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VR / UNITY PROJECT: Landscape as a Medium of Estrangement

VR/Unity project is a non-assessed assignment for MA students as part of their work on the *Virtual Realities* module taught in the Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London. The activity is authored and led by [Dr Gabriele Salciute Civiliene](#), DDH, King's College London.

The outputs of student projects were used as exhibits in the peer-to-peer exhibition created and curated by MA students enrolled on the *Curating and Preserving Digital Culture* module. Both the modules were convened and taught by Dr Gabriele Salciute Civiliene.

The curatorial team of the physical exhibition that took place on the premises of King's College London on 27-29 May 2024 was led by MA student Jamila Lui, DDH, King's College London. The digital [gallery](#) of the VR/Unity projects was built on the educational interactive media platform [ThingLink](#). The digital exhibit was created by MA student Magdalena Cupo, DDH, King's College London.

The pedagogical objectives of the activity:

- to promote student creativity and attention diversity through their engagement in an experiential learning activity that combines multimedia and multi-sensory modalities of narration;
- to facilitate critical skills acquisition and application through design thinking and problem solving;
- to democratise access to immersive technology skills learning by showing the ways in which students could use Unity as a no-coding rapid prototyping tool to articulate ideas about technology-enhanced experiences;
- to provide opportunities for students to accelerate their technical skills acquisition by collaborating in groups;
- to make students engage with the concepts pertinent to how we think about immersive technologies such as immersion, embodiment, placeness, story-living, world-building, and the like;
- to facilitate critical reflection on how students think about immersive technologies and their uses;
- to simulate work placement environment for creating evidence to be included in creative technology design portfolios;
- to extend opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration across modules and programmes.

ESTRANGEMENT THEORIES: Shklovsky's *Ostranenie* and Brecht's *V-Effekt*

"In German, my native language, "estrangement" is commonly translated as *Verfremdung*. *Verfremdung* in turn can be translated into English in several ways, the three most popular being "estrangement", "defamiliarization" and "alienation." Each of these variant translations has had consequences, as we shall see, since Suvin, who speaks German fluently, draws heavily from such German authors as Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Bloch.² In German-speaking

discourse, the term *Verfremdung* is used by two different theoretical traditions: for the concept of *ostranenie* as developed by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, and for Brecht's concept of the estranging effect, the so-called *V-Effekt*. Although these theoretical approaches share similarities, they are by no means identical. Shklovsky in his 1917 essay *Art as Technique* defines *ostranenie* as the breaking up of established habits of reception. In daily life, we often perceive things only superficially—i.e., we do not really see them the way they are. To *truly* see things again we must overcome our “blind” perception, and this is only possible when they are made strange again. This process of making things to appear strange is, according to Shklovsky, the essential task of any kind of art. <...>

At first glance, Brecht's definition of *Verfremdung* seems almost identical to Shklovsky's *ostranenie*: “A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (qtd in *Metamorphoses* (6)). Yet for Brecht, *Verfremdung* also has a strong didactic and political meaning, and clearly is part of the audience's perception. The *V-Effekt* blocks empathy. In Brecht's Epic Theater the spectator is not allowed to “delve” into the play and is obstructed from regarding it as “natural.” Quite the contrary, the action on stage—and by analogy the social order— should be rendered visible as something artificial and man-made. In the logic of dialectical materialism, *VEffekt* should make an audience aware of sociopolitical processes (Jameson 58). In contrast to Shklovsky, Brecht's *Verfremdung* is not so much a general principle of art as a specific didactic effect (Brooker 90). For Brecht, there are analogies between estrangement and the scientific process; both are based on a naïve, fresh look at the world, both take nothing for granted, and both ask why the current situation is the way it is (Rülicke-Weiler 303). Brecht's plea for a “theater of the scientific age” has to be understood in this context.”

Simon Spiegel (2008). “Things Made Strange: On the Concept of “Estrangement” in Science Fiction Theory”. *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 35, p. 369-370.

VR / UNITY PROJECT BRIEF

In groups, you will build a **6DoF world in Unity** that features a navigable landscape (or a variation such as urban-scape, seascape, soundscape, etc). The concept of your immersive landscape will be grounded in one of estrangement theories (e.g. estrangement as defined in literature by Shklovsky, as theorized for theatre by Brecht, or one of your choosing/finding).

Your concept design and its implementation would address the following questions:

- For whom is your immersive world? And what motivates you to target that specific type or group of users?
- Which estrangement theory will you choose, and what insights of that estrangement theory will inform your concept landscape? What motivates your conceptual choices?
- What is the purpose of estrangement in your world-building? Consider aesthetic, cognitive, psychological, ecological, etc dimensions of estrangement as a technique.
- In what ways do you seek to estrange users for whom you are designing your immersive landscape? What is the major principle of estrangement, e.g. disorientation, alienation from the familiar, contrast with the familiar, and the like?
- In what ways does estrangement theory inform the features and overall architecture of your immersive landscape?

- What aesthetics will you choose, e.g. abstract, geometric, or photorealistic design; objects or lack of those; colour palette; the size of expanse (e.g. you may want to have as small or as large a space as possible); and the like? What motivates these choices?
- In what ways the medium of VR is more effective to deliver the effect of estrangement than other media?

You will build your immersive landscape in Unity and will publish it as a web-based VR application. Based on your application, you will also create a non-interactive walk-through video. Use a walk-through video to contextualize your work, e.g. what theories, events, art pieces, and the like underpin or inspire your vision, narrative, and some ideas; what you learned about your own imagination during this collaborative world-building activity; and the like. Both items will be used as exhibits by your peers from the *Curating and Preserving Digital Culture* module in their curated exhibition of digital artefacts.

It is important that you demonstrate the skills of building a terrain in Unity instead of importing the readymade landscapes from Unity Asset Store unless you modify the readymade landscape in a significant way. You can though reuse 3D models and textures from Unity Asset Store or other platforms and apply AI in your workflow, e.g. animating avatars with Mixamo, and the like.

You will demonstrate a functional desktop application in the last week of the module. Your demonstration and presentation will be 5 to 7 min allowing a few minutes for questions and comments from your classmates. When presenting your landscapes, make sure to explain the following, in addition to the above:

- What was your overall experience of building and immersing in your 6DoF experience?
- Did you find it challenging to come up with the ideas of estrangement and the ways of their implementation in the Unity medium? What other challenges did you face? Consider emotional, cultural, and technical aspects of immersive design.
- How did you overcome the challenges; what compromises did you make? What helped you reach consensus as a team? How did you distribute your tasks?
- What insights of estrangement theory have informed you design?
- What features and aspects of your landscape are contributing to the effect of estrangement?
- Which affordances of immersive technology (e.g. placeness, theatricality, enhanced cinematic first-person perspective, emotional impact, cognitive intrusiveness, and other) have helped you realize the estranging effects of your landscape?
- If you were to add more advanced interactions to your design, what those would be and in what ways they would be adding to the effect of estrangement? And to what end?

Each member of the group will contribute to the presentation.