

# Competitive Acting - Issues on Action, Interaction and Acting in Converged Media

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## ABSTRACT

One of the challenging problems of tomorrow's iTV is how to generate a digital drama that looks like a real movie but which emerges out of the interaction of many (thousands) users. The problem of actors' credibility has been widely discussed in the relevant literature, however only in the context of the traditional theatre play. This article describes some basic aspects of future acting in digital environments. It also introduces the concept of "competitive acting", a new paradigm for digital stage plays of the future combining drama with interaction-driven dialogue and action elements in converged media.

## General Terms

Theory.

## Keywords

competitive acting, future drama, digital drama, digital stage play, converged media, GAMECAST, participation-of-many, television, series type, iTV.

## 1. ACTING THEORY AND FUTURE DRAMA

As media convergence evolves, it becomes more and more evident that not only digital environments but also the roles of the users therein are changing. Digital environments become digital theatres letting the players augment their physical existence through their digital representations in virtual spaces [4, 5]. As the new possibilities to interact with the "old" TV medium open up viewers become active users and gamers. Players within interactive game environments become digital actors and performers; the users' actions not only push the game forward but also let dramatic plot structures emerge and unfold. The users' avatars orchestrate a digital stage play.

Drama is typically described as a work portraying life intended for performance by actors on stage. Traditional dramas strongly focus on roles to be played and on the verbal and visual expression of human emotions. The physical nature of dramatical forms arises out of the physical existence of a real theatrical stage where the action takes place. Traditional dramas, as we know them, implement linear storylines and do not let viewers intervene in or influence the play. With technology and interactivity becoming more and more distinct and predominant in our lifestyles, culture and society, a demand for interactive experiences and the delivery of more personalized entertainment content becomes noticeable. In addition, in the era of virtual worlds the human imagination on

dramatic content design and delivery is tendentially changing since "*the boundaries between the real and the virtual are becoming increasingly confused and the interface is becoming increasingly important in our experience*" [4].

It is very probable that in future approaches to drama a virtual environment will serve as a stage. The actors will even play their roles distributed across different physical locations or as models who only lend their appearances, mimics, gestures and speech to virtual AI actors [7, 19]. The recipients in turn will gain the possibility to actively participate in the play and thus rise to become active performers. Theatre might, in this case, become just a metaphor for an interface where the real and the virtual converge. Future digital dramas in such environments will tell stories involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue, as we know it from traditional theatre stage plays. The substantial difference will be the technology-enabled possibility to be involved in the action as a future "digital me". We intentionally avoid at this stage using the word "avatar" since the future will almost certainly enable us to construct things which go far beyond what we associate with the avatars of today (2009), e.g. simple human representations in SecondLife-like environments [12]. Today, we are already approaching the concept of digital drama through MMORPGs - Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games - which feature a large base of players interacting with one another in a virtual world [1].

Stanislavski (1863-1938), one of the pioneering theoreticians in theatre acting, demanded from theatre an exact reconstruction of reality. According to Stanislavski and his "*creative if*" concept [14] actors should personify the characters. In an ordinary life our bodies automatically manifest our feelings through mimic and gestures for example. These have to be intentionally used on stage to make it possible to convey the intentions of the performance, to indicate and to empathize with the inner feelings of the characters played and demonstrate the "authenticity" of the action on stage and the truthfulness of the plot. Actors have to treat the set as if it were reality. They should not only understand the individual goals of the roles played but also keep in mind the individual inner line of the characters by pursuing their individual goals throughout the play. Actors need to remain in the frame of mind of the characters off-stage so that the aforementioned inner line does not get broken: "*if the inner line is broken an actor no longer understands what is being said or done and he ceases to have any desires or emotions.*" [14]. Lee Strasberg, an American director, actor, and producer (1901-1982) held a slightly different view, although based on the theory of Stanislavski. Lee Strasberg's teachings are associated with the term "method acting" [3]. According to

Strasberg's explanations a realistic and lifelike manner of acting is supposedly achieved through impersonation, and by letting personal experiences interact with a given situation and thereby influence the play. An actor should recall emotions or sensations from his or her own life and use them to identify with the character being portrayed [15]. Thus, the actor's dramatic interpretation inevitably emerges out of the actor's own personality and his or her psychological structure. Strasberg actually derived his Method Acting from Stanislavski's "creative if" concept but he demanded from actors that they behave in a particular way since "*the circumstances of the scene indicate that the character must behave in a particular way*" [15]. The actual situation and plot unfolding should motivate the actors to bring their own feelings, emotional responses and experiences into the play and largely translate their human experiences through unique and spontaneous behavior. "*To tell any story - from a fantastic, surreal story to a very naturalistic, realistic story - the key ingredient is always humanity*" [17]. The "Method Acting" training by Strasberg stands for successful "Hollywood Style" movies and is still the basis for actor training in many institutions worldwide.

