Epic Web Design

Final essay
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*"When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world',
it means, that any attempt to understand the world has been given
up. What is natural must have the force of what is startling. This is the
only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. Peoples activity must
simultaneously be so and be capable of being different."*

Bertolt Brecht

Introduction: Why *epic*?

The term *epic* is derived from the *epic theatre* of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who said that "the essential point of the *epic theatre* is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the *spectator's* reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things." [1] Brecht introduced an approach to theatre which I consider very appropriate for web design, when you want to make a design that should appeal more to the user's reason. In that sense I think that design for online experiences can be as effective as design for experiences in the theatre audience.

Web 2.0 has made it possible that users can *view* and *create* content on the web. It is a platform that contains data for which it is not always clear who produced it. Especially in the form of text this is a risk. When something is presented printed as text, black on white, you are eager to assume it as truthful.

In this essay I will discuss certain aspects of theatre that I think are necessary and useful to keep in mind, when you want to create a critical or *epic* design for the web. The web has dramatized text by putting it on a screen and turning readers into spectators. While discussing these aspects, I will use my final project for my MA Media Design as a case that I develop as an *epic* design: The explanation of the mechanism of Wikipedia.

[1]   Bertolt Brecht, <u>Brecht on Theatre — The Development of an Aesthetic</u>, © 1957, p. 23

1 Catharsis

Aristotle called the experience of the end cause of a play, a pleasurable release of emotion, *catharsis*. When a conflict gets resolved. According to him it occurred while witnessing the play. Brecht had a different notion of *catharsis*, since he wanted his audience to be critical of what was being performed, to take it into consideration and to "put it to work in their lives" [2]. So the *catharsis* does not occur until *after* witnessing the play.

Where Bertolt Brecht found that "peoples activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different" where it comes to theatre, I share the same point of view when it comes to internet. Brecht wanted his audience to take a critical approach to *what* they were confronted with: by creating momentary awareness and by presenting it in the form of a play, a story, where he wanted his audience to remain critical after seeing it, when putting reflection to work in their lives.

I want to accomplish the same critical approach to *what* — in my case Wikipedia — a user is confronted with: by creating awareness of how Wikipedia works and by presenting Wikipedia articles. Online, in the form of a theatre script, a story. This way of presenting it as another medium, out of the online environment (although you are viewing it at the same time in a web page), should create the same critical approach to Wikipedia as seeing a theater play by Brecht, and afterwards, when you use it in its conventional form, in another online session. In other words: the encounter with the epic design of Wikipedia should shape critical reflection whenever a user browses Wikipedia.

[2]   Brenda Laurel, <u>Computers as Theatre</u>, © 1993, 1991, p. 31

2 (no) Fourth wall

In a lecture about "Storytelling and technology — evolution of society", June Cohen, director of *TED media* on *Le Web 3* (December 2007) said that she has never been more fascinated about the web than right now. With the rise of blogs, social media, podcasting and online video she has gained a new perspective on the web. She characterized it with a statement of Marshall McLuhan on television: "50's television demands partition and involvement in depth of the whole thing. It will not work as a background. It engages you." It was a perfect platform for speakers back then, like Kennedy and Martin Luther King. But as a response to that, according to Cohen, nothing could be further from the truth of today's television. Speech has become synonymous with boring. And we are not giving it our full attention. We walk in and out of the room, are on the phone, switch the channels or make our dinners. Then, personal media like *iPods* and laptops are a totally different story, she says. When you are watching somebody or something on your *iPod* or laptop, it feels as if they were talking directly to you. You have chosen it and you have reserved time for it. Maybe you will make time during lunch hour or while you are flying across the world.

That is an interesting, but dangerous point when comparing a personal medium like a personal computer to theatre. When you decide to go to the theatre you make a choice of a specific play and spend your time on it with your full attention. Because of the fall of the *fourth wall* — the invisible wall between audience and actors in a theatre — you also feel as if the play style is *addressed to you*, it has become more personal. And I think this makes you feel as if your thoughts and opinions as an individual become more valuable. Wikipedia gives the same signal by making it possible that your contribution to Wikipedia can matter. There is no notion of a wall, not even a notion of a border. Just like as everybody can view, everybody can edit. There is nothing to be said against this, as long as users are aware of the concept.

3 Story / Content

Wikipedia is the perfect online example of an interface that needs itself and its contents as well, to be approached critically. It therefore is my metaphor for all interfaces and content online that need to be treated this way.

Wikipedia needs a critical approach, because it is an encyclopedic platform that works with the concept that all common knowledge should be gathered at any moment by any possible contributor no matter which cultural or social background he or she has. The design shows the opposite: the encyclopