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Maria Mandea (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4118-921X) is an artist and researcher who works with the medium of play. She holds a PhD focused on the performative and participatory aspects of games and teaches game design at the Master's level, emphasizing concept and analog prototypes. In 2013, she founded *Micul Haos*, a toy design project, and in 2017, she co-founded the *Super:Serios* artist collective. Maria is the vice-president of *Laborator Artistic* Association and a co-founder of the Știrbei47 art space. In 2023, she initiated *The Play Institute (Institutul Jocului)* in Bucharest. Her work, which includes large-scale interactive installations (*Divided,* 2020, *Aproape Departe*, 2020, *System in the Room*, 2020, *Rousseau Game*, 2022) has been shown in various national and international settings, including the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest and the Ars Electronica Center. Her work is also featured in public collections of museums.

Contact information: maria.mandea@unatc.ro

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ART DEVICES - PLAY DEVICES: IMMERSION VS. ESTRANGEMENT IN ART-GAMES

MARIA MANDEA
National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" Bucharest

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of "device" in art, beginning with Viktor Shklovsky's Russian formalist concept of *ostranenie*, or "making strange," as the essence of artistic expression. It then applies this idea to games, especially hybrid and large-scale analog art games, by exploring the central, academic tension between immersion and the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) as an ethical-political device linked to the German playwright Bertolt Brecht.

While the dominant paradigm in game design is immersion—where the player is so emotionally absorbed that they forget the artificiality of the medium—Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is the deliberate act of breaking the audience's focus on narrative to allow for critical thinking about the situation. This paper argues that games that exist solely as one or the other are limited: a game focused solely on immersion risks being pure entertainment. At the same time, one concentrated solely on alienation could be perceived as abstract or unplayable.

The most powerful design, therefore, lies in the dialectic between these two forces, in complicity. Estrangement creates an intentional "crisis within immersion" that forces the player to step back from their emotional experience and critically analyze the game's constructed situations and underlying systems. Through this process, the player becomes complicit, and the game is transformed into a participatory and critical medium, serving a political and didactic function that encourages reflection on the issues and power dynamics it models - an essential direction if it is to be considered a form of art.

This paper draws upon the author's design experience, using art games to demonstrate these concepts in practice. The analysis includes *The Rousseau Game,* an exhibition playground created for and displayed at the National Museum for Contemporary Art in Bucharest and *Divided*, a game developed for the Deep Space 8K at the Ars Electronica Center Linz.

Keywords: *Artistic device, immersion, estrangement, complicity, alienation*

Introduction

Immersion is one of the defining paradigms when discussing games, from the magic circle, games as rituals to modern video games. By considering art as a device for social interaction and social creation of meaning we will be exploring the tension between immersion and estrangement (directly drawn from Shklovsky's concept of ostranenie or making strange (Shklovsky, 1965)) and the alienation effect or Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt (Brecht, 1964), proposing complicity as a more complex and nuanced approach to game design that both involves the player and lets them distance themselves enough to imply critical thinking.

Despite being a dominant design approach, pursuing immersion alone can lead to games that are more about entertainment and treat players as spectators. It is the usual paradigm for commercial games, but is it enough to treat them as an art form in their own right? In Rancière's (2009) interpretation, the spectator is "separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (p. 2). But is the power to intervene in the game—moving the story forward and maintaining its illusion — enough for the player to become an emancipated spectator? In contrast, a game focused solely on alienation and defamiliarization could become too abstract or unplayable, creating, in Rancière's (2009) terms, a pedagogical relationship between the game and the players. I have experimented with such approaches in games as research on architecture. One such example involved expanding a theory of urban design and cybernetics into a large-scale installation in which the audience was invited to discuss relations and power structures within an urban system (Mandea et al., 2023).

The most interesting designs, however, exist in the dialectic between the two forces, immersion and estrangement. The artist's intentional "crisis within immersion" forces players to critically analyze the game's systems and the real-world issues they represent. Through this process, a game can be transformed into a participatory and critical medium with political and didactic functions, a necessary step for games to be considered a form of art. To demonstrate these concepts in practice, this paper will use the author's own hybrid game designs, *Divided* and *The Rousseau Game* as case studies.

