The Brechtian, Absurdist, and Poor Video Game: Alternative Theatrical Models of Software-based Experience

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Abstract

Springing from an interview with video game critic Morgan Webb, this essay proposes a set of avant-garde models for video game illusions prioritizing artistic goals that do not necessarily function in terms of the market. These models are derived from the history of 20th Century experimental theatre and transposed to video game practice via the "Computers as Theatre" analogy proposed by Brenda Laurel in 1991. This analogy asserts that software (especially video games) is more like theatre than any other artistic medium and is therefore suitably analyzed through the tools of theatre criticism. Laurel's use of this analogy drew from the model of classical Aristotelian illusory space. This article appends Laurel's analogy with other critical theatrical models, in particular Bertolt Brecht's concept of Verfremdungseffekt, The Theatre of the Absurd, and Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre. Insofar as these techniques provided alternative theatrical illusions from the emotional influence inherent in the classical model of Aristotelian theatre, they can also provide different contexts for evaluating and experiencing meanings embedded into video game texts such as Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare *and* Katamari Damacy.

Author Biography

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The purpose of the this essay is to propose more critical models for how an illusion is creat-ed in video games by drawing on the history of theatre and extant literature analogizing the worlds of software and performance. The suggestion of adopting any kind of critical illusion making (or breaking) technique within the practice of video game production prompts an important question: why might any viewer/user want to critically engage with illusory space? And furthermore, why should a video game producer create in such a manner when the market-driven video game audience demands ever increasingly realistic video game experi-ences? This requires a two-part answer. The first is, to deliberately create works in such a way is also to engender a video game avant-garde. But secondly, as in the theatrical avant-garde, it's important to keep in mind that avant-garde practice and popular or commercial success are not mutually exclusive (although the latter is not the purpose of the former).

I would like to begin by offering the case against critical engagement with illusory space through a brief email interview I conducted with Morgan Webb, the former co-host of *X-Play*, a video game review show that aired on the cable television network G4. As the only nationally televised outlet for video game criticism with a wide audience during its run, *X-Play* had a considerable voice for video game criticism in the United States:

> Where do you think gaming is as a medium in relation to the contemporary art world?
>
> Morgan Webb: I think it is the rare outsider who could conceive of video games as an art form or containing any artistic merit. Most gamers wouldn't immediately voice that opinion either, though I do believe most would con-cede the point if it were argued. Unlike contemporary art, which can survive on a small, rarefied audience obsessed with originality and authenticity, video games are made for wide consumption, and indeed every copy is identical and of equal value to every other. This puts it in a very different category than contemporary art. A video game is judged as a great or transcendent work not based on its visual merit, but on the amount of immersion and enjoyment experienced by the player. It may contain visual art but the art is not the point.
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> What do you find most important about the voice of a video game critic? (Is it helping gamers know what to buy, developing a criterion for gaming as medi-um, offer insight as to what's culturally important about games etc.?)
>
> MW: Personally I feel the most important point is to protect the consumer from bad purchases and experiences. In that way I like to think I have a small role in keeping game companies honest.

Are you interested/invested in other artistic media (film/video, music, theatre, painting, sculpture, etc.) and is there a valuable discussion to be had between previous media and games?

MW: I think a lot of the creators of other artistic media, such as those who work in film, video, painting, sculpting and illustrating are eyeing video games as a new and lucrative industry that can use their skills, but video games are still looked upon with suspicion. I worry that a lot of the artists working in old media will come around too late – their jobs will be taken by young kids who learned on the job.

How important is the commercial world to the creation and viewing of video games? Is there room in the world for independent/low budget games? Will blockbuster games always dominate?

MW: The commercial world is everything, even for independent games. Even small titles take a long time to make, and most people want to be compensated for their work. We're always going to see blockbuster games, but the independent games are just starting to come of age. You can download independent games now, and the tools to make them are becoming more accessible and available. We're in an amazing age right now, where the choices of some independent game designers will shape game design for years to come. This is the space to watch.

Webb's comments are consistent with the general assumption that the costs of video game production require a general prioritization toward the demands of market, leaving artistic or conceptual goals as secondary. This definitely seems to be the case when looking at the industrial workflow model for home console development that requires large licensing and development kit dues to Sony, Nintendo, or Microsoft, in addition to production costs. She asserted this is the case even for small-scale independent games, but she added that non-platform oriented lower-cost game development is now possible. Although home console platforms have been the culturally dominant mode of video game distribution since the mid-1980's during the proliferation of the Atari 2600 and Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), the possibility of non-platform specific, open-ended (sometimes open-source) game development is rapidly expanding with distribution systems, such as Steam, Google Play, Apple App Store, Humble Store, itch.io, and OUYA. The wide proliferation and increased ability of game making tools, such as Unity, Flash, GameMaker: Studio, and Processing, allow for small-scale game development. Furthermore, hugely successful commercial games often offer their engines as freely available tools to modify and transform into new games, as is the case with the *Unreal* engine's Unreal Development Kit (UDK) and the Source SDK engine that was originally developed for *Half Life 2*. Webb explained the lack of an artist base in video game development not as the result of prohibitive costs, but on the part of the produc-

er, who wants to be compensated. Industrial video game producers have the market in mind even when unassociated with large-scale commercial game development.

By observing the multiple levels of game production emerging through the tools mentioned above (including AAA studios like Electronic Arts, individuals working on their own like Lucas Pope, and all of the ambiguous shades of "indie" between), it is not hard to see that this is already not strictly the case. One would only need to look to the Serious Games movement, which takes its purpose as deliberately non-commercial and instead educational, to find evidence that non-commercial game production does exist (*1*). But what of non-commercial interests that are also not explicitly pedagogical? Why haven't other artistic and expressive interests in games codified into an identifiable avant-garde in a manner similar to the history of other media?

