

Playing Games with Shklovsky, Brecht, and Boal: Ostranenie, V-Effect, and Spect-Actors as Analytical Tools for Game Studies

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Short description

The article discusses the concepts of ostranenie (Shklovsky), V-effect (Brecht), and spect-actor (Boal), before critically reviewing their earlier application to analyses of games and play.

Abstract

The present article provides a critical introduction to concepts of estrangement. After referring scholarly debates about origins, mutual relations, and legacies of concepts such as Viktor Shklovsky's ostranenie, Bertolt Brecht's V-effect, and Augusto Boal's spect-actor, I critically review earlier applications of these concepts in game studies and point to some problematic aspects of these endeavors. Finally, I argue for the continued salience of these terms as tools for analysis of video games as designed objects embedded in complex socio-political and cultural contexts.

Keywords

Shklovsky, ostranenie, Brecht, V-effect, Boal, spectator, estrangement, Russian Formalism

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Introduction: The Art(s) of Estrangement

The present article provides a critical introduction to the concept of estrangement and argues for its relevance as analytical tool for the discipline of game studies. Firstly, I present key strains of Russian Formalism. I show how the school developed and how this affected use and understanding of important concepts such as Shklovsky's ostranenie. Subsequently, I introduce Brecht's theories of the stage with special emphasis on the V-effect, before I engage the often-fierce scholarly debate about mutual inspirations, dependencies, and differences between the two frameworks. Finally, I show how Boal's theatre of the oppressed can contribute important insights that are beyond the scope of both ostranenie and V-effect.

Having thus established a sound theoretical basis, I address earlier attempts to use these concepts in game studies. My main point of contention is that ostranenie, V-effect, and spect-actor often

have been employed in a cursory fashion and without paying sufficient attention to their complex theoretical foundations, etymology, and mutual relations. As such, important scholarly debates about their correct application and scope are frequently eschewed leading to a downplaying of terminological developments and differences. Unravelling some of these issues, the present article aims at facilitating a more critical application of the concepts in the context of game studies.

Viktor Shklovsky's *Ostranenie*: Formalist Approaches to Literature and Art

Russian Formalist thought is a scholarly movement that emerged in connection to an artistic and literary avant-garde that was active in tsarist and revolutionary Russia in the 1910s and 20s.¹ Spearheaded by young and ambitious scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum, Boris Tomashevsky, and Yury Tynyanov among others, the group radically opposed established hermeneutic and historical approaches to literature and engaged in fierce, and often polemic, exchanges with such movements as Russian Symbolism, Futurism, or Marxist theorists of varying denominations (Lemon and Reis 1965; Erlich 1969; Striedter 1969).

The main theoretical and methodological thrust of the Formalists was a focus on formal properties of literary texts that they perceived as raw data to be approached with scientific methods on a par with those developed for the natural sciences. According to early Formalist thought, the objects of analysis of literary studies are the internal relations that constitute a work of literature. As such, literariness, rather than literature, became the main focal point of Formalist studies that directed attention away from the historical, sociological, or other contexts in which works of art are embedded. Deploying their methods of analysis to literature, visual arts, and film, early Formalist scholars worked on the assumption that the work of art is nothing more than the sum of its formal devices. The object can be fully accounted for by way of analyzing its constituent parts.

In his summary of early developments of the formal method throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Eikhenbaum (2002 [1927]) lays out key assumptions, methods, and theories that are characteristic of the Formalist movement. At the same time, however, he argues for Formalism's inherent dynamism and adaptability.² According to Eikhenbaum, Formalism is concerned "with literature as a specific system of facts" (4) that is open to systematic scientific inquiry based on the inherent falsifiability of hypotheses and preconceptions. This objective implied a radical break with received forms of hermeneutic and historical research. Drawing upon the works of Roman Jakobson, Lev Jakubinskij, and in particular Viktor Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum then moves on to establish a series of key advances made by the group such as the distinction between practical and poetic language (8-10), the notion of palpable formal devices as autonomous objects of study (12-13), or the idea that the main task and function of art is a reinvigoration of perception that is achieved by a deliberate making strange of habitualized objects or linguistic structures (12-14). The latter point is closely connected to Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* that, being of major significance to the present inquiry, will be explicated in greater detail below.

¹ For a detailed introduction to Russian Formalism see for instance Erlich (1969), Striedter (1969), and Hansen-Löve (1978).

² Eikhenbaum's text was written as part of an exchange with Soviet critics who attempted to purge criticism from alleged anti-Soviet tendencies and who, with some notable exceptions, often exhibited a simplified and monolithic idea of Formalism (see for instance Erlich 1975, pp. 18-24 and Erlich 1969, ch. vi and vii). For a detailed evaluation of Formalism from a Marxist perspective see for instance the seminal work by Bakhtin and Medvedev (1978 [1928]).

As Eikhenbaum (2002 [1927]) shows, already at its beginnings, the Formalist movement consisted of a variety of different approaches and applied theories and methods in a dynamic fashion open to change and alteration. As such, it is not easy to pinpoint a particular doctrine or methodological frame uniting all instantiations of the group. Accordingly, most scholarship describes various points of origin, different developmental phases, and a variety of scholarly legacies and connections of Formalist thinking (see for instance Erlich 1969; Striedter 1969; Hansen-Löve 1978).

The seminal study by Hansen-Löve (1978) distinguishes three phases of Russian Formalist thought that are characterized by a gradual opening toward contextual factors such as historical and evolutionary dynamics or an embedding of works of art in complex cultural and political structures and processes. Hansen-Löve in particular points to the importance of Vygotsky and the Bakhtin-Medvedev circle for leading Formalism away from a reductionist notion of form. He writes that, with Vygotsky, Formalism received impulses that enabled a re-interpretation of key formalist principles and lead to a gradual turn from a "reflexological empiricism to a socio-historical psychology of consciousness" (Hansen-Löve 1978, p. 427).³ As such, rather than adopting a pure art-for-art's-sake perspective focusing on formal devices alone, important strains of Russian Formalism opened up for a context-bound, dialogical understanding of meaning as constituted in and through complex interactions and exchanges between form, audience, and background.

