

## I am the hero of my art

# THE DRAMATURGY OF INTERACTIVE ART

First of all, I should say, that this talk should be viewed more as a provocation, rather than an actual scientific paper. In fact I gave a similar one in 2014 at an event Coney hosted in London. It's topic "the dramaturgy of interactive art" is very much something I have been thinking about while going about my own theatrical practice. Being Austrian a large part of the theatre world is governed by these magical fearsome creatures called dramaturgs. They concern themselves with dramaturgy.

So, to start off, I should probably define dramaturgy. It is the set of theories or techniques governing the composition of performance text. And by text I don't just mean a written script, but everything included in the meaning making process of a performance. Dance for example has clear dramaturgies, clear arcs of suspense, without using a single written word. I think sometimes our academia is too much concerned with literary text, rather than texture, and this can be quite damaging for our research and praxis in theatre and performance. Similarly to dance, games and other new media have dramatic arcs too, sometimes governed more by their rules, rather than their literary text.

It used to be every other artform that used story telling learned something from theatre and performance, now they've learned it all, they've changed it around and finally, theatre can learn something again.

One of the things that is interesting in games, is that story telling is very much centered on the player. In contrast, dramaturgy in traditional theatre is protagonist centric. And the protagonist is usually played by an actor on a stage. The audience thus becomes an onlooker and passive. They are not passive in the meaning making process of course, but they are action-less.

In video games stories are centered around the person perceiving them, playing them, thus embracing them. The hero's journey is not told, it is experienced.

How you might ask? By the cunning use of a set of rules through which the experience, and ultimately the story is being told.

In a do-it-yourself world, with the rise of blogs, hacker & tinker culture, open source & creative commons, and a youth that rightfully fears they are not supported to their best potential, this youth starts doing things themselves, becoming active in their experience of this world. The stories we tell through media & artforms, such as youtube, blogs, and games have already

become our own stories, in which we are the 'heroes' (or the villains), let's make sure theatre follows this path too.

Immersion and the possibility of action could be seen as primary dramatic devices in games. In this example the possibility of meaningful action is not even necessary and we still create an interesting story arc. *Gone Home* by the fullbright company is an immersive, explorative game, where you play a student coming home to their family's house during the holidays. Your family has recently moved house, so everything is new to you. You arrive, it's raining outside. You are alone, and you don't know your way around.

Most of the story is told through objects and, depending on what objects you find when, dramatic arcs start to develop. Rather than utilizing one central arc, many varieties are possible, as you "the player", become the central point through which the story is being told. Your lack of knowledge about the house in the real world, is cleverly incorporated into the story of the fictional universe, the student's loss of a connection to her sister (and the players lack of a real connection to said sister) are also accounted for in the story and dramatic structure of the game.

An interesting aspect to consider here is the concept of freedom and fake freedom. I can hardly interact in a complex way with any of the objects in this house and yet simply picking them up and turning them over and maybe reading what's written on them, is enough to make meaning and tell an enticing story with high points and low points, in which I, as the player, act as the center.

Similarly *Her Story*, by Sam Barlow, incorporates its players into the dramaturgy of its story.

In this game you are playing a person sitting at a computer while sitting at a computer in real life. You search through an archive of videos that are used as a story-telling-technique. The videos are those of a real actress playing a character in the fictional setting of the game. This double-setting combining the real world with a fictional world, is very similar to Alternate Reality Games of the 2000s. The story is being told through (inter)action with game elements and the dramaturgy is rooted in this interaction. Rather than having the story told at you, you form part of creating the story through an interactive environment.

In *Cibele* by Nina Freeman, as another example, you start off as a voyeur, and end as 19 year old girl. These forms of storytelling allow for the freedom of experiencing the story from different angles, thus allowing for far more complex stories. Furthermore the possibility of empathy and the safe experimentation with different perspectives and viewpoints of some issues is encouraged in such dramaturgies.

Obviously video games provide a far more controlled environment than any interactive theatre or performance project ever could. However, if we study these dramaturgical structures carefully, i think we can learn a lot from them and incorporate some of their aspects into our work and research.

Coney's *Early Days (of a better nation)*, for example follows a rather radical open approach to how stories are created with an audience. At each performance an audience of roughly 60 gets to decide how they want to rebuild the nation of Dacia from the ashes of a revolution. The ending is not only open, but the whole story is made by its audience's actions within their newly growing political system. There are almost as many possibilities of rebuilding this new nation, as there are people in the audience.

Freedom (or the premise thereof), is often the best advocate for exciting dramaturgies, that arise through the creativity or the minds and meaning making processes of individual audience members. On the other hand, traditional theatrical dramaturgies of audience spectators, allow for very little room of interpretation. Already simply the fact that I am the center of the dramaturgy is enough, to encourage me to experience a different point of view from my own. I'm thrown into this character that I may not be like at all. Blast Theory goes as far as asking their participants to 'give yourself a name and label yourself'. This is a clear sign that you are entering the fictional space of play. You are no longer yourself, but a different version of yourself, an avatar if you want, a character. Within the magic circle of play and its playful dramaturgy, we are given the safe-space to experiment and to experience different settings, issues, points of view, one of the things that are definitely lacking in our 21st century societies.

Of course there are more contemporary performance projects, that are using exactly those dramaturgical means to tell stories today. *The Personal Adventure Automat* by the street game conspiracy for example, or Coney's *Early Days (of a better nation)*, or *Starry Heavens* by Nathalie Pozzi and Eric Zimmerman. However, every little academic research is going into those dramaturgical structures and devices. We probably have thousands of papers on Shakespear's dramatic structure, but hardly any on that of video games and new media and how they are changing society today. Coming back to my earlier statement that this is indeed a provocation: go out and research how interactivity informs dramatic structure of experiences and publish what you found!

\*Arnie Voice\* Do it naaaau!

Thank you!

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