Perhaps the term "avant-garde" is not frequently applied to games to avoid associations with early 20th century visual art, an association that might ruffle video game creators, visual art practitioners and scholars alike. But a fringe games movement, similar to fringe movements that developed over the history of cinema and popular music, is not only possible, but has indeed already begun to take shape because of the democratization and lowered costs of required technology. This is even corroborated in Webb's comments on independent games. So then, if the needs of capital are no longer prohibiting the existence of a codified non-market driven oppositional games movement what is? I would like to argue it is for lack of a thorough critical discourse and set of techniques with which to exercise oppositional ideas that truly distinguish what we could consider avant-garde games from their market-driven counterparts. In order to establish this discourse, we need not necessarily demand that the gamer desire more critical forms of illusion making, but instead develop more models of criticism that can be used for producers, critics and theorists. It is my hope to find historical precedence for why to develop critical illusion making techniques and, therefore, suggest an answer as to why this is artistically valuable in games.

Computers as Theatre

In 1991, software engineer, designer, and theorist Brenda Laurel made a crucial step in the history of software design by aligning the often-considered functionalist practice of writing computer code with the artistic tradition of theatre. Her book *Computers as Theatre* is still known as a touchstone for software practitioners from both the commercial and artistic spheres. For its moment, the book was a radical gesture. Laurel (1993) was one of the few proposing and developing a "poetics of human-computer activity" rather than simply improving software in strict terms of computer science and "usability" (p. xix). The book's intended primary audience was the greater software development community and industry. But as an early example of software discussed within an artistic tradition, it serves as an excellent document for art historians, media scholars, and game critics to evaluate the aesthetics and cultural content of software. The book's influence persists to this day. Henry Jenkins

(2013) stated it was "one of the few truly transformative books to emerge in the heady early days of the 'digital revolution'" when it was republished in 2013.

Laurel's chief insight into the theoretical framing of software design is that the goal of software is to represent *action* initiated by *agents*, rather than agents themselves or the objects they manipulate. The following sentence summarizes her attitude and approach to software: "[The computer's] interesting potential lay not in its ability to perform calculations but in its capacity to *represent action in which humans could participate*" (Laurel, 1993, p. xix). In software, there is a sequence of events and therefore an implied narrative. The important development in this new medium of the computer is the addition of the interface; for the first time a medium could give the audience considerable control over the series of events in a narrative work as standard practice. However, throughout her book, Laurel (1993) insisted that continued attention to improving only the interface was not going to generate new, relevant software experiences. She instead proposed that software practitioners focus on the action that the interface creates. It is this observation that, to Laurel, links the production and experience of software closer to the theatrical tradition than to any other artistic medium. This at first seems an unlikely choice for two reasons. First, software design is widely conceived of within the domain of technology rather than the arts. Second, software is largely experienced through the mediation of the screen. To many scholars, such as Anne Friedberg (2006), this screen connection puts software into a continuing trajectory of pictorial technology that starts with linear perspective in painting and continues into photography and eventually the cinema. Although all of these pictorial practices do inform the experience of software in a deeply relevant way, Laurel's emphasis on *interface* rather than the screen, or display, frames the most essential quality of software experience as an active performance. In other words, the viewer/user is capable of making actionable decisions in real time similar to the way an actor controls the events of a play at every moment: "An interface is not simply the means whereby a person and a computer represent themselves to one another; rather it is a shared context for action in which both are agents" (Laurel, 1993, p. 4)

Her software-as-theatre analogy goes further than performative agency through the interface. In both software and theatre, the action takes place in a virtual performance area: The space where the action is presented. In the case of theatre this is the stage, and in games the screen. This performance area is supported by a technical system that disappears once the work is being experienced. In the case of theatre, this consists of sets, props, lights, etc.; in the case of computers it consists of displays, processors, and software code (Laurel, 1993, p. 15). She stated that, like a computer, "For the audience member who is engaged by and involved in the play, the action on the stage is *all there is*" (Laurel, 1993, p. 16). This describes both plays and software in terms of immersive art, which suggests that a certain persuasive quality of illusion is in play. For Laurel, the illusion that effective software produces is the same kind used from the classical stage up to the stage of the dawn of the 20th Century: illusion rendered from an Aristotelian framework. She invokes Aristotle's *Poetics* as the sole theoretical text into which this new perspective of software design fits. Aristotelian drama

necessitates continuous narrative and a consistent, separate world represented on stage, to which the audience is transported from the world around them. Given this framework, Laurel's theory proposes software that captures the viewer/user within a consistent illusion which makes the technology supporting it and the rest of the world disappear. In this sense, Aristotelian drama can be considered a proto-virtual reality, which can now be fully realized with the new capabilities found in software.

But, when might the disappearance of the external world around virtual art become problematic? Embedded in Laurel's dramatic software theory lies not only a philosophy of software design, but a crucial problem in the discourse around all virtual art.

While I want to acknowledge the crucial insight given through Laurel's software-as-theatre analogy, I also want to question the limitations of framing a dramatic theory of software in a strictly Aristotelian sense. In an effort to contribute to a developing aesthetic and critical theory to better analyze software as cultural material, I will use Laurel's book as a launchpad for a new artistic discourse around software. I intend to evaluate Laurel's (1993) insights in *Computers as Theatre*, determine their limitations, and append her theatrical software theory with the work of some theorists who have already tackled problems of consistent illusion within the discipline of theatre. While I will briefly attend to some literature that has continued the discussion around performance and software since the publishing of *Computers as Theatre*, the purpose of this study is to directly enact the method proposed by Laurel while using models of theatre that she omits; specifically, I will engage the critical models of 20th century avant-garde theatre (Laurel, 1993, p. 36). As an experimental suggestion for the practice of illusion-making and interactivity within those illusions, I propose that practitioners evaluate software in terms of Bertolt Brecht's (1995) *Verfremdungseffekt*, the Theatre of the Absurd, and Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre. In the same way that all these critical efforts attempted to resolve the problems of classical drama, these modules of performance should help resolve critical problems in experiencing immersive software-based environments.