One key Formalist concept is *ostranenie* - making strange. Shklovsky coined the neologism in his 1919-essay *Iskusstvo kak priem*,⁴ where he derives it from the Russian word *strannij* (strange) to encapsulate what he perceives as the overarching function of art, namely to refresh the senses by de-habitualizing what convention has made mundane and therefore invisible. "[A]rt", Shklovsky argues, "exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (Shklovsky 1965 [1919], p. 12; translated by Lemon and Reis; emphasis in original). As such, Shklovsky continues, the technique of art is aimed at estranging things with the objective of making them difficult to digest, as such challenging reader and spectator, and reinvigorating our perception, thus enabling us to truly see, rather than merely recognize the world around us.

Even though the concept of *ostranenie* has acquired significant currency in literary and cultural scholarship, there are a series of challenges that complicate a straightforward definition and application. These challenges are predominantly connected to three areas: 1) differences in translations of the term *ostranenie* and of key texts by Shklovsky, 2) changes in the way Shklovsky defined and applied the concept throughout his own scholarship, and 3) varying origins and legacies that charge *ostranenie* with different meaning potentials and scopes of usage. I will treat each of these problems in turn.

³ All translations from German are my own. Original reads: "Wende vom reflexologischen Empirismus zu einer gesellschaftlich-historischen Bewußtseinspsychologie".

⁴ The title of Shklovsky's essay has been translated as *Art as Technique* (Lemon and Reis 1965) or as *Art as Device* (Sher 1990; Berlina 2015). I side with Sher's and Berlina's suggestion as it more clearly aligns the text to the Formalist intention of studying the very material out of which artistic creations are made, rather than focusing on a more abstract notion of artistic technique. It is interesting to note that Berlina (2015) suggests yet another translation that takes heed of the fact that Shklovsky added a comma to certain versions of the title. According to her, when written with a comma - *Iskusstvo, kak priem* - the meaning turns into something like *Art, how is reception*. Berlina (2015) speculates that this is yet another of Shklovsky's many puns through which he, in his writing, practically applied and illustrated the concept of *ostranenie* he developed.

There is no complete agreement among scholars as to how exactly Shklovsky's neologism *ostranenie* should be translated. Berlina (2015; p. 153) provides a useful overview over various expressions used in English. She briefly explains and juxtaposes the terms "defamiliarization", "estrangement", "making strange", and "enstrangement", before acknowledging that the term "estrangement is gaining currency" (152; note 4) in research. It is notable that the term "distanciation" proposed by for instance Brewster (1974, p. 94) is not part of Berlina's (2015) canon, even though Brewster (1974, pp. 92-95) convincingly points to possible parallels with Brecht's term *Verfremdung* that are captured in his suggestion. Neither does she address Lemon and Reis's (1965, p. 12) "dehabitualization", Mitchell's (1974, p. 74), "de-routinization", Morson's (2012, p. xi) "bestrangement", or the terms proposed by Van den Oever (2010, p. 12) - "deautomatization" and "alienation".

Berlina (2015) ends her discussion of alternative translations by following Sher's (1990) suggestion *enstrangement*. According to both Berlina and Sher, this choice retains Shklovsky's dehabitualizing spelling mistake that rendered *ostranenie* with one 'n' in spite of the fact that the word's root in Russian 'strannji' (strange) would imply a spelling with a double 'n' - *ostrannenie*.⁵ In the following, I will adopt Berlina's (2015, p. 152) and Sher's (1990, pp. xviii-xix) suggestion and use *enstrangement* as a direct translation of Shklovsky's *ostranenie*. In addition, however, I will use de-habitualization, de-familiarization, distanciation, and de-automatization to paraphrase meaning-potentials inherent in the term that become relevant in particular contexts of use.

In addition to the term *ostranenie*, important passages in Shklovsky's work detailing the concept's purpose and functions have been translated differently. I will exemplify this problem with reference to an important and often-quoted sentence from the text *Iskusstvo kak priem* (1919) where Shklovsky first, drawing on a long citation of Tolstoy, lays out the problem posed by an automatization of perception, before explaining how art can renew our relation to the world. The translations I will compare are Lemon and Reis (1965, p. 12), Sher (1990, p. 5-6), and Berlina (2015, p. 162).

The three translations diverge when it comes to defining the function of art. In a key passage, Reis and Lemon (1965) suggest that art is "*a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*" (p. 12; emphasis in original).⁶ Berlina (2015, p. 154) criticizes this translation and asserts its inherently tautological qualities. She describes Sher's (1990) alternative - "*art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant*" (p. 6; emphasis in original) - as "a vast improvement" (Berlina 2015, p. 154), but attacks Sher for making Shklovsky's text unnecessarily academic, a move she finds in disaccord with Shklovsky's own diction that deliberately used simple words such as thing, making, and live through.

Based on her criticism, Berlina (2015), then puts forth her own alternative stating that art is "the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter". Her formulation remains purposefully ambiguous regarding the question whether "making" refers to a cognitive process or the actual manufacturing of a physical object. In both cases, the product is less important than the process of creation. Accordingly, the object recedes into the background

⁵ In contrast to the spelling proposed by Shklovsky, Van den Oever (2010) chooses to transcribe the former's neologism as *ostrannenie* (with double 'n'). According to her, this makes it possible to "once again estrange us from what may now have become a word too familiar to us" (p. 12).

⁶ In his introduction to the 2012 paperback edition of Lemon and Reis's (1965) translation, Morson (2012) comments on the sentence in question with the remark: "Shklovsky rather inconsistently concludes" (p. xi). However, Morson does not comment on available alternative translations of the apparently inconsistent phrase.

and gives way to processes of active configuration – both mentally and physically – that reinvigorate human perception of both works of art and the world.