## **2. "PARTICIPATION-OF-MANY" IN DIGITAL THEATRES OF THE FUTURE**

Approaching game-like settings in converged media, actors need to not only embody the characters played but also develop an understanding of the concept of a virtual stage, where the digital representation of actors needs to co-exist with digital representations of game players, which, in this can be treated as untrained actors. Schmieder and Wierzbicki already reported on a GAMECAST system, which represents such a setting and is currently under development [11]. From today's point of view, one of the significant problems with digital dramas of the future will emerge from the interaction of a large number of untrained actors represented by game players. These players need to be granted the right to settle conflicts on their own initiative and interact with the play according to their own strategies so that their particular goals can be reached. The conflict a player is facing is typically binary in its nature and it can build up on a win-or-lose basis. The action follows a typical branching structure which represents the set of possible paths the user can select from and walk through.

One of the most important goals within the GAMECAST storytelling concept is to create a feeling of interactive freedom for the player while maintaining affordable production costs. To reach this goal it is important that the player does not notice the branching structure beneath it, with variable scenes, triggered when particular conditions are met.

An "old-fashioned" computer game is based on an "interaction-of-one" principle - only one player is involved in playing the game and only one player needs to be given options to choose from. In MMORPG-like "interaction-of-many" settings, where players not only appear as virtual actors in the digital drama but also contribute towards the plot unfolding therein, each player needs a specific goal to be achieved throughout the interaction process. In converged, "participation-of-many" environments like GAMECAST (we are thinking here primarily about the fusion of games with television series as described in [11]) the situation becomes much more complex. Virtual actors (AI characters [7]), active players (lean-forward users, untrained actors), passive,

lean-backward audiences and human game masters (directors of the play) create a unique sphere of agitators, prosumers, consumers and "superusers". AI characters and human game masters regulate the flow of the interaction. Appearing as roles from the story they convey goals for the interaction scenes to the untrained actors (players). AI characters and human game masters also operate as agent provocateurs. They foster conflicts and intervene, if needed, using dramaturgical methods that originate from the story. The overall goal is to create a dramaturgically fruitful unfolding story, which is required to satisfy the passive recipients of a series. This approach aims at creating authentic and credible dramatic lines and believable appearances in a TV series, not just game-based performances in terms of on-screen-as-if-on-stage performances as described by Lowood [6]. One of the challenges of this approach is to motivate the players to play the game, let them have fun with the "role" they create and enjoy the feeling of improvisation they are experiencing. It is not important to make them perfectly impersonate the role but instead to try to generate competitive situations on a digital stage where the players concentrate on gaming and winning the game rather than on playing roles.

The super-objectives [14] of a player within GAMECAST are shaped when he or she decides which game option to choose. A simple decision like this might be to join and support a specific group of protagonists in the series (GAMECAST reference). The player's social relations within the online world, his way of playing as well as his behavior and the sense of achievement within different quests the player has started shape his objectives, his virtual character and personality. Considering storytelling the most appropriate way to construct interactive narratives for digital theatres would be to take into account the individual actions of every player and also the player's digital me accordingly. This would, however, raise the costs to the extent that the production would soon become unaffordable. Therefore, for new players in GAMECAST the goals are set according to the party they joined. This approach incorporates special guided scenes in which supporting characters (non-player characters or the characters which are controlled by human game masters) explain the goal of the mission and encourage the players accordingly. The function of the scenes is to provide each player or each group of players with a certain goal, which might be achieved during the interaction scene which follows. The goals of the quests are set to foster dramaturgic conflicts, as described above. The guided scenes are not shown to the audience which does not interact with the game part of the series.

Due the possible large number of players in GAMECAST not everyone can be granted the same ability to influence the play. To differentiate between levels of influence, a concept of interaction levels has been introduced which accounts for the players' performance and their reputation within the game community which is run parallel to the series. Dependent on these, a player can even become and impersonate the main character of the series [11].

Players have the chance to advance within the story and impersonate this role, which will then first appear within the story.

Under the conditions described above, acting theories that use the remembrance of similar emotional experiences are of almost no use for digital theatres. The "method acting" by Strasberg can

certainly help trained actors to put themselves into a certain mood on a real stage, but it can hardly be adopted by untrained actors who are playing a game. Certain extreme emotions like suicidal despair are just too harsh as that an untrained actor would and should experience it. Those interacting would have to be out of their mind “if they would want to submit themselves to the fate of a heroine who commits suicide as the result of a love affair turned bad” and that “Any attempt to turn empathy [...] into first-person, genuinely felt emotion would [...] trespass on the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain.” [9]. Furthermore it would simply take too long for untrained actors to recall all the aspects and feelings of a certain situation.

### 3. COMPETITIVE ACTING

Thanks to training and acting studies, professional actors, are able to (un)intentionally orchestrate and convey their feelings with their bodies, speech and faces, whilst still staying focused on the scene and the other actors within it. Untrained actors lack this training and often focus on the process of conveying emotions during their performance, which can likely lead to a point where they focus more on demonstrating than on really immersing themselves in the situation. That is why untrained actors are always threatened with becoming emotionally blocked, which makes them choose strategies based upon what they believe to be appropriate in a given situation. For this reason, performances by untrained actors often seem unnatural.