Before embarking on this analysis, I would also like to establish the terms that describe the different elements common to both the theatre and to software, in order to efficiently transpose examples and techniques. Three essential areas for producing a theatrical illusion are: (a) The architectural layout of the theatre (the spatial relationship between audience and stage); (b) the scenic elements of the production (sets, props, lights etc.); and most importantly, (c) the action and style of the performance (actors and to a lesser extent the reaction of the audience.) All three of these kinds of elements are reflected in the experience of software: (a) architectural space is determined by the spatial relationship between the user and the interface, display and hardware elements (2); (b) scene elements exist within the display output and style; and (c) action is performed by the viewer/user and to a lesser extent the program's artificial intelligence (A.I.). Although it may seem that the "actor" in theatre is only the person on stage and, in software, only the person controlling the interface, Laurel insists in her analogy that the live audience has agency in controlling the real-time outcome

of the theatrical performance and likewise the A.I. has effect on the actions of the software viewer/user (and therefore the outcome of the software performance). A fundamental difference that indeed does separate theatre from software is a certain inverted ratio of proportion of agency between these entities. On average, the theatre audience has relatively less agency over the theatre actor than the viewer/user has over the A.I. in software. Nonetheless, all of these entities hold some degree of agency in all cases and, therefore, have a similar moment of interactivity that is crucial to the software-as-theatre analogy. Since both are concerned with the representation of action, as Laurel says, both media can be constructed and described using these categories.

The influence of Laurel's theory is visible in the still-developing field of video game/interactive art studies. In 1997, Janet Murray published *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* which cited and evolves several of Laurel's ideas about interactive narrative, and coins the term "cyberdrama" (Murray, 1998). This concept was later used as a theoretical starting point for *First Person* (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004), a volume of essays on performance in software. *First Person* grouped Laurel, Murray, and dozens of voices who have joined the discourse around performance in new media art. In the first section of essays, aptly titled "cyberdrama," the ideas of Murray, Laurel, and Michael Mateas, among others, are situated in a vigorous debate that intricately develops and re-defines how Aristotelian dramatic structure is affected by the indeterminacy and confused authorship of interfaces. But even in this scholarship (which takes place more than a decade after *Computers as Theatre* was published), no other dramatic figures are brought into the discussion than Aristotle. Furthermore, this discussion of dramatic structure and the effects of the interface comes from a narrow literary standpoint and rarely touches upon cyberdrama's sensory experience (see Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004). In order for the discourse around software-as-performance to continue, other figures in the history of theatre, such as Bertolt Brecht, who have oppositional views toward Aristotelian dramatic structure, need to be brought into the discussion. Dramatists like Brecht working in a non-Aristotelian framework offer an experiential analysis of theatrical illusions and how they affect the viewer. Therefore, using a diversity of figures in dramatic theory allows for the study of sensory experience in virtual performance to be developed (*3*).

Like Katja Kwastek in her more recently published *Aesthetics of Digital Interactivity* (2013), I am departing from this literature with an approach that is deliberately art historical but also focused on sensory experience rather than the material existence of digital art objects on their own. The viewer/user-centric perspective is most useful as my aim is to discern the impact of the illusion created in a video game, rather than its literary construction or how a game technically functions. Since individual sensory experience can be seen as an inherently problematic position to argue from (as no one has any access to anyone's sensorium other than their own, and along with it individual aesthetic reactions), I will try not to make any foreclosed claims about the totality of sensory experience. Instead I will propose speculations and suggestions of sensory experience that I believe will likely find consensus in the experience of others.

These texts mentioned above illustrate a long discourse around performance and software that has continued after the publication of *Computers as Theatre*. In future studies it may serve as another useful exercise to fully reinvestigate the narrative of software-as-performance discourse that occurred after *Computers as Theatre* with an expanded notion of Laurel's ideas. Because the purpose of this essay is to propose new illusion making models for games from 20th Century theatre history, I find it useful to directly address *Computers as Theatre* as a primary text and see if the ideas presented can be meaningfully applied to contemporary game production with modular alterations.

Verisimilitude vs. *Verfremdungseffekt*

It is crucial to keep in mind that the emotional result of the classic theatre is not merely a narrative effect, but is brought about by a device of sensory experience. Aristotelian rules demand the complete verisimilitude of all elements on stage; that is to say, the likeness of reality must be represented in the all aspects of the scene. For verisimilitude to exist requires the cooperation of all elements on stage to fit with one another in an unbroken, consistent illusion. The set must realistically match to the situation the actors are in; the costumes must accurately represent who the characters are; and so forth.

It is this logic of verisimilitude that remains the dominant paradigm for software design and Laurel's framework. Like the determined emotional result of the audience member watching the classic drama, maintaining an unbroken verisimilitude in software predetermines the experience of the viewer/user. Because of the added indeterminacy of the interface, the level of predetermination in the experience of software is potentially lessened at the discretion of the software designer. This is a fundamental problem that every software practitioner must decide upon when making an interface: the user needs some kind of control to operate the software, but how much control should the user really have?

Laurel recommends the logic of verisimilitude when approaching the user control level problem. She stated: "The problem with the audience-as-active-participant idea is that it adds to the clutter, both psychological and physical. The transformation needs to be subtractive rather than additive" (Laurel, 1993, p. 17). To Laurel, to create a situation where the user is allowed to break the overall illusory logic of the interactive experience is to create panic and clutter. In order to clear this panic and clutter, she suggests subtracting from the overall amount of user agency. Verisimilitude must persist and the illusion must not be broken for the experience to make sense.