The readings above suggest that the term *ostranenie* is characterized by a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it appears directed at the world with the objective of renewing individuals' habitualized and automated manner of perception, and possibly cognition, in general. On the other hand, the concept seems to refer to a slowing down and thereby emphasising of the process of artistic reception enabling renewed relations not to the world, but to the formal devices constitutive of the work of art. A similar ambiguity is partly reflected in developments of Shklovsky's own thought and scholarly development. This leads us over to the second and third challenge to a straightforward application of the term *ostranenie*.

During his long scholarship, Shklovsky has altered use and definition of his main concept. These changes become most palpable in a comparison of his 1919-essay *Iskusstvo kak priem* and his book-length study *Povesti o prose* (1966). Lachmann (1984 [1970], p. 323) has pointed out that, even though remaining true to the most crucial currents of his thought, Shklovsky (1966) used his late book to conduct a reinvestigation and partly a revision of his early work on *ostranenie*. Besides asserting a productive relation with Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* that will be dealt with later in the present essay, Lachmann identifies a crucial "change in emphasis" in Shklovsky's thinking (p. 336) from an enstranging of form to a theory of a "new seeing" (p. 336) enabled by artistic creation.⁷ This move shifts focus from the enstranging play of formal devices as an end in itself to the individual and societal effects of these devices and their reception, as such entailing a contextualization of Shklovsky's thinking. During this move, also the question of academic sources and inspirations as well as of possible legacies of the term *ostranenie* became a crucial point of interest. This brings us over to the third challenge posed by Shklovsky's concept – that of a mixed and often apparently contradictory genealogy.

Shklovsky's early essays such as *Voskresenie Slova* (The Resurrection of the Word; 1914) or *Iskusstvo kak priem* (Art as Technique/Device; 1919) are written as polemics against established traditions in Russian literary studies such as Chernyshevskij's, Dobroljubov's, and Pisarev's political rather than literary criticism, Veselovskij's comparative literary history, or Potebnya's attempt to approach poetry in linguistic terms (see for instance Erlich 1975).⁸ In his early texts, Shklovsky aimed at renewing literary criticism by asserting literary form as autonomous object of scientific study. The devices constituting a work, not an extra-literary context, where the proper field of the critic. However, in apparent contradiction to a formal-reductionist undercurrent in his thinking, Shklovsky explicitly identifies Tolstoy as an important inspiration for the development of the term *ostranenie*.

As Striedter (1969, p. xxiii) and Lachmann (1984 [1970], pp. 326-327) point out, Shklovsky's repeated use of examples from the works by Tolstoy bears witness to a seeming paradox in the former's terminology. While the early Shklovsky (1914, 1919) perceives of *ostranenie* as a set of formal devices that slow down and complicate the process of perception for the sake of this very process that, then, emerges as an end in itself, Tolstoy employs his own technique with the objective of loosening an object or act from its established context to draw attention to it – to make it conscious – and this way enable an activation of the reader. In contrast to an early

⁷ The expression new seeing is a direct translation of Shklovsky's concept of *novoe videnie* developed in his *Povesti o prose* (1966:2, p. 444).

⁸ The apparent proximity between Potebnya and the Formalists in terms of a linguistic approach to literature had been brushed over by the early Shklovsky in what Erlich (1969) terms a "cavalier treatment of recognized authorities [...] so typical of Russian Formalism" (p. 23).

Shklovsky, writes Lachmann (1984 [1970]), the approach by Tolstoy serves a critique of politics and society with an eye on facilitating change – a fact that, according to Erlich (1969), proved “incidental” to Shklovsky who was “not concerned with the ideological implications of the device” (p. 177). Of course, as Lachmann (1984 [1970] shows later in her essay (page 336 and 339), the balance shifted towards a more societal and contextual approach in Shklovsky’s (1966) later work, and has inspired, among others, Marcuse’s (1969) ideas about a change in perceptual habits as a precondition for successful revolutions. Also Striedter (1969, p. xxiii) argues that “two different intentions of estrangement”⁹ created tensions in Shklovsky’s thinking from the beginning.

Other scholars have identified Romanticism and in particular the works by Novalis and Shelley as important sources for Shklovsky’s thinking on estrangement. Both Grimm (1984 [1961], pp. 188-189) and Ungvári (1979, pp. 218-219) have emphasised this connection this way significantly expanding the concept’s lineage and potential implications.¹⁰ Tihanov (2005) on the other hand has shown a peculiar doubleness in Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* that puts radically progressive and inherently conservative potentials of the term up against one another. Identifying a “paradox” at the heart of *ostranenie*, Tihanov (2005, p. 686) writes: “[T]he end product [of an act of estrangement] is meant as a piece of innovation – arrived at through various artistic devices – that serves, however, to revive and make more palpable the old (and constant) substance of things [...] thus reasserting what is presumed to be the object’s timeless substance”. Tihanov utilizes Shklovsky’s biography and in particular his experiences during World War I and the Russian revolutions to explain this duality in the theory of *ostranenie*.

Shklovsky’s counterintuitive recourse to Tolstoy, the lineage connecting his work to Novalis and Shelley, as well as the aspects highlighted by Tihanov, reveal an ambiguity inherent in the concept of *ostranenie* that seems to constantly oscillate between a rigid and reductive formalism and an understanding of the functioning of estranging devices in various extra-literary contexts. The reason for this ambiguity can be found in the fact that theories of artistic estrangement, de-habitualization, and de-automatization have a far more complicated and diverse genealogy than initially acknowledged by Shklovsky – a genealogy that connects the concept not only to Tolstoy and Novalis, but also to Aristoteles, Hegel, Marx, and ultimately Bertolt Brecht (see for instance Helmers (1984), Grimm 1984 [1961]), Ungvári 1979).