The argument is beyond games becoming a form of art or not, but rather that art can find renewed purpose when understood as a device for generating meaning, thereby taking on qualities akin to games.

Defining immersion

Immersion is a subjective, phenomenological state of the user. This is the state of being "whisked away" from the non-mediated world into a mediated one, a sense of psychological absorption and the dominant paradigm in game design. A foundational text for this perspective is Janet Murray's 1997 book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Murray metaphorically defines immersion as *"the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (Murray, 1997, p. 160)*. It is an inherently pleasurable experience that is a primary driver of a player's satisfaction. Murray further discusses audience participation, how it can be awkward and disruptive in theatre, and pursues the *"discovery of the digital equivalent of the theater's fourth wall" (Murray, 1997,*

p. 165). Breaking the fourth wall, or the actor stepping out of character to address the audience directly, is one of the classic Brechtian techniques for estrangement, so Murray' trying to set up the fourth wall is very telling of the relation between estrangement and immersion. In interactive media, a significant disruption is the interface, and immersion is often viewed as dependent on its invisibility, as in ubiquitous interfaces (Dourish, 2004).

A closely related and widely applied concept is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow state theory, which describes a psychological state of deep concentration and enjoyment where an individual becomes so absorbed in an activity that everything around seems to fade. Well-designed games can be vehicles for inducing a flow state, which is what game designers often mean when they talk about "immersion", considering it the psychological mechanism behind. A game designer creates an environment where the player's skills are constantly being tested by challenges that are scaled to their ability, therefore being kept in a state of flow.

Lombard and Ditton (1997) consider the immersive quality of a system as a measure of its technological capacity to create a vivid, sensory-rich environment. This includes elements such as high-resolution graphics, surround sound or haptic feedback. From this viewpoint, a virtual reality headset or a massive 8K projection system is inherently more immersive than a traditional screen because it has a greater capacity to "shut out physical reality".

Yet not all forms of immersion are equal. According to Bavelier et al. (2011) there are four types of immersion in video games: systems immersion (the player is deeply engaged with the mechanics and rules, similar to a "flow state"), spatial immersion (the sense of being physically present in the game's world), empathic/social immersion (a player's emotional connection to characters and social contexts) and narrative/sequential immersion (the compulsion to see how a story or progression of events unfolds).

The approach we will discuss, however, aligns with philosophies in the field of Live Interfaces (Sá, Carvalhais, & McLean, 2015). These systems favor complexity and volatility that exceed the user's absolute control, deliberately re-materializing the interface to prevent its seamless dissolution. I utilize this volatile quality as an estrangement device, interrupting the flow state to force the player's critical attention back onto the game's constructed rules and mechanics and make them complicit in their own immersion state.

Art as Device

The term "device" can be linked to Shklovsky's 1917 essay "Art as Device," which was central to the Russian Formalist movement (Shklovsky, 1965). With the growth of academic and artistic research in games, there is a renewed interest in this concept, as game designers and scholars increasingly analyze how a game's formal components (its rules, mechanics, and systems) function as devices to shape the player's experience (Dunne, 2014; Evans, 2014; Pötzsch, 2017; Tyack & Wyeth, 2017).

We are very much accustomed to the word "device" in our mediated world. A traditional "object" is a tool with a singular,

often passive, function—a clock tells time, a light switch turns a light on or off. A "device," by contrast, is an active, networked, and programmable entity, a shift driven by ubiquitous computing, the more prevalent internet of things and the rise of the smart object (Manovich, 2013).

In the artistic field, the device is closely related to the use of the readymade or to conceptual art. With Fountain, Duchamp used the device of selection and recontextualization. From this perspective, the device is not merely a set of rules, but an actor within a relational system, as articulated by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005). The work of art was no longer about the artist's manual skill or intrinsic beauty. Instead, the device forced the viewer to confront a new set of questions: Why is this art? What is the role of the artist? Who decides what art is? The physical object became secondary to the idea behind it (Ades et al., 2021), a meaning produced only through the social, institutional, and relational networks surrounding the artwork. Conceptual artists, like Sol LeWitt (1967), saw the device as a set of rules or instructions: "Anything that calls attention to and interests the viewer in this physicality is a deterrent to our understanding of the idea and is used as an expressive device" (p.83). This approach fundamentally shifted the focus from the object to the process and the underlying intellectual framework. In this way, the artistic device serves a function similar to the "device" in our mediated world: both are constructed systems that mediate our experience.