Bertolt Brecht's criticism of the dramatic theatre of Aristotle (as opposed to his epic theatre) is that the illusion on stage is primarily concerned with causing a feeling of empathy on the part of the audience for the characters on stage. This empathy is caused by the catharsis demanded in Aristotelian structure, and through this empathy the audience feels a certain closeness to the play. What the characters feel the audience is meant to feel. Brecht (1995)

described this as a theatre of pleasure, where critical discussion and action could not be elicited in that the audience's emotions have already been determined. Brecht (1995) sought a "theatre of instruction" called the "epic theatre," as opposed to a "theatre for pleasure" (also referred to as the "dramatic theatre" by Brecht; p. 112). He termed the critical concept for implementing this theatre *Verfremdungseffekt*, which can be translated to the "alienation effect" or "distancing effect." Essentially, by creating interruptions or fissures within the illusion on stage, the audience can achieve a certain distance to the characters and events, allowing for evaluation and critique.

Walter Benjamin (1996), theorist and friend of Brecht, described the achievement of the "epic" theatre as the antithesis of the classical model: "Brecht's drama eliminated the Aristotelian catharsis, the purging of the emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero...the art of the epic theater consists in producing astonishment rather than empathy" (p. 66-67) Although oppositional to the Aristotelian illusion, *Verfremdungseffekt* still includes an illusion of sorts, and the viewer is still meant to be engaged in it. *Verfremdungseffekt* aims to distance the viewer, but not to dis-engage the viewer completely. The goal is still to "astonish," to involve the viewer in a particular problem or discussion in a critical capacity.

In a similar manner to how Brecht identified the classical drama's overly persuasive emotional power over the viewer, could it be suggested that verisimilitude can hold persuasive power over the viewer/user of software? The goal of simulation video games as simple as *Microsoft Flight Simulator* or as grand in production as war-based first-person shooters, such as the *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor* series, is to make the viewer/user feel as if they are really there flying a Learjet or storming the beaches of Normandy. These games do not attempt to stimulate inquiry in the viewer/user concerning the structure of the Learjet or Normandy invasion, let alone the structure of the apparatus supporting the illusion. The illusion is consistent, and the experience of this consistency seeks to reach a level that could be described as persuasive immersion, (4) limited more by cost, processing power and other technical requirements than stylistic decisions. To extend Brecht's logic into a discussion of persuasive immersion: a verisimilar environment presents the potential for video game texts to go unevaluated, at least in part because the illusion is designed to be identified and sympathized with by the viewing subject. This kind of space becomes difficult to critique and may explain a position like the one taken by Morgan Webb where games are sought only for immersive experience and not read for the meanings they might express. A Brechtian analysis of verisimilar game illusions suggests not only that critical evaluation of games is the sole responsibility of the gamer but also that it can be built into game environments through the artistic strategies taken by the game maker.

How then might one create a game using Brecht's alternate model of illusion? How does this distancing effect actually manifest itself in practice? During the Brechtian performance, cues are delivered from the actors, stage elements, and theatre itself, indicating to the audience that what they are seeing is illusory, and, therefore, both its contents and the illusion

itself can be evaluated. These cues could consist of things like physical objects that are comically out of scale with the rest of the stage world, actors speaking to the audience in direct address, or large signs with text commenting on the play's events appearing out of nowhere. The method for creating the distancing effect could be anything that causes a momentary break or inconsistency within the constructed illusion. More specific examples of precisely what an actor can to do initiate *Verfremdungseffect* are offered in Brecht's (1996) landmark "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect" published in 1951. In the essay, Brecht (1996) encouraged the actor to "safeguard against [the dramatic theatre's] unduly, 'impulsive', frictionless and un-critical creation of characters and incidents" by utilizing the first three tools of distance acting:

1. Transposition into the third person.

2. Transposition into the past.

3. Speaking the stage directions out loud. (p. 100-101)

Any of these performance techniques reveal that the actor is merely an artist portraying a character, rather than giving the audience the impression that he truly is that character. *Verfremdungseffekt* shows the artifice of the performative elements that contribute to an on-stage illusion, creating a critical rather than emotional space.

It's important to note that the implementation of *Verfremdungseffekt* is primarily an aesthetic practice of breaking the experience of the illusion in which the audience is caught, rather than a literary concept delivered from the text. A Brechtian text, of course, contributes very directly to the illusion on stage through instructions, but it is not until the actual performance and experience of the production that the goals of epic theatre can be realized. Brechtian theatre is a sensory experience that occurs in real time. A Brechtian text on its own creates neither an illusory situation nor *Verfremdungseffekt* to interrupt it. This critical space happens at the moment of performance.

Appended to Laurel's classical dramatic theory of software, the Brechtian method for illusion-breaking gives us a preliminary example of how to approach the problem of persuasive immersion in software. A Brechtian approach to designing a video game or application would entail interruptions and inconsistencies on all three levels of the performative space of software: hardware elements (architecture), display elements (scene setting) and interface elements (the user-as-performer). By conceptually transposing Brecht's primary tools from distance acting into the vernacular of the user-as-performer, we can realize some concrete examples already accessible within software design practices that could begin to shape a Brechtian video game. First, an actor transposing himself by speaking in the third person could translate to a wide range of perspectival toggles available in the interface. In this way, a game such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008; henceforth, *GTA4*), which allows for a

