ripe for exploitation. Narration and music, two of the most common epic devices, are already used in FPS games: the *Deus Ex* franchise makes extensive use of in-game narration to drive the overall story and long-term goals forwards, with repercussions upon short term goals and behaviour. *Half Life 2* also includes an episodic sequence with real time narration, though this is principally used to influence action in the short term. Narration in Epic theatre was used to jolt the audience periodically from immersion, and to provide an alternative perspective free from the innate constraints of plot and character. *Deus Ex* uses a similar tactic in its final episodes, when three parties 'compete' to steer the player towards one of the

possible outcomes. Interestingly, the sequel assumes all three outcomes actually occurred, ignoring the contradictory ramifications of the three states co-existing and, more importantly, meaning that the player's choice of political and ethical allegiance counts for nothing.

Epic tactics attempt to force an audience to consider the implications of the action in the real world by highlighting the artifice and displacement of control within an artificial reality. Currently games push in the opposite direction, using dramatic techniques to hide the limited choice, and avoiding the ramifications of the action in the real world; the rise in popularity of World War II simulators being a particular case in point. An Epic game is one that does not allow its users to forget it is a game, that control is being redistributed and, more importantly, imposed upon the perception, actions and ethics of the player. Just as with Epic theatre, this experience is not intended to be a comforting one: Brecht described mainstream theatre as 'culinary' and argued that the passive ingestion of content was, in itself, a dangerous act.

4 Conclusion

Brecht recognized that, given an immersive environment, where each audience member sits cocooned in the dark in comfort, and dramatic, engaging content, the innate tendency of theatre is towards passivity. Little can be learnt under such circumstances, because theatre itself works against any form of question, reaction or dynamism. Likewise, there is an inherent passivity in FPS games. The formal structures limit potential for exploration of alternative actions which, when coupled with a tiny field of content and a seductively hyper-real environment, create a narrow corridor of simplistic behavioural response and highly limited searches for solutions to any given situation or conflict. The ability of FPS environments to function as learning spaces for socially rich, ethically complex activities appears stunted. But Brecht's dramaturgy suggests an alternative model to follow: rather than embedding ethics within a dramatic structure, the structure itself should be exposed; the inherent politics of the corridor of affect made visible. Above all, the player should be aware of their being played: taught not only to act, but emotionally and ethically respond in a specific manner. Virtual environments have more than proved their worth as educational and therapeutic tools [23] and FPS environments are perhaps the closest medium to VEs currently available to a global market. As such, they are an enormously powerful medium with clear mass appeal. But, even whilst stepping aside from the debate about violence and media, they reward a limited and specific ethical and social set of behavioural responses and actions, and the ease to which audiences are immersed in this corridor of affect is already being exploited politically. If this is not to be the limits of the game, if we believe that these mass market virtual environments have a greater capacity for learning social and ethical behaviours, we need to consider alternative models than fourth-wall removed hyper-reality. Brecht's work offers such an alternative.

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