Legacy or Inspiration? From Shklovsky’s *Ostranenie* to Brecht’s V-Effect and Beyond

As has been shown above, Shklovsky’s term *ostranenie* is characterized by a certain ambiguity in terms of translation, development, and points of origin. As a result, *ostranenie* sometimes appears as a formalist concept reducing art to a mere play of forms for form’s sake, and a wider understanding that opens for societal and political functions of an artistically estranged new seeing. In contrast, Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* or *V-effect* appears focused on a particular art form – the theatre stage – and entails a clearly contextual trajectory detailing the formal means applicable to achieve a concrete political effect in audiences and actors (see for instance Brecht 1957). As such, while there doubtlessly are connections between *ostranenie* and V-effect at the level of attention to artistic form, Brecht’s aesthetics are fundamentally directed at the world and have an evident point of origin in Hegelian and Marxist dialectics (Schaefer 1958; Fradkin 1974, pp. 157-160; Grimm 1984 [1961], pp. 187-189; Knopf 1980, pp. 378-380; Knopf 1984 [1974];

⁹ German original reads: “zwei unterschiedliche Intentionen der Verfremdung”.

¹⁰ Fradkin (1974, p. 154) substantiates such a romantic lineage with reference to an interview Vladimir Pozner had conducted with Shklovsky in 1964 where the latter explicitly points out a connection to Novalis.

pp. 362-366). As Tihanov (2005) observes, "Brecht went beyond that [Shklovsky's] theory by interpreting defamiliarization not just as a formal but also as a didactic technique that would promote his audience's better grasp of reality and would thus enhance its ability to fight for its political goals" (p. 688).

Brecht's term *Verfremdung* has been translated into English in different ways. Willett (1959, p. 179) identifies estrangement, alienation, and disillusion as common equivalents. He concedes that "none of [them] is entirely right" (p. 179), before suggesting that the term implies "a matter of detachment, of reorientation" (ibidem). Connecting Brecht's term to Shelley and Schopenhauer, rather than Hegel and Marx, and arguing for its origins in Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, Willett (1959, pp. 179-180) fails to identify the indebtedness of Brecht's *Verfremdung* to the concept of *Entfremdung* in its evolution from Hegelian to Marxist thinking. Only through the latter connection, however, the shift from didactics to dialectics in epic theatre can be properly acknowledged, thus clearly detaching the V-effect from formalist reductions to theatrical devices alone. Brecht's V-effect has a clearly emancipatory trajectory that aims at raising awareness of oppression and exploitation thereby preparing the cognitive grounds for political struggle (Schaefer 1958; Knopf 1980, pp. 387-388; Ungvárí 1979; Fradkin 1974, pp. 158-160).

When connecting Brecht's V-effect to Marx, a specific form of estrangement becomes palpable that is closely linked to socio-economic relations and conditions, namely to a form of alienation of workers from the labour process, the objects of their labour, and therefore from themselves, each other, and the world. When perceived in its Marxist context, Brecht's V-effect becomes conceivable as a dialectical device to achieve a "Verfremdung' der 'Entfremdung'" (Schaefer 1958, p. 94) - an estrangement of alienation. What Schaefer means is that in capitalist systems, socio-economic alienation has become naturalized and accepted as a necessary state of affairs by all subjects, including the exploited and oppressed proletariat. This naturalisation renders alienation and its consequences invisible even to those negatively affected by it. The processes of automation and habitualization identified by the formalists (among others), here serve to veil the fundamental contradictions of a class-divided society. In contrast to a theatre of illusions that brushes over these contradictions and pacifies audiences by means of theatrical spectacle, Brecht's dialectical theatre and V-effect deploy a series of devices that estrange, and therefore draw attention to, these contradictions, thus moulding political consciousness and facilitating active change. In Bloch's (1970) terms, Brecht transforms the theatre from a "Temple of the Muses" into a "special laboratory, where the possibilities of right behavior can be dramatically and politically tested and made into models" (p. 124).

Apparently, there are significant differences between Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and Brecht's V-effect. Nevertheless, the question of possible mutual influences between the two thinkers and their main concepts has engendered significant scholarly debate. Willett (1958, pp. 179-180 and pp. 208-210) was the first to clearly articulate the claim that Brecht had been inspired by Shklovsky's term. He supports this assertion with reference to the fact that Brecht began explicitly using the term *Verfremdung* only after a visit to Moscow in 1935 where Formalist scholarship was brought to his attention by Tretyakov. Willett (1958, p. 209) also identifies several conceptual likenesses between *ostranenie* and V-effect, such as the laying bare of the device or the distinction between fabula and plot. All these likenesses, however, are situated at the level of form and bracket entirely the question of context and directedness of the work of art so significant for Brecht's dialectical theatre.

The hypothesis of a certain indebtedness of Brecht to Shklovsky and Russian Formalism has been supported by Reich (1970, p. 371-372), who in his memoirs describes the same meeting

between Tretyakov and Brecht in Moscow in 1935 as a crucial inspiration for the adoption of the term V-effect by Brecht. Reich's memoir has been repeatedly quoted to assert this trajectory. In particular Western Brecht scholars were often excited by the idea that the artistic icon of the socialist world, Brecht, could be connected to a scholarly current denigrated by Soviet authorities since the 1930s. However, at closer inspection it becomes apparent that Reich (1970, p. 372) himself relativizes the significance of the Shklovsky - Brecht trajectory when writing that, in spite of a certain semantic similarity, the differences between the concepts are significant. Fradkin (1974, pp. 153-157) and Knopf (1984 [1974], pp. 356-359) argue that, even though it should be true that Brecht had borrowed the actual term *Verfremdung* from Shklovsky, Brecht had been developing his concept since the late 1920s, and that theoretical inspiration had come from Hegelian and Marxian dialectics, rather than Formalism.

In an interview with Schumacher (1976, p. 36), Shklovsky himself denied that his term *ostranenie* had provided any important inspiration to Brecht, while he, according to Lachmann (1984 [1970], pp. 337-338), in his *Povesti o prose* (1966) acknowledged a certain indebtedness of his own concept of a new seeing to Brecht's writing. These and other factors lead Helmers (1984, p. 23) to the conclusion, that the connection Shklovsky → Brecht is based on mostly incidental evidence, while the connection the other way around - from Brecht to (a late) Shklovsky - appears comparably well documented.