first-person perspective as well as a third-person overhead view is more Brechtian than a war simulator like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007; henceforth, *COD4:MW*) which uses a persuasive first person display. In a video game, a sudden jump in perspective causes a user to distance him or herself and readjust, unlike the frequent perspective jumps of cinema. Since the change in perspective is driven by the agency of the user-as-performer through the interface, rather than at the discretion of the filmmaker, coordinated in time with other cinematic moments and effects, video game perspectival shifts don't benefit from the continuity of cinematic montage (5). The rupture of perspective change within a game illusion could be further developed in a *GTA4*-type interface by allowing perspective to switch from first to third person, then to another character, then to a virtual cat, and then a mailbox, in order to create a heightened *Verfremdungseffekt* on the user-performer. Second, the Brechtian actor speaking in the past tense could translate to a player's actions from the past being replayed in tandem with the current action within the game. This kind of visual technique has already been made possible with time-shifting games like *Max Payne* and *Prince of Persia*, yet these games incorporate those shifts into the consistent illusion with explanatory conventions. This effect could be made more Brechtian by incorporating deliberately confusing replays to distance the user from his avatar, while adding to the visual spectacle. Thirdly, Brecht's convention of speaking stage directions aloud could manifest itself in virtual space by allowing the code (or script) of the software to appear creatively within the illusion (6). This would be a highly effective, and perhaps aesthetically interesting, technique that would not only expose the seams of how software is constructed, but use those seams as elements of content (7).

So now we understand the two theatrical models of illusory aesthetics that can be analogized to software design: the Aristotelian model of verisimilitude and the Brechtian model of *Verfremdungseffekt*. At this point it may prove useful to compare two particular video games that exemplify these contrasting illusion-making models, and interpret their potential effect of a viewer/user's aesthetic experience. As briefly mentioned earlier, war-simulating first-person shooters fit very well into an Aristotelian illusion-making style, and therefore also into Laurel's conception of an effective artistic software experience. In particular, the wildly successful *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007) offers a lavishly detailed unbroken verisimilitude of contemporary battle situations in current-day war-torn areas.

It is also more applicable to the Aristotelian model than other *Call of Duty* (*COD*) titles that preceded and followed it because of its representational claim on present day warfare. *COD* titles previous to *COD4:MW*'s release focused on wars of the historical past and more recent (and still successful) *COD* titles are set further into the future and use more fantastical weaponry. Other titles also incorporate different gameplay features, such as more perspectival options in recent titles, which place other *COD* games at different parts of a spectrum between Aristotelian and Brechtian dramatic models. Although the strong similarities throughout the series should make an Aristotelian analysis useful in some regard for all *COD* games, my analysis of *COD4:MW* should not stand in as an analysis of this entirely large and culturally

impactful franchise. Still, because of the issues contemporary war it raises, I find *COD4:MW* to be the most relevant *COD* title for use in this essay.

In the game the viewer/user takes the firsthand perspective of an American or British combat soldier who fights his way through many immersive military scenarios. Through her/his own performance of the game's actions, the viewer/user not only feels empathy for the character they are controlling, but also feels the rewards of completing heroic military feats. The persuasive immersion of the game's verisimilitude situates the viewer/user's experience in a virtual space where they think and feel like the characters represented. This heightened level of emotional engagement creates a thrilling and rewarding experience for an audience, yet compromises the audience's ability to evaluate the software as a cultural object, as well as the subject matter portrayed. When dealing with representations with real world referents and consequences this can be an undesirable side effect. A simulation might belie a great discrepancy between the representation of the simulated act and the reality on which it is based. This discrepancy could easily go unnoticed if, as Brecht suggests, the cathartic hold of the verisimilar illusion is too strong on the viewer/user and representations are taken as is. For example, war simulators posit a representation of contemporary theatres of war where combat scenarios are sport-like arenas for accumulating points, headshots, and "killstreaks" and where the consequence of death is merely a brief time penalty before "respawn." A war simulator might also propose a romantic or nationalistic narrative of war that eclipses history or omits important political details for understanding why international conflict exists. My intention for bringing up these kinds problems is not to further labor any perennial popular debate about video game violence, but instead ask what kind of context can be built into the structure of a game illusion to consider these representations?

In contrast to *Call of Duty*, I would like to submit the *Katamari* franchise (*8*) as a commercially successful video game series that already embodies many aspects of a Brechtian software design practice. To qualify this comparison I will mention that the *Katamari* series is clearly outside of the codified FPS genre in which *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* firmly resides. Still, there are fundamental categories of comparison shared between the two titles, such as a three-dimensional constructed environment, and a controllable player character, which make the comparison useful, especially in the theatrical verisimilitude vs. *Verfremgdungseffekt* context. Furthermore, even in theatre to complete the comparison between illusions in epic plays (such as Brecht's comic musical *The Threepenny Opera*) and illusions in dramatic plays (such as Ibsen's domestic drama *A Doll's House*), some amount of genre-hopping is needed. The premise of *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) departs from the familiar and realistic: the King of all Cosmos, depicted as a foppish celestial being with a horizontally elongated head, destroyed all of the stars in the sky for no justifiable reason. After regretting this decision he charged his son, the prince, with the task of replacing the stars by gathering materials from earth. The viewer/user plays the prince, who must gather the earth's detritus by rolling everything in sight around a ball called the Katamari. This was the only performable action within the interface: ball rolling. As you rolled more objects around your Katamari and it became ever larger, the world around the prince drastically changed scale. Within the same rolling episode the prince was on the same scale as minute objects, such as paper clips, but as the Katamari collects objects, it and its operator grew larger than whole cities or even land-

masses.

The objects and the world that contains them are abstract, colorful and geometric in the same manner as many Japanese cartoons and often have no ostensible reason to be seen in the same context. The prince might roll up a cow, a blender, and then the Eiffel tower in one gesture. Furthermore, these objects are not only heterogeneous in kind, but also disproportional to each other in terms of realistic scale. Objects as dissimilar as cows and Eiffel towers often appear as the same relative size. It is important to keep in mind that while the objects and settings presented in the world of Katamari do not fit together in a verisimilar reality, they do not destroy a sense of reality altogether. They still form a reality of a kind, but one that frequently broadcasts reminders that it is out of sync with the familiarity of lived reality. Once a great mass of these objects is rolled into a towering ball, the King converts it into a star, ostensibly by extracting some spiritual essence from all of these earthly things. This somewhat explains the title, which loosely translates to "Clump Spirit."

