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Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Jörg Burbach, M.A.

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From Amphitheater to Holodecks

About Cyberspace

“Cyberspace holds potential to provide new pathways for imagining, creating, and sharing human experiences.”
– Dr. Nina LeNoir [1]

When William Gibson published his book *Neuromancer* in 1984 [2], the word “Cyberspace” was only two years old. He himself used the term in his 1982 short story “Burning Chrome”. In *Neuromancer*, Gibson gave this definition:

“Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights...”
– Neale, Mark [2]

Later, he admitted, that he wanted to come up with “an effective buzzword. It seemed evocative and essentially meaningless. It was suggestive of something, but had no real semantic meaning, even for me, as I saw it emerge on the page.” [3]

More than 30 years later, the term “Cyberspace” is exactly what Gibson predicted, but much more. The hallucination, today called “world wide web” or “internet” is a vast source of imagination, data, services, and threats. Buried in millions of pages, one may find everything, mankind has ever produced. And the internet steadily grows. To abstract Cyberspace, regard it as an evolutionary process. But, maybe, technical innovation and improvement may pinpoint it even better.

The very first pages of the Internet offered some text, no graphics, no sound, no videos, but interaction [4]. Compare (of course more sophisticated) theatrical performances like those of Shakespeare to the very first webpage: both started somehow raw, but new, and fresh. Theatre improved, by adding things like lighting, sound effects, interaction. During this essay, readers will get to know about theatrical performances changing over the last Millenia, likewise internet and video games changed since the early games in the 1960s. And both of course, changed media reception.

About Cyberdrama

Cyberdrama is ... “a reinvention of storytelling itself for the new digital medium.”
– Murray, Janet [5]

Before, I compared the development of theatrical performances to development of interactive video games. Cyberdrama is a mixture of theatre, and a video game. Of course, interactive theatre exists in the form of open performances, or improvisation, but video games offer far more possibilities for virtual, or if you play in the same room, personal interaction. Broken down, the abstraction of performance may be the only difference between open theatre, and video games.

Both offer stories – either prewritten, or improvised. Authors write a play, but also a game. Players play their role, but in video games, they may also be source of new stories. We will later have a look at narratological rules, defined by players.

Both offer a defined environment, either a stage, where the play happens. Or an environment, where gameplay happens. And they both accord to ludological rules. [6]

Both of course employ Non Playable Characters (NPC). In theatre, the actors are NPCs, visitors are characters, who interact with the system offered on stage. In video games, NPCs guide players through the game, and give feedback, items, or directions.

Actually, Cyberdrama can be defined as an “interactive theatre in a video game world”.

Different Forms of Cyberdrama

Of the before defined Cyberdrama, Sue Davis [7] defines four types:

- 'Interactive drama' – focusing more on story/presentation than gameplay [8]
- 'cybersoap' – a soap opera on the internet [9]
- 'webisodic' – an episode of a series distributed via the internet [10]
- 'digital drama' – a serious presentation in a digital world [11].

When talking about any of the above types of Cyberdrama, new narrative forms have to be defined as well. Almost all media, like books, movies, music, work linearly. There is a start, a middle part, and an ending.

Movies like “Memento” break the linear narration by rewinding the movie by about 10 minutes every scene, until it reaches the beginning of the story. On DVD, Memento offers another cut, which puts the movie in chronological order. This way, the story is easily understood, but the movie loses its uniqueness. [12].

In “Choose your own Adventure”-books [13], readers have to jump from chapter to chapter, sometimes forward, sometimes backward. These books were really important in the 80s, and special in readers experience, and some even offer hidden chapters. Today, because of video games, they only fill a niche.

However, classic non-linear fiction, presented by media, cannot be experienced outside a computer. For example, Point and Click Adventures are non-linear and linear at the same time. It depends on game designers, and their effort, how linear a game is presented.

In “Day of the Tentacle” (DOTT) [14], Tim Schaefer, Dave Grossman, and Ron Gilbert managed to put in a linear story, which at the same time may be played strictly non-linearly. The story of DOTT is about three young people, who try to rescue the world from mutated purple tentacle, but parted the young ones by 200 years each. At a certain point in the game, you switch between the three characters, but you select the timing, when to solve which riddles. The story is narrated using cutscenes, too.

Tell Tale Games added the episodic appearance to point and click adventures in slicing the game into 6 parts, which are sold separately. Examples are CSI, and Sam & Max, which are sold in 5 or 6 parts. The habit of slicing a story into several episodes is lent from television, where you find a pilot and e. g. 6, 13, or 23 episodes bundled in a season. Most series conclude a story line in one episode, and a bigger story in a season. Episodic approaches have some advantages: you can add

many cliffhangers. Or the viewer, or player may stop buying episodes after having played the first ones, if the series didn't fit their taste.