Scholars such as Helmers (1984), Knopf (1980), and Fradkin (1974), among others, place Shklovsky and Brecht on different sides of an estrangement continuum in art and culture. They assert an indebtedness of Brecht to Hegel and Marx, while they connect Shklovsky's thinking to Aristotle, Tolstoy, and Novalis. What is shared between Shklovsky and Brecht is an attention to formal devices that enable a making strange of the habitualized and familiar that leads to new insights. What divides them is the question toward what these devices are directed and how their wider effects can be understood. As Günther (2001, p. 142) writes, implied in Shklovsky formulation of making the stone stony again is the aim of "recreating an original sensation of things". In contrast to this, Brecht's aesthetics aims at facilitating the "understanding of puzzling mechanisms" and opens a perspective on reality as a "dynamic and contradictory process" that is open to intervention and change.¹¹

In Brecht's writings about the theatre (Brecht 1957), the V-effect plays a key role in constituting forms of estrangement that can motivate critical reflection and political mobilisation. The effect is brought about on three interrelated levels: a) the playwright, b) the director, and c) the actors.¹² At each level, particular devices are deployed with the objective to de-familiarize, problematize, and challenge taken for granted perspectives and conventions. As such, huge posters can question implicit assumptions of key scenes, actors can suddenly turn to and interrogate the audience, or songs and choirs can break the dramatic immersion and, often in an ironic fashion, comment upon the displayed events. The main goal is to counter the illusionary potentials of classical theatre by preventing spectators from being completely submerged by the play. Rather, Brecht's plays use devices of estrangement to create a critical distance between spectators, and the events and actors on stage - a distance that does not make emotional involvement impossible, but rather redirects it from affective identification with particular individuals to an emotional as well as intellectual concern with real-life relations and conditions the plays and their characters in one

¹¹ German originals read: "Geht es [Shklovsky] um die Wiederherstellung der Empfindung der Dinge, so zielt Brechts V-Effekt auf Verstehen des 'erstaunlichen Mechanismus' ab" and "[d]ie Realität wird [...] gedacht [...] als in sich widersprüchlicher dynamischer Prozess, in den man eingreifen, den man verändern und beherrschen kann."

¹² For valuable introductions into Brecht's theory of the theatre see Grimm (1965), Fradkin (1974), and Knopf (1980), among others.

way or another refer or point to. Increased knowledge combined with this conscious concern enables concrete political action aimed at resolving the contradictions and problems identified on stage.

Brecht's (1957, pp. 128) epic theatre facilitates a dialectical double-move where the naturalized and habitualized are first estranged and therefore made visible and explicit, before they become the object of critical analysis that leads to a better understanding of real conditions and relations thus enabling emancipatory practices and initiatives. As such, Brecht's is a political conscientious and activist form of theatre that aims at disseminating the knowledge and critical insights necessary to instigate change through a relentless questioning and challenging of taken-for-granted 'facts' and frames. This focus on political and theatrical practice makes Brecht's theories an important source of inspiration for contemporary thinking about the subversive and emancipatory potentials of the stage, such as the theatre of the oppressed by Augusto Boal.

Activating Audiences: Boal's Spect-Actors and the Stage as Simulation

Brecht's theories maintain a rather rigid distinction between playwrights, directors, and actors on the one hand, and spectators on the other, that becomes palpable in his idea that, through the use of the V-effect in theatre performances, certain conditions, relations, and contradictions can be made visible and brought to the awareness of audiences more effectively than in traditional forms of drama. Boal (2002) maintains the idea of an inherently political purpose of theatre that should aim at facilitating progressive change by disseminating knowledge and empowering audiences. In contrast to Brecht, however, he takes down the fourth wall separating stage and audience entirely in that he allows spectators to intervene into the play, and thus change the course of the displayed events, at any moment. As such, he adds the spectator as a fourth constitutive dimension of a conscientious and activist, political theatre.

Boal (1979, 2002) encapsulates this interactive theatrical practice in his idea of a *Theatre of the Oppressed* that comprises such techniques and concepts as the "forum theatre" (2002, p. 242) and "spect-actor" (2002, p. 243). The technique of forum theatre limits the function and power of playwrights and directors in that it opens theatre performances for active interventions from the side of audiences who are enabled to stop and step into the only loosely scripted play at any moment. As a result, the written drama and the stage become open frames that point to a general theme and direction, but that do not provide any narrative or other closure. Through this practice of estranging the very acts of staging and performing, audiences are enabled to create and re-create, to test and try, ever new options and possibilities, and critically analyse their consequences and impacts in open debates.

The spectators who in Brecht's theatre are enlightened and fed with the knowledge necessary to take action, are empowered by Boal to make their own decisions and test them in what, as Frasca (2004, p. 89) has pointed out, emerges as a simulated environment. At the same time, forum theatre holds intervening audiences accountable for the consequences of their proposed actions that are displayed within the fictional world of the stage. As a result, the spectator becomes "spect-actor" (Boal 2002, p. 243) - a component of the theatrical performance that both views, and actively takes part in and co-constitutes, the course of events, its actions, forms of presentation, and outcomes.

According to Boal, forum theatre facilitates a direct, practical, and responsible engagement of audiences with the socio-political problem-complexes addressed on stage. The roles of both

playwright and director are diminished and now merely establish general frames – certain basic rules – that loosely predispose the debates and subsequent formative interventions of spect-actors. This not only de-habitualises conventional expectations of spectator position, narrative stability and textual closure, but also facilitates new ways of seeing, processing, and interfering with the presented drama and its world-directed themes. Political conscientization, as such, becomes conceivable as a continuum that includes (interventions into) what happens on stage, but that also comprises the very discussions and acts of deliberation taking place among audiences while witnessing, criticizing, and debating a play.

Having introduced and contextualized the key concepts of *ostranenie* (Shklovsky), V-effect (Brecht), and spect-actor (Boal), I will now move on to a brief critique of earlier uses of these terms in the study of games and play.