Making strange as meta-mechanic

Shklovsky's (1965) main thesis argued that the purpose of art is to combat the pervasive phenomenon of habitual perception or automatization. He observes that beyond a certain age perception becomes diminished because of the repetitive nature of actions. When we experience something for the first time, we use our senses to perceive and understand it. But as we experience something again, perception becomes a process of mere recognition rather than genuine sensation. Pötzsch (2017) argues that for Shklovsky, the essence of art is to "de-habitualize what convention has made mundane" (p. 3) thereby refreshing the senses and renewing the audience's perception of art itself. In other words, the purpose of art is to experience something as-if it were for the first time, sometimes deliberately making the process of perception long and laborious. He defined this as the arts' power to *make strange*, or the concept of *ostranenie (estrangement or defamiliarization)*. For him, the core mechanism for achieving *ostranenie* is the literary "device". Art, therefore, becomes a device, a set of tools and techniques to achieve something in the way the audience perceives it. For a game designer, this is very familiar, it's as if working with game mechanics to create meaning with the participation of the player (Pötzsch, 2017).

Russian Formalism viewed literature as a distinct entity, separate from historical or social contexts, focusing instead on the unique "literariness" of a text and arguing that words were not mere representations of objects but objects themselves. This emphasis on form and function over external context is critical for understanding the universal applicability of Shklovsky's (1965) theory to other media. Similar to "literariness" in literature or "musicality" in music, in the medium of games we have the terms "ludicity" and more usual "playfulness". Playfulness is the specific quality of games, a quality that can be applied to other objects and experiences that we might

not otherwise consider games (Mandea, 2024). The Formalist viewpoint was radical in its assertion that the artifact is not important, with the true value lying in the creative process (Shklovsky, 1965). Similarly, the game in itself is not as important (is just an artifact) as the process of play.

This rigorous, technical approach to analysis allows for the study of mechanics and systems of play independently of their narrative or thematic contexts, similar to the Formalists' rejection of biographical, psychological, or sociological explanations for a work's value.

Similar to Shklovsky's ideas, Bertolt Brecht (1964) developed the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect. The term has been translated in various ways, including estrangement, alienation, and defamiliarization. For the purposes of this paper, I will employ the term 'estrangement,' as its definition most effectively contrasts with immersion, and it proves to be a particularly productive concept within the medium of games, where the aesthetic of strangeness can be a feature and is quite common in analogue, physical games.

The two are similar; however, there is a crucial distinction between them. Shklovsky's (1965) *ostranenie* was a purely formalist, aesthetic device; its goal was to make the artistic medium itself feel new again. Brecht (1964) later took this aesthetic concept and added a clear and definitive political mission to it. For Brecht (1964), the purpose of "making strange" was not merely to renew perception but to estrange the audience from the social and political conditions in which they lived, providing them with the "intellectual tools for political action" (Pötzsch, 2017, p. 10). Bertolt Brecht's (1964) theatrical techniques can be directly paralleled in video game mechanics. One such parallel is the use of direct address. An actor might turn to the audience to comment on their character's actions; a similar effect occurs in games whenever the narrative flow is interrupted by a pop-up window or a system prompt. For instance, in *The Sims* (Wright, 2000-present), the game's simulation of a suburban family's life is interrupted when the player shifts to "Build Mode," momentarily stepping out of the simulated time and into the game's constructed reality. We can argue that this is a formalist device with no political meaning attached. But when we think of games within an artistic umbrella, things become clearer. For example, in *Cut Piece* (1964), Yoko Ono invites the audience to take a pair of scissors and cut her clothes while she sits passively. Many Fluxus artworks, following the idea that the artwork is in the relations formed with the process, use game structures to produce social sculptures. This idea of relational aesthetics is one that Bourriaud (2002) champions by describing relational artworks as interactive, even user-friendly. Bishop (2004, 2006) argues that such work risks relying on the very forces it critiques and becoming mere affirmations of consumer choice. This outcome places them more in the realm of a formalist device than a device for the common development of political meanings.

