

# 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dramatic Theory Meets VR Storytelling

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## **Keywords**

Enacted, Spatial, Storytelling, VR, Immersive, Dramatic Theory

## **INTRODUCTION**

The definition of an immersive experience varies depending on whom you ask. For a designer of interactive media, immersive denotes virtual reality along with its technology. For those in the theatre arts, immersive implies some reconfiguration of promenade, site specific and interactive forms of theatre (Garver 2014). The common element between them is the desire to create experiences that are interactive and spatial thus leading to new ways of structuring narrative. While film and proscenium-based theatre are two-dimensional forms composed and presented within a frame, immersive experiences “reclaim the z-axis” (Bucher 2017). The interactive and three-dimensional aspects of immersive experiences demand a rethinking of narrative structure to focus on: 1.) the player as both an actor, who steps into a role to construct experience, and as an observer who watches and interprets the performance, and 2.) the connection of interaction, pattern and spectacle. Designing three-dimensional narratives that situate the player as an actor-observer may be derived from existing theatre forms and game mechanics design by selecting methods that focus on telling the story through experience and de-prioritizing two-dimensional language-based narrative techniques. This project explores how to intentionally design narratives for virtual reality by creating a VR adaptation of Artaud’s play, *Jet of Blood* (1925). The project resulted in a different type of immersive experience derived from theatre forms that reject traditional text-based narratives in favor of an enacted sensory focused experience.

## **PLAYER AS ACTOR - OBSERVER**

Jenkins defines four types of spatial/environmental storytelling methods that “create the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience” (Jenkins 2004): Of which the most important for this project, and also under researched, is that of the enacted narrative which “enable players to perform or witness narrative events.” Jenkins (2004) describes spatial stories as those that privilege spatial exploration over plot development, driven by broad goals and conflicts but also existing at a local, “micronarrative” level to shape emotional response, which he compares to musical numbers or gag sequences in film. This definition of enacted spatial stories is problematic, however, in that it ignores, or simplifies, the potential of game mechanics to directly contribute to narrative. We can find examples of enacted mechanics in games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017), and *Passage* (Rohrer 2007).

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In theatre, different dramatic forms have been envisioned to empower and immerse the audience, bring in the z-axis, and privilege interactivity. For example, Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (Artaud 1994) was developed from surrealist roots to subsume the audience's senses. For Artaud, the true structural elements of theatre were character, pattern, and spectacle: Plot, thought, and language were to be minimized. While Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1994) connects to ideas of emergent narratives by turning the audience into spect-actors, Artaud worked to radically change the language of the theatre. In comparing computers to theatre, Laurel (Laurel 2013), however, returns to theatre's bedrock. She uses Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle et al. 2012) to define the structural units of interactive media as: action (plot), character, thought, language, melody (pattern), and spectacle (enactment). Laurel focuses her discussion around the idea of user agents who initiate action to co-create experiences with a computer partner as mediator. The primacy of player as interactive agent forwarded by Laurel overlooks the more nuanced point that players also can have a perspective and may inhabit a role. Building from this, we can see that embodying a role, as a character, connects interaction to spectacle and pattern in a way that creates meaning. VR narratives can be constructed with the player as both 1.) an actor who embodies a role to perform and initiate interactions, and 2.) as an audience surrounded by unfolding spectacle and pattern.

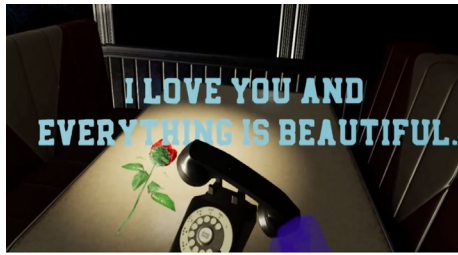
## STORYTELLING FOR VR

To date, through the development of *Jet of Blood VR*, we have identified several areas for VR storytelling that invite more study:

- 1.) The design of enacted game mechanics aligns with A.) Artaud's insistence on the primacy of dance, ritual and gesture, B.) Jenkins' ideas of spatial storytelling, C.) Immersive theatre's incorporation of dance and physical theatre (Lecoq 2006), D.) Game design ideas from non-VR games.
- 2.) Reduce the dependency on language-based design (Artaud 1994; Lecoq 2006) and instead distribute narrative between interaction, pattern, and spectacle (see figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1:** *Jet of Blood VR* memory objects convey narrative through spectacle alone. The player initiates the sequence by picking up an object that connects to the narrative. The narrative sequence consists of an audio cue, music and laughing for example, while a particle effect of additional objects signifying narrative concepts, swirl around the player.



**Figure 2:** The player steps into the role of facilitator between the Boy and Girl actors. Lines are not delivered until the player finds the phone and raises it to their ear. The combination of short lines and spectacle creates an intense pattern which changes the experience for the player. This method combines interaction, pattern and spectacle.

- 3.) Situate the player as an actor in accordance with Theatre of the Oppressed, enacted storytelling and Immersive Theatre. In *The Severance Theory: Welcome to Respite* (Scoggin 2021), the player enters the world of a live VR play with actors that respond to the player. Interactive objects, movement through space and mechanics will also serve to situate the player as actor as exemplified by *Half Life: Alyx* (Valve Corporation 2020) and *Superhot VR* (SUPERHOT Team 2016).

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