While observing the scattershot ball rolling we might be able to discern Brechtian theatrical techniques at work in the performance and display of illusion construction. First, as discussed earlier, scale is highly volatile, never allowing for illusory consistency or verisimilitude. This is evident as the illusory world itself constantly changes size, as do the disproportional objects within it. The constant shift in scale also results in a constant shift in the user/viewer's perspective, which makes it difficult for the viewer/user to feel very accustomed to any particular moment of this reality. As soon as one might get used to one point of scale, the scale changes again. This can leave one not entirely ejected from this reality, but shifted within it enough that the illusion seems unstable. This is further exaggerated by a controllable perspectival toggle that allows the viewer/user to see from the prince's perspective or a third person view. This mercurial sense of scale could be described as a *Verfremdungseffekt* between the viewer/user and their avatar. The viewer/user is controlling the prince's actions in real time and is always looking at the prince's efforts, but since the viewer/user is constantly adapting to the shifting reality, it is difficult to impossible to feel cathartic, empathic closeness with the prince's labor. Furthermore, the relationships between objects are deliberately incongruous and not aimed at creating any kind of comprehensive naturalistic representation of the real world. Nonetheless, *Katamari* references enough familiar objects from lived reality (paper clips, cows, street signs, and the Eiffel Tower are recognizable enough to many viewers) while slightly defamiliarizing them through the misuse of scale and placement, that its overall effect is to constantly oscillate between reality and reality interrupted. As in Brecht's epic theatre, the illusory effect is not the total destruction of dramatic theatre, but its intentional fissures or interruptions. The absurd juxtaposition of the cow/Eiffel tower example reveals to the viewer/user that this is indeed an artificial world in which they are participating. Yet the simple performance of ball rolling is extremely engaging and rewarding on a level comparable to the war simulator.

Games of the Absurd

In short, the Brechtian conventions within *Katamari Damacy* create the possibility for critical distance. But what in the form or content of this software-based performance is there to critically consider? To answer this question it will prove useful to diversify the conversation from

the models of Aristotle and Brecht to include another 20th century theatrical model related to the Brechtian tradition. Specifically, *Katamari Damacy* can be read not only in a Brechtian sense but also in the frame of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Similar to the reactionary art of Dada, whose adherents created surreal imagery and situations as a response to the irreconcilable state of being after World War I, the Theatre of the Absurd created performative illusions meant to reflect the absurd conditions of post-World War II existence. In his eminent book on the subject, Martin Esslin (1980) stated: "Theatre of the absurd is a new approach, not a genre or school" (p. 9). Therefore, in terms of this discussion, it presents another useful and transposable approach to illusory space. In keeping with the Brechtian critical tradition of theatre, the Theatre of Absurd also creates bizarre spaces meant for the viewer to evaluate. In Samuel Beckett's (1970) famous *Endgame,* characters were bound to chairs and resided in trashcans in some ambiguously post-apocalyptic bunker, reflecting many fears of post-war nuclear paranoia. In Ionesco and Howe's (2007) one-act play *The Bald Soprano,* members of polite society converse in an infinite loop of nonsense and platitude, criticizing the uselessness of the upper class. Still in keeping with Brechtian theatre, the viewer is not meant to empathize with the characters but critically observe them. What is different, however, is that the themes offered through this critical observation are descriptive of the world's condition, whereas Brecht's themes are instructive and polemical. In Esslin's terms: "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced *arguing* about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being - that is, in terms of concrete stage images" (Esslin, 1980, p. 25).

Theatre of the Absurd illustrates the absurdity of post-war existence by rendering appropriately absurd situations and illusions. Similarly, *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) illustrates an appropriately absurd attitude of post-modern pop-culture existence in an international context. In *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004)*,* however, the dark morose character of postwar European and American Theatre of absurdity is replaced by the manic technicolor assemblage of Japanese pop culture. The similarity resides in the broken logic of how these absurd spaces work, and how artistically this can be seen as an expression of one's infinitely complex cultural context. In the hyper-mediated 2000's, this context might look more like the frantic rainbows, cows and cosmic nonsense of *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) than the post-apocalyptic underworld of Beckett's (1970) *Endgame.*

Poor Games

These critical performance techniques are not meant as a prescriptive menu that should immediately be worked into the practice of all software artists, but are presented instead as an example of how concepts from different traditions can be easily appropriated with a little conceptual calibration. In this spirit, I would like to briefly discuss a third figure that follows Brecht in the tradition of theatre experimentation that he began in the early 20th century. This is to show that Laurel's software-as-theatre analogy will be strongest with a diverse het-

erogeneity of theoretical figures, rather than forcing new software theory to entirely conform to one classical model of performance. Furthermore, these transpositions of theatrical models are meant as provocations to stoke conversation about what is possible in experimental software practice, rather than to suggest that the developing history of software art repeat the history of theatre simply because we have established an analogy between the two traditions. On the contrary, these ideas are offered in order to ensure that software art does not unnecessarily repeat any other tradition's history by appropriating solutions to the critical problems of illusion making that the theatre world has already resolved. I'd also like to reiterate that I am including these theatrical figures by way of conceptual transposition, and not a literal mapping of their practice to software in any sense. Not only would this not work because of the fundamental differences that do exist between theatre and software, but it would also misinterpret the literal and direct practice of these particular experiments in theatre.