Analysing Games with Shklovsky, Brecht, and Boal: Ostranenie, V-Effect, and Spect-Actors in the Study of Video Games

Summing up the findings of the previous sections it can be argued that while Shklovsky's term *ostranenie* is about reinvigorating perception with the purpose of returning to a forgotten essence of things, Brecht's V-effect is about estranging the familiar with the objective to grasp the real relations and contradictions hidden in the apparently natural and consensual, thus providing the intellectual tools for political action. Finally, Boal's spect-actor is about participation – creative and accountable interventions in plays that become testing grounds for real-world engagements. The present section will critically review a series of advances applying the terms *ostranenie*, V-effect, and spect-actor to analyses of games and play.

In game studies literature, formalism and neo-formalism as conducted in literary criticism and film studies, are often mentioned as general inspiration for approaches that focus on narrative and conceive of games as, among other things, specific storytelling mechanisms (Aarseth 1997, pp. 110-114; Juul 2005, pp. 156-157; Carr 2006; Calleja 2011, pp. 113-116; Neitzel 2011). Few of these works, however, explicitly mention Shklovsky or try to activate his concept of *ostranenie* for analytical purposes. Among those that do, the work by Myers (2009 and 2010) stands out and needs to be commented upon.

In parts of his otherwise very valuable contribution, Myers (2009) has given what has to be characterized as a reductionist account of Shklovsky and Russian Formalism. Myers (2009) posits a similarity between certain elements of what he terms "locomotor play" (pp. 49-50) in videogames and a poetic language in the sense of the Russian Formalists. Starting with the interesting observation that the "requirement of habituation prior to full engagement with video game play is parallel, in part, with requirements for reading" as both necessitate the development of certain capabilities, or "literacy" (p. 51), he then states that, due to continuous demands posed by new controller configurations and different controller sequences to be mastered, "the video game play experience is perhaps more properly compared to the experience of reading poetic language" (*ibidem*).¹³ This presentation of Shklovsky conflates challenges connected to the acquisition of general reading skills with the enstranging effects of formal devices that are deliberately deployed to slow down reception for artistic purposes.

¹³ Myers (2009) backs up this postulated analogy with the somewhat obscure sentence stating that "[t]he demands of poetic language are more involved than those of conventional language. The poetic language reading experience is, like the video game experience, uncertain" (p. 51).

In response to Myers, I would argue that controller configurations and sequences are indeed formal devices that *can be* used to create artistic estrangement. This is for instance convincingly achieved in *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2015) where a lack of tutorial deliberately prolongs the process of habitualisation of game controls and mechanics to draw attention to the unpreparedness of civilians to efficiently deal with a war situation. In most mainstream games, however, new controller functions and requirements are not deliberately used as artistic devices, but are treated as obstacles to be overcome as quickly as possible to enable a smooth enjoyment of the game – hence tutorial sequences as a design solution. As such, controller configurations and sequences do not have poetic qualities per se, but are specific devices that can be employed in a ‘poetic’ or in a ‘natural’ manner. On the basis of this, Myers argument can be nuanced; not “the video game experience” as such is “poetic” (ibidem; my emphasis), but *certain devices deployed at the level of game mechanics can prolong and complicate reception to enable poetic experiences of estrangement*. A deliberate de-familiarizing of game controls is one viable option to achieve such effects.

In his book-length study, Myers (2010) repeats key elements from his 2009-article that is included at various sections of his monograph. Explicitly connecting his argument to Shklovsky’s thinking, Myers (2009, p. 52; 2010, p. 46) writes: “By confining the video game play experience within the mechanics of the video game controller and habituated response, video game rules and relationships undermine and deny conventional experience in much the same manner that poetic language undermines and denies conventional language”. As has been shown in the present article, according to Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists, poetic language draws attention to form and slows down and complicates processes of reading and other forms of reception. This is achieved through the deployment of specific formal devices that estrange the perceiver and, this way, de-habitualize automated forms of seeing and cognition thus renewing our relation to language/art and, in certain iterations of the school, to the world. Rather than undermining or denying conventional language, literary practice deliberately makes it strange to recreate its full semiotic potentials – to enable it again to convey the stoniness of the stone to readers. Formalists were also fully aware of the fact that estranging devices, once deployed, gradually wear off and become conventionalized thereby losing their effect, as such implying a constant oscillating between conventionalisation and renewal. What has been said above also applies to the formal devices deployed to de-familiarize automated forms of doing and interacting in games. However, this is not, as Myers implies, an intrinsic quality of all games and all forms play.

In chapter 3, Myers (2010) introduces what he perceives as the key elements of Formalist method and doctrine (pp. 40-44) to prepare the grounds for his formalist-inspired approach to an analysis of video game play experiences. In the process, Myers heavily relies upon the work by Erlich (1969) in its 1981-edition and only cursory refers to original literature such as *Isskustvo kak priem*. As such, what emerges is a limited account of the Formalist movement in general and of Shklovsky’s thinking in particular that is mostly based on free association rather than close study of original texts. This approach is not necessarily problematic and appears legitimate when preparing general grounds for a specific argument or analysis. It becomes objectionable, however, once the fragmentary evidence is used to suggest a radical re-thinking of formalist theory and method as conducted by Myers (2010), who suggests a close connection between the formal method and a “cognitive aesthetic” and “biogenetic structuralism” (p. 44).

Myers (2010) not only disregards the varieties of Formalist approaches and the changing over time of key assumptions, concepts, and methods of the movement, but also reduces Formalist doctrine to “an early form of cognitive science, with its goal being to find formal properties of sign

and symbol systems indicative of formal properties of the mind" (p. 43). Such an argument can certainly be made, but to suggest it is the only and true core of formalist theory would require a conscientious engagement with formalist literature. As it stands now, Myers's narrowing down of Formalist thinking and practice is not only oblivious of the development of the method throughout the three phases identified by Hansen-Löve (1978), or the changes in Shklovsky's own work from *Isskustvo kak priem* (1919) to *Povesti o prose* (1966), but also simplifies complex and ambiguous concepts such as *ostranenie*.