Complicity, in between immersion and estrangement

While immersion seeks to dissolve the boundary between the player and the game world, inviting them to surrender their sense of reality, estrangement demands a more critical and reflective stance. This deliberate disruption forces the

player to step back from emotional absorption and analyze the game's constructed nature, remaining vigilant to shifts in power structures or worldview. The most powerful artistic games, however, do not operate on a simple binary. I am therefore proposing complicity as a different aesthetic effect: a state in which the player is not just immersed in the game but an active participant in the artist's proposition —a co-conspirator who simultaneously embraces the fiction and remains critically aware of its artifice. This dialectical relationship allows the game to serve both as a captivating experience and a critical tool. For now, I will be analyzing the design and development of two of my own game designs, both of which have been exhibited at major art institutions.

Figure 1 View from the installation of Divided with players in the physical space of the game; source: the author.

From concept to experience - *Divided*

Divided is a game that works as an interactive installation developed specifically for the Deep Space 8K at the Ars Electronica Center, an immersive (in the sense discussed by Lombard and Ditton) 16 by 9 meters space with projection on the floor and one of the walls and a system of sensors that determine the players' exact location in space.

The piece starts with the concept of the *border* and develops it using two colors that flow across the screen and floor. Between these colors, a line forms, marking the existence of two territories. It utilizes the space's immersive qualities to immediately draw participants into a simulated conflict. My core creative motivation was not to simply immerse the player, but to use that immersion as a platform for estrangement, leading to complicity. Drawing on Professor Gerhard Funk's theory of cooperative aesthetics (Hales & Kelomees, 2024), the work is designed to investigate the complex dynamics of cooperation and collaboration. The installation is a part of the Ars Electronica Center program and was also featured at the 2021 edition of the Ars Electronica Festival, a piece usually experienced within a context of contemporary digital and interactive art.

The simple basic rule (that of the line dividing two colors) shows the players that they must remain within their own color's territory while getting as close as possible to the center (and to the other group). As the game progresses, the line's animation is programmed to speed up, making the game increasingly difficult and forcing players to make faster movements and decisions. The presence of the non-playing audience, who can shout or even step into the game, serves as an estrangement device. The traditional fourth wall is not

just broken; it is rendered fluid and negotiable. This move is a direct application of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, transforming the participant from an immersed player into a self-aware performer being observed. This deliberate shift forces them to view their own actions—their cooperation or conflict—not merely as a game activity, but as a publicly staged social behavior.

In Divided, the interplay between the two color-based territories creates a dynamic that drives the game's mechanics and the players' movements (Fig. 1). This tension gives rise to a cooperative aesthetic, in which players—initially strangers—subconsciously coordinate their movements with one another and with the visual design of the projected space. They become complicit in both the performance and the quest for its meaning.

The installation's full meaning is not inherent in its form; it is actively created through participation. Without the players' interaction, the installation remains a simple animation. As one participant noted, the game is about "the relationships between people and how we approach each other while still maintaining certain boundaries." Another described it as being about "freedom that stops where freedom of the other begins" These interpretations were only possible because of the participants' active engagement, demonstrating how the game transforms from a mere object into a critical, meaning-making medium through complicity and interaction.

The Rousseau Game

The Rousseau Game is a five-part interactive installation that explores different facets of property, space, and human relationships developed in the Auditorium of the National Museum for Contemporary Art in Bucharest in 2022. The institution acquired the game one year later and it is now in the permanent collection. The game's concept was inspired by a quote from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755), which offers a fictional history of the formation of the ideas of property and civil society. The text opens the second part of Rousseau's *Discourse on the inequality among men* (1755): *«The first man, who after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say this is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that man have saved the human species, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, «Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody*." » (p. 43).