The design of GAMECAST, a converged-media “theatre”, is based on a principle we call “competitive acting”. The German noun for acting, “Schauspiel”, which could literally be translated as “Show-game”, reflects relatively well the two elements of acting – the show and the game (play). GAMECAST focuses on the latter; it concentrates on the ‘game’ rather than on the mimetic aspect of acting. The authors suggest the following three principles to the players:

1. “Do not concentrate on acting!”
2. “It is not a staged play - it is a game experience, and every game has its rules!”
3. “Try to win by using the game’s strategies and you will be a believable actor.”

Striving for success and concentrating on the mission is one of the main driving forces as regards the formation of involvement and emotion. It implies behavior that is free from worrying about whether one is doing the right things or not. In addition, it lets one forget the fear of being watched – a perfect condition for the creation of a candid actor performance through playing a game (see [17]). Real actors need years of training to gain such a level of acting performance credibility, honesty and authenticity on stage. In environments like GAMECAST where many players actually face the same conflict, it is obvious that each player needs to be confronted with a situation which demands a win. To reach their goals the players can choose mainly between different strategies. All emotions like comfort or anger arise naturally and unintentionally when these strategies are fulfilled or fail. Based on these aspects, the conflicts within each scene in a GAMECAST show are not staged; they naturally arise out of the fact that different players pursue different opposing goals. Rather than choosing methods of acting, players choose what they believe and feel to be the best strategies necessary to prevail. Their dialogue

partners choose what they believe to be the appropriate response to the current action. Therefore, every scene emerges out of the actions and reactions of the performers and unfolds in an improvisation-like manner.

### 4. DIRECTING DIGITAL DRAMAS

Converged media brings us to the point where the way in which dramas and stage plays are rehased or conceived for games, cinema and television needs rethinking. Directing digital dramas will require a balanced approach to dealing with dramatic content and interactivity. It has been claimed that interactivity and dramaturgy are fundamentally antagonistic concepts which rule each other out [18]. This is why the interactivity in narrative remains a challenge to critics [8] and many approaches to interactive films and dramas have failed due to a lack of joy in playing the game [13]. Granted more interactive freedom a consistent dramaturgy becomes problematic because users / players who impact on an interactive story often do not care about creating a good dramaturgy. “*After all, this would require a kind of thinking that contradicts the goal of immersion. No hero in a conflict would think about which actions would lead to the best dramaturgy - she cares only about how to solve this conflict.*” That is why: “*Depending on the level of power over the story, the user can more or less destroy it* [10].”

Competitive Acting attempts to incorporate the player in the process of storytelling as an agent driven by self-centered wants, so that the actions that originate from these wants foster the unfolding of the dramaturgy. This corresponds to works by Tanenbaum, among others [16]. Tanenbaum demands a rethinking of the user’s role within interactive media: “*responsibility for the quality of an interactive narrative experience must perforce be shared across the system designer and the player ... As long as we continue to design interactive narrative artifacts around the assumption that the player’s role is simply as a problematizing source of error that must be corrected for, then we are denying half of the equation.*” [16].

David Strasberg made very interesting statements on diverse topics within the area of acting in an interview with Bijan Tehrani [17]:

*What directors need to find is how to watch an actor and how to look for what they need. One actor needs a pat on the back, the other needs a shout, and the other needs a whisper in the ear. Understanding the actor gives a huge advantage to any director. If you’re working with untrained people I think it it’s doubly important because you can’t fall back on the standard vocabulary that you use to guide a professional actor. You really have to understand what you want and what that actor needs at that moment.*

The above seems to be generally proved true in any theatre, classical or digital, contemporary or future. In a situation where the play remains fully uncontrolled and the plot unfolds completely dynamically it is very probable that the action will eventually end in chaos. Directing digital interactive dramas in the future will require bringing in dialogues between multiple characters (trained and untrained actors) and structuring them in such a way that the action makes sense. This is a task which does not differ much from the traditional directing of films and television series, or better an improvised scene.

As the fun of human players would be greatly diminished if they had to follow the orders of a director, their actions cannot really be controlled. They can only be manipulated by the dramaturgical methods through game masters and NPCs - the non-player characters, like new strong enemies, obstacles, agent provocateurs etc. appearing in the game. It is most important that the action remains believable and that it fits into the dramatic content. Problems with players who might intentionally want to disturb the interaction scenes and threaten the success of a mission would have to be solved through the appropriate intervention of a game master (director).

## 5. SUMMARY

Although many elements of traditional theories of acting may still apply in different situations within virtual environments the digital form of reciprocity which users (untrained actors, players) fulfill in different game-like settings makes digital play different in its nature from what we associate with traditional theatre. In this paper a new model of competitive acting in converged environments was introduced and contraposed to traditional acting theories by Stanislavski and Strasberg. The "Competitive Acting Theory" aims to foster two aspects within interactive dialogue and drama. The first aspect is authenticity; the second and most important is fun and the joy of competing. It has been claimed that the authenticity of acting in digital media emerges out of the competitive settings in which the player concentrates on working out a win situation for himself or for a group he joined in the play.

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