As already indicated above, the argument of a relevance of Formalist thinking for cognitive approaches to literature, film, and games can be, and has already been, made (see for instance Thompson 1988), and Myers (2010) provides a sound, though limited, argument for this. The problem lies more in his style of writing that does not refer key literature on Formalism or *ostranenie*, but that nevertheless claims to redress the entire school creating the impression of having acquired the only viable method for a productive application of the formal method to analysis of games and play. As such, Myers's assertions that "Formalism remains valid *only* as the initial step establishing a relationship between aesthetics and cognition, or, more strongly put, between codes of media and codes of brains" (p. 48; my emphasis), or that "the study of digital media aesthetics *is essentially* the study of the human neurological system" (p. 49; my emphasis) seem to say more about the limitations of Myers's outlook than about Formalism or the complexities of the reception of art or other cultural processes.

For the Formalist method and *ostranenie* to make sense in analysis of games and play, the specific devices that entail a slowing down and complicating of both the reception of the game narrative and the interactive engagement with game system, mechanics, and fictitious worlds need to be properly analysed and presented. This way the media specific aspects of games and play can be productively highlighted whilst maintaining crucial insights drawn from formalist methods in film and literary studies.

Compared to Shklovsky, the writings of Brecht have been taken up more readily in game studies (Laurel 1991, Farman 2010, Evans 2014, Dunne 2014, de Wildt 2014). In her seminal study *Computers as Theatre*, Laurel (1991) turns to classical theories of the drama to achieve a better understanding of human-computer interaction. Drawing upon Aristotle's *Poetics*, she argues that dramatic theory is better suited for both analysis and design of virtual environments and interfaces than narratology because of the performative and interactive aspects constitutive of this 'new' technology. As such, writings on the theatre might help to engage other professions than programmers and technologists in the production of computer-based applications, thus leading to more creative and engaging solutions.

Laurel (1991) bases most of her work on the writings of Aristotle but turns to Brecht to alleviate what she perceives as a key weakness in the former's *Poetics*, namely the conceptual and temporal limitation of catharsis to a pleasurable release of emotion at the end of the play. In contrast to this view, Laurel argues, Brecht "extended the notion of catharsis beyond the temporal boundary of the performance" (p. 31) until the point where audiences "take what they have assimilated from the representation and put it to work in their lives" (*ibidem*). According to Laurel, this contribution by Brecht makes his theory of epic theatre an important source of inspiration for analysis and design of computer-based technologies. However, rather than engaging with the dialectical qualities of the V-effect, Laurel reduces Brecht's concept to an understanding of "computer-based representations" as a form of representation "that is not the same as real life but which has real-world effects and consequences" (p. 31), this way de-emphasizing the critical and empowering potentials implied in the Marxist roots of Brecht's work.

This neglect of the Marxist origins and, therefore dialectical nature, of epic theatre and V-effect is perpetuated in more recent applications of Brecht's scholarship to analysis of videogames and play. Evans (2014, pp. 8-10) for instance rightly criticizes an overdependence of Laurel (1991) on Aristotelian dramatic theory, before he launches Brecht's V-effect as a viable alternative. In his doubtlessly valuable endeavour, however, he fails to acknowledge the (arguably superficial) use of Brecht by Laurel (1991, p. 31), and falls prey to a similar reductionism excluding important dimensions of Brecht's key concept. Evans (2014) correctly explains the V-effect as a series of devices deployed at the level of dramatic text, stage design and setting, as well as actor performances that has the objective of achieving "a certain distance [of the audience] to characters and events, allowing for evaluation and critique" (p. 9). He then moves on to convincingly show that this same practice can be employed in video game design to produce "interruptions and inconsistencies" (p. 10) at the level of rules, mechanics, interface, and story.

The examples Evans (2014, pp. 11-13) then chooses, however, disregard the dialectic dimensions of Brecht's theatre that is directed at an estrangement (*Verfremdung*) of a state of Marxian alienation (*Entfremdung*) with the objective of unveiling naturalized, and therefore invisible, relations of exploitation and oppression this way conveying the knowledge necessary to empower audiences and facilitate active political change. The illustrations Evans provides - shifts between first- and third-person perspective in *GTA IV*, time-shifting in *Max Payne*, and grotesque elements in the *Katamari*-franchise - do indeed estrange certain received generic conventions regarding gameplay, characters, and narrative, but they do so without drawing attention to any real-world contradictions or issues. As such, Evan's examples would more easily lend themselves to an analysis by means of Russian Formalism and Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* than Brecht's V-effect.

Interrogating the dialectic relations between player-subject (interpreting subject), playing subject, and played subject, de Wildt (2014) chooses far more suitable examples for an application of Brechtian concepts to analysis of video games - *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café 2013) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012). In his otherwise very convincing presentation of Brecht's framework, de Wildt (2014, p. 13) asserts a unilateral dependence of the V-effect on Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, as such, aligning himself to a debatable conceptual trajectory (Grimm 1961 [1985]; Fradkin 1974; Knopf 1985 [1974]; Helmers 1985). Regardless this attribution of Brecht's key concept to Russian Formalism, de Wildt (2014, pp. 14-15) then correctly situates Brecht's theory of the theatre, and the V-effect in particular, within the frames of Marxist dialectics asserting the relevance of games and play for the creation of a "critical distance" (p. 15) that enables conscientious engagements with real-world challenges and contradictions thus facilitating political empowerment and agency. Finally, he points to the relevance of Boal's concept of spect-actor for game analyses based on dramatic theory.

Drawing upon Calico's (2008) work, deWildt (2014, p. 15) mistakenly attributes Boal's (1979, 2002) terminology to Brecht. Thereby, he creates a misrepresentation of Brecht's thinking that was aimed at using theatre for a mobilisation of audiences for political purposes beyond the stage and not for a direct involvement of spectators in theatrical performances as implied in Boal's spect-actor and forum theatre. Even though Boal's ultimate aims were similar to Brecht's, namely a political mobilisation of audiences, the artistic strategies proposed to achieve such objectives, and the presumed role of spectators and stage, were different.