That said, I will describe Jerzy Grotowski's (1970) Poor Theatre as another viable model of experimental theatre practice which can bear insight for the design of software-based environments. Developed throughout the 1960's in his theatre laboratory in Poland, the Poor Theatre, although related to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* through experimental theatre tradition, has a different critical impact on illusion-making than creating evaluative distance. Rather than making frequent ruptures within the illusion on stage, the Poor Theatre seeks to strip illusory elements down to their most essential state in order to intensify the connective moment between the actor and spectator. Grotowski (1970) stated:

> Can the theatre exist without costumes and sets? Yes, it can. Can it exist without music to accompany the plot? Yes. Can it exist without lighting effects? Of course. And without a text? Yes... But can the theatre exist without actors? I know of no example of this.... Can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance. So we are left with the actor and the spectator. We can thus define the theatre as 'what takes place between spectator and actor.' (p. 32)

This reductive rather than additive methodology is at the core of the Poor Theatre's goal of creating an intense and essential theatrical moment, unfettered by the superfluity of illusion. By rationalizing production elements as inessential, Grotowski de-emphasizes stagecraft in his productions and instead lays all the importance of the play on the technique of the actors and their ability to engage with the audience in a very direct fashion. Poor Theatre plays do have sets, props and costumes of a kind, but are always discarded when not entirely necessary, leading to an ascetic, minimal aesthetic: "We do not work by proliferation of signs, or by accumulation of signs... Rather we subtract, seeking distillation of signs by eliminating those of "natural" behavior which obscure pure impulse" (Grotowski, 1970, p. 18). To support the "pure impulse" of the actor-spectator connection, Grotowski advocates for a spatial re-arrangement of the performance space. Beyond addressing the audience directly, as in epic theatre, the physical boundary between stage and audience area is discarded entirely. The

Poor performance area does not "break" the fourth wall but fully eradicates it. Floor arrangements demand that the audience sit or stand in pockets strewn about the space, and actors freely move anywhere, regardless of whether or not space was already occupied by audience members. Floor arrangements were also iterative and specific to each production: "We have resigned from the stage-and-auditorium plant: for each production, a new space is designed for the actors and spectators. Thus infinite variation of performer-audience relationships is possible" (Grotowski, 1970, p. 19). Blending the spectators and actors in space has two specific goals. First, it further intensifies the actor-spectator connection by sheer proximity. Second, the audience isn't allowed autonomy but is instead a part of the performance. An audience member can see but is also seen by all other audience members, forcing a spectator into performing themselves and being an integrated part of the scene. The roles of actor and spectator themselves are brought into flux, as the performance no longer relies on clear spatial divisions.

Grotowski's conclusion is that the moment of connectivity between spectator and actor is all that really matters in the discipline. Although they would disagree on many other things, this definitive essence of theatre coincides with Laurel's definition of the interface as the core of software production. Theatre isn't the text, and software isn't the code on which it is based. Neither kind of work exists until the performative moment when actor interacts with spectator or the user-as-performer engages with the virtual elements. While the cores of each discipline coincide, Laurel does not suggest a methodological stripping away of superfluous elements in order to fully realize this essential performative moment in software use. In fact, her view is quite the opposite. What she described as a "subtractive rather than additive process" (Laurel, 1993, p. 17) of user-control-level is, in comparison to Grotowski's method, a heavy addition of more production elements to cover the architecture of the technology. It is, therefore, useful to append Grotowski's method to Laurel's single theatrical reference point of Aristotle in order to ask how the "pure impulse" of software can be achieved.

Put in shorter terms, Grotowski described the Poor Theatre as a "via negativa - not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks" (Grotowski, 1970, p. 16). How can this reductive method be applied to video game design or where might it already be visible? To answer this, it is useful to look into the past of video game history to find an example that predates any superfluous production elements now available to video game creators. Just as we can see elements of Brechtian and Absurdist techniques in *Katamari,* the goals of Grotowski's technique are evident in *Tetris,* one of the video game world's most played and well-known titles. Created by Alexey Pazhitnov in 1984, *Tetris* also makes use of a "via negativa" and strives toward "the eradication of blocks," of both the literal and figurative sort. The scenic display elements exhibit a spartan degree of minimalism. The playing area, or "well," was a simple vertical rectangle. Blocks of six different shapes dropped from the top of the well and must be arranged into filled rows as they fall to the bottom. If the user completed a row, it disappeared, allowing for more block arrangement space. As more rows were cleared, the speed at which the blocks fall increased. If the blocks piled to the top of the well, the game was over.

Even by the standards of other games being developed in 1984, not to mention comparison to the lavishly complex visuals of contemporary game design, *Tetris* is an incredibly stripped down and elemental work. The lack of distracting ornamentation intensifies the remaining feedback loop of anticipating block shapes and finding spaces for them under increasing time pressure. The game is nothing more than time-based spatial problem-solving, yet the increasing speed of falling blocks can seize the user into a pulse-raised, hyper-concentrated state. In this sense *Tetris* functions quite like Grotowski's Poor Theatre in that it elicits the maximum connection capable between viewer/user and game, while stripping that medium down to its barest essential elements.

Perhaps a certain asceticism is responsible for the continued popularity of *Tetris* and other early arcade or Atari platform games, such as *Centipede* (Atari, 1981) or *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), that lack the panoramas of 3D action adventure games or the "juicy" feedback of contemporary mobile "casual" games (Juul, 2009). A recent popular trend in "low-res" re-vivalism and abstraction, as exhibited by games like *Sword & Sworcery EP* (Capybara Games & Superbrothers, 2011), *VVVVVV* (Cavanagh, 2010), or *The Impossible Game* (FlukeDude, 2011), suggest a continued audience that is receptive to aesthetics more stripped down and unadorned than recent displays of opulence in games, such as *inFamous: Second Son* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2014). Nostalgia is also a key factor in why video games from the 1980's and their aesthetics remain popular, but these early games with abstract representations have as much grip and connection to the user as games with rich graphics, possibly even more. Early arcade games, viewed in hindsight, act as inadvertent "Poor video games," showing the connective power of an ascetic interface even when current technology offers a far more spectacular experience. Although the developers of games like *Centipede* or *Pac-Man* were developing at the limit of available technology at the time of their creation, the continued efficacy of the games suggest that deliberate aesthetic asceticism in the face of lavish technology is an option for the contemporary developer (**9**).