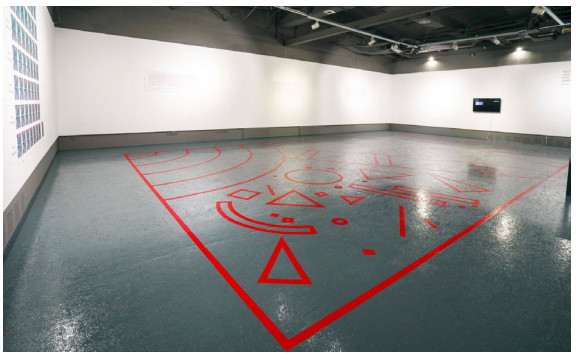

Figure 2 The Rousseau Game, Installation view, 2022, National Museum for Contemporary Art, Bucharest; source: the author.

The mechanism described—of enclosing a piece of land as well as the resulting conflict between the two protagonists of the story, incorporates the possibility of imagining a game situation. The Rousseau Game installation transforms Rousseau's (1755) ideas on property, making them as a series of playable, large-scale floor games (9 by 13 meters). Drawing on relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), the piece treats the act of playing as a medium for exploring how interpersonal relationships and power dynamics emerge. It has five distinct zones, each with its own rules designed to provoke reflection on different aspects of property, from negotiation over limited space to the claiming of territory.

The project and exhibition were structured in two stages: the creation of the game-as-object and the activation of the game-as-event. The first stage involves the physical design of the games on site while the museum is open, a process documented with surveillance cameras within the exhibition space (Fig. 2). The second stage is the public activation, where visitors are invited to play. The rules are not posted; instead, participants must either discuss them with the designer or collectively create their own, thereby emphasizing participation and negotiation. Players are complicit with the game and the designer, and the installation becomes a dynamic platform for exploring complex issues. The work forces participants to live out Rousseau's philosophical problem (the formation of the social contract) as a critical, playable event (Fig. 3). They often debated whether to play cooperatively or engage in conflict, thereby directly addressing the philosophical questions of property and social contracts. The "contract" or the rules of the game make them become immersed while still maintaining a critical eye. A group of players, while playing the part of the game where space becomes smaller and smaller at first, were trying to squeeze in. When they saw that it was not possible and the mechanics forced them to play against each other, they used only their fingers so they could all fit. By making meaning contingent on player interaction, the game-as-event provides a space for collaborative reflexivity (including dialogue, debate, and disagreement) rather than offering a fixed message, which constitutes a contemporary form of social sculpture (Van den Berg, 2019). It transforms the museum space from a site of passive contemplation into a laboratory for exploring the fluid, relational essence of property through participants' physical engagement.

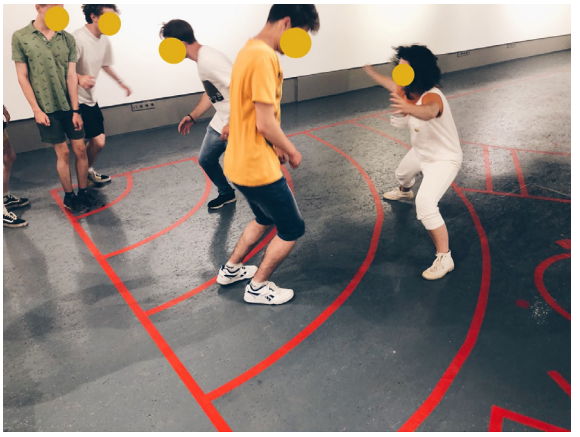

Figure 3 Players had to protect their territory while advancing to the next circle to gain more territory; source: the author.

Conclusion

The case studies of *Divided* and *The Rousseau Game* demonstrate in practice how art can find renewed meaning by being

understood as device (as defined by Shklovsky in "Art as Device"), therefore linking art to the emerging medium of games. In these works, complicity emerges as players debate whether to follow the rules of antagonism or cooperation, thereby transforming exhibition spaces from sites of passive observation into laboratories for critical negotiation. Drawing on a background in visual and theater arts, this paper has situated games as one of the most interesting directions for the deliberate critical creation of meaning, by placing them in a dynamic tension between immersion and estrangement for artists and audiences alike, a direction that is just opening and will likely be explored extensively.

Authorship Statement:

Maria Mandea is the sole author of this paper and is responsible for all aspects of the research, writing, and submission.

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