To increase confusion, Calico (2008, pp. 225-226, note 11), whose book on Brecht deWildt (2014) cites, misattributes Boal's concept of spect-actor to Frasca (2004) without realizing that

Frasca (2004, pp. 88-89) extensively refers to Boal's work when introducing terms such as spect-actor, forum theatre, or theatre of the oppressed. In any case, Frasca (2004) was the first to reappropriate Boal's concepts and practices to analyses of games, a move that enabled crucial new insights into the nature of games and play that point beyond the scope of Brecht's thinking.

When introducing Boal's concepts, Frasca (2004, p. 85) extends the significance of theories of the drama for the discipline of game studies beyond a confinement to Aristotle's *Poetics* that has dominated the field since the publication of Laurel's (1991) seminal study on the issue. Arguing for an ontological specificity of games as simulations, rather than narratives, Frasca (2004, pp. 86-87) moves on to show how Boal's (1979, 2002) theories and techniques encapsulated in the *Theatre of the Oppressed* not so much constitute a re-thinking of established drama, but a reconstitution of the stage as a simulated space comparable to games. Frasca writes: "[Boal's] Forum Theatre is nothing but a game, with specific rules, that uses theatre to simulate certain events and behaviours" (p. 89). As such, rather than merely opening up new possibilities for the dramatic sequencing of events in an interactive narrative, both *games* and *theatre of the oppressed* enable, within certain modifiable confines, an active involvement of spect-actors in the very constitution of virtual characters and events, and invite for infinite repetitions of ever-emergent narrative action in simulated settings.

According to both Boal and Frasca, the infinite possibility of repetition is key to the political mobilization and conscientization that is the aim of *Theatre* and *Games of the Oppressed* respectively. Both enable an exposition of specific problems and contradictions from multiple vantage points, actively involve players and spectators, and make possible a dynamic testing of possible solutions. By these means, these techniques facilitate critical thinking, open debate, and constructive exchange across apparent divides, rather than cementing preconceived ideological or other positions in pre-set narrative frames.

Frasca (2004) describes open source software that invites active modifications of the rule systems and components of mainstream and educational games as an important step towards such new and politically aware, critical practices of involvement and play, while Ito (2004) and Jenkins (2004) alert to the significance of fan culture innovations and open game creation systems for potential applications of Frasca's ideas. Based on such considerations, it can be argued that Farman's (2010) Brecht-inspired analysis of player modding performances in *GTA: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games 2004), could have been better accounted for through recourse to Boal's (1979, 2002) concepts of spect-actor and forum theatre than by reference to the V-effect.

Conclusion

The present article has introduced various conceptions of estrangement and argued for their relevance for analysis of games and play. Moving from a presentation and contextualisation of Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, Brecht's V-effect, and Boal's spect-actor to a critical review of uses of these concepts in game studies, I attempted to provide a basis for better grounded and more thorough applications of these terms in future research.

The most important contribution to game studies from the side of Russian Formalism is the focus on formal devices as empirically observable features of games that systematically restrict and predispose player performances and perceptions, this way enabling particular meaning potentials to emerge. In mainstream titles, the deployed devices will predominantly invite game experiences in line with player expectations. Such adherence to genre conventions and assumed player

preferences has its basis in investment-return considerations of a rapidly expanding and highly competitive industry, and often leads to reiteration of received hegemonic roles and frames in mainstream products (Srauy 2017; Hammar 2017). Devices that facilitate an estrangement from such habitualized generic forms are often perceived as potential threats to investments as they challenge players into unexpected roles and demand reflection rather than inviting relaxing immersion. Therefore, comparable to processes observable in other media (Artz 2015), also mainstream games tend to eschew challenging content, making art games and independent productions the most important sources of innovation. Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is a suitable tool to analyse the renewing functions and effects of estranging devices employed in such games, and might provide new insight to developers and designers regarding the nature and potentials of their craft.

While *ostranenie* predominantly focuses on an estranging play of form, Brecht's V-effect can be employed to highlight formal devices in their relation to political contradictions and problems. Here a de-habitualizing effect is invited at the level of form that draws attention to taken-for-granted and therefore invisible real-world relations. The V-effect describes formal means through which cultural expressions, games among them, can draw attention to naturalized contradictions by making them strange, thereby conveying knowledge and affording critical reflection that facilitates political mobilization. Brecht's writing is not only well-suited to identify and describe the formal devices used to initiate such processes, but might also serve as a source of inspiration for a games industry often trapped in profit-maximizing cycles of generic repetition that makes it difficult to take wider socio-cultural functions and potentials of the medium sufficiently into account.

Lastly, taking Boal's concept of spect-actor on board, the barrier separating players from games can be problematized and undermined. In letting players directly interfere with the formal systemic processes that limit in-game visions and performances (as has been convincingly achieved in the modding centre of *This War of Mine*), the relation between cultural expressions and audiences is first estranged and then reconfigured, as such allowing for a constitutive interchange between formal frames and players. Boal's thinking allows for an analysis of the formal devices affording such structural player involvement at the level of both narrative and game code, and can, similar to Brecht, become an inspiration for scholars as well as game industry professionals. In addition, however, Boal's work can become a source of innovative player engagement beyond a ludic or immersive attitude that makes the very rules and mechanics structuring interaction and perception the potential object of critical inquiry, politically inflected discussions, and formative intervention.

The present article has argued that the concepts of *ostranenie* (Shklovsky), V-effect (Brecht), and spect-actor (Boal) can provide important insights and facilitate creative new practices in analysis, development, design, and play of digital and other games. Unfortunately, space limitations made an application of the developed framework in actual analyses impossible. Instead, I had to confine my approach to an introduction of key terminology, theoretical developments, and scholarly debates, paired with a critical engagement with some earlier uses of these concepts in game studies. The alternative would have been to water down the theoretical inquiry and thereby make it prone to similar omissions and simplifications as those I criticized in the works of others. My main objective has been to present a sound theoretical foundation for future formalist-inspired research in game studies. I hope the article will be read and received with this purpose in mind.

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