In Qora [15], another completely different form of narration is used. The player's avatar is put into a friendly looking atmosphere. He has to walk around, talk to people, and discover information and new areas. Some of which aren't accessible, until told about by NPCs. The information is presented in a kind of Super Mario style. Every now and then, you encounter signs, which after keypress reveal their narration. This way, no text obfuscates the scene. The more you play, the more information you gain as player.

Another very nice example for Interactive Drama may be "Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery". This game uses Twitter as a social extension of the game, as players can tweet their progress in the game. Superbrothers even added the hashtag #Sworcery, a combination of Sorcery and Sword to use it as a hashtag unique for the tweets of Sword and Sworcery. [16]

Even serious topics may be presented in a form of Interactive Drama [17]. 70 years after the end of World War II, the Grimme awarded, German project "Digital Past" tweeted the last months of the events of WW II, in Europe. Using Twitter as a medium brought the news into the present. People behind the project talked about having problems putting all information into 150 characters, Twitter offered them.

Multi User Dungeons

When playing rogue-like games, you often wander around alone in the dungeons. This single-player experience mostly offers a simple story about looting the area, rescuing a kidnapped person, or slaying a boss. During the fight down the levels, you witnessed a linearly narrated story – if there was a story at all.

When networking came into account, Multi User Dungeons (MUD) were invented. Tasks like fighting a human opponent, trading with friends, and looting, or slaying enemies together were added to the story.

The new possibilities, like sending players from one end of the dungeon to another one, lead to newly invented stories. For example, other players may pay you to find 10 roses, or to kill a dozen big rats.

At first, the frameset of rules had a mere ludological background: Rules were given to keep the game in an enjoyable mood. With "People Versus Environment" (PvE [18]) of World of Warcraft, WoW), a twist was added. Now, there already was interaction between players, who committed themselves to PvE. Some of them would use more sophisticated language inside the games roleplay mode. Players being palsy-walsy with others did this on an entertaining base, as a simple "thx", instead of "Thank ye, sire!" is used to thank other players, when they helped, or healed each other.

And last, not least, WoW offers a Player vs. Player (PvP [18]) mode, where you could compete against other players on the same server, not only helping each other like in PvE, but also combatting them. These different playing modes appeal to almost every possible player: Players who like to enjoy a world by their own, only asking for help, if they like to. Players, who like to compete in every moment. And players, who like to get in contact with many others, building guilds, and a big social community.

In context of holodecks, players try to express being part not only of the game, but of an alternate reality. Much like the staff of the Enterprise, they imagine being somewhere else.

Game Example

In 2014, Warsaw-based 11 bit studios published their serious game "This War of Mine" [19]. The 2.5d game is set in a war world, where some survivors live together in a wrecked house, trying to make a living. During playing, you gather material like wood, food, weapons, and build beds, heating, or ovens to comfort the situation.

"War" is different to other dystopian-set games like Homefront [20], Manhunter [21], or Deus Ex Series [22]. In the latter games, you will collect everything, you find on your way, as the goal is to survive and reach the end of a level, or the game. In "War", you need to trade with other people for goods, you need, and the game is broken down into day to build, and night to loot other houses. And the psychology of Katia feeling guilty after stealing things, is an important part of the game. [23]

Hamlet on the Holodeck

When Hamlet was first presented on stage, regular visitors were mere spectators. The only interaction may have been during breaks, and afterwards, to have a chat with the actors. The audience surrounded the stage passively. The next step would have been improvisation theatre, where people could shout words at the actors, or actors asked for words, they added to their play. This already, was a nice extension of regular theatre, a great source of interaction.

Up next, installations of any kind appeared, which must have been a great experience for everybody involved. The stage moved into the audience, and visitors became actors, and vice versa. This enhanced technology even more: big screens, cameras, electronic feedback, people were immersed into a theatrical experience. Interactive Games, like the mentioned Multi User Dungeons, added the interaction needed to be a game instead of a play.

The final step will be the Holodeck itself. Like in Starship Enterprise, The Next Generation, the Holodeck will cover everything that offers interactivity. You may only be a spectator watching a recorded or live play in a digital environment (Theatre). Or you may interact with others (PvP), or the Environment (PvE). You could sandbox a new kind of planet (Game Design), or simply play your game.

Last not least, direct feedback without any goggles, fake tools, or furniture lead to total immersion into the game. The future will improve the immersion, maybe without the need for any hardware at all [24]. In the end, it doesn't matter, if you are spectator, actor, or a mixture of both, stories completely depend on imagination.

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