These elements of the Poor Theatre visible in early arcade games only constitute the scenic/display and performer/user levels of our software-as-theatre analogy. But, what of the architectural/hardware level? Grotowski's method suggests to the video game designer a vastly unexplored genre of site-specific multi-display interactivity. The virtual space behind the screen is often rendered complex and ornate, but the physical parameters of corporeal space on and around the hardware are rarely dealt with. Rather than thinking of an arcade or LAN (**10**) setting as a localized space where all users plug into a their own display and interact only virtually, the same space could be refashioned as a massively variable space where the user is forced to see their display, other users and other users' displays, all from the same perspective. In the same way the Poor Theatre broke down the actor/spectator dichotomy through spatial means, a localized virtual world installation could problematize the unrelenting display/user dichotomy as well. Perhaps creating a situation where a user must negotiate virtual and corporal space in the same breath would create an entirely experiential framework where convention usually separates these as belonging to different realms.

Conclusion

I have suggested transpositions of 20th century experimental theatre techniques as a method for developing this critical video game discourse and practice. This continues the invaluable software-as-theatre analogy established by Laurel, which is widely accepted in both the industrial and critical sides of the field. Her analogy initiated a discussion on what is most essential about interfaces and what makes them a medium. Still, her theatrical reference point in Aristotelian, dramatic theatre remains insufficient for understanding states of software-based illusory environments other than verisimilitude. It is therefore necessary to supplement the analogy with Brechtian, Absurdist, and Poor techniques, and certainly many others which are out of the scope of this essay (including perspectives unrelated to theatre and performance). In order to implement and fully explore what this practice and discourse can do requires a set of producers within the field who prioritize these critical issues in illusion making over the demands of the market. While it can surely be argued that complete independence from market-based concerns is impossible for any avant-garde or fringe, a certain degree of autonomy must be allocated to dealing with these concerns or the field can never meaningfully mature.

That said, dealing with critical issues of illusory space does not necessarily exclude the producer from the benefits of the market. Likewise, a producer who keeps the market as his or her highest priority can still make use of Brechtian technique or other critical models. This is exhibited in such elements as the perspectival toggles in *Grand Theft Auto IV,* showing that experimental technique can exist as a degree in a spectrum rather than being a didactic either/or situation. In fact, the example of *Katamari* shows that a balance can be struck between experimental illusion-making and commercial success. However, in order for a video game avant-garde to coalesce, it is very likely that some works will have to sacrifice popular or commercial success in order to explore the formal possibilities and cultural significance of the medium and discipline on its own terms. This perspective would make Webb's "rare outsider" who can conceive of the video game as an artistic medium not so rare, and furthermore it would hold the video game critic accountable for more than simply informing a consumer what not to purchase. Brechtian games, Absurd games, and Poor games are critical steps that can advance the video game producer away from the market, allowing him or her to function as a video game artist, and engender a larger vocabulary for a video game avant-garde.

Endnotes

1. For example: *Darfur is Dying* (2006) led by Susanna Ruiz or *Foldit* (University of Washington Center for Game Science, 2008).

2. The relationship can vary depending on physical elements such as use of wired or wireless

controllers, hidden or exposed hardware, the distance between user and display for a sedentary or moving user, the size of display etc.

3. For more literature that is not as direct a response to Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* but continues the comparison between digital and new media art to performance see Steve Dixon's (2007) *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation,* Susan Kozel's (2007) *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology,* and Chris Salter's (2010) *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance.*

4. This term is a combination of terms borrowed from Ian Bogost and Oliver Grau. See Ian Bogost (2007) *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames,* and Oliver Grau (2003) *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion.*

5. This can only be stated with the exception of cinematic perspective changes that deliberately construct an abrupt, non-continuous or otherwise Brecthian effect. Non-continuous perspective changes can and do exist within the cinema, yet aren't the goal of conventional montage.

6. This is not to say that the hearing of stage directions and the seeing of code on screen are equally as legible. To contrary, far more members of a theatre audience would at least understand what was being referenced in the recitation of stage directions than software users who could recognize and interpret the code that is generating the program in front of them. But, the illusion-breaking effect would be very similar. While the meaning in context of individual works would be significantly different, an overall *Verfremdungseffekt* would take place in either case.

7. The practice of exposed code and image processing presented together as real-time performance has existed for some time, yet is are rarely applied to video games. Noteworthy examples include demonstrations of the Sandin Image Processor running GRASS (see Phil Morton's General Motors 1976) and contemporary live coding platforms such as Fluxus and Supercollider (see http://www.pawfal.org/fluxus/ and http://www.audiosynth.com/ respectively).

8. *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004); see also its sequels *We Love Katamari* (Namco, 2005), *Beautiful Katamari* (Namco, 2007) and *Katamari Forever* (Namco Bandai, 2009).

9. An even more radical example of a poor aesthetic in video games can be found in text-based adventures such as *Zork* (Infocom, 1980) or early multi-user dungeon games (MUDs). In a sense these games are even more minimal than Tetris or early arcade games in that they contain no images other than text descriptions and still create a highly immersive experience for the user. Since the difference between MUDs and contemporary video game design is the difference between text and image rather than the difference between realism and abstrac-

tion of the image it would take a methodology other than the software-as-theatre analogy to properly contextualize them, but they are noteworthy in this context nonetheless.

10. Land-area network: a localized network of computers commonly used as the site of video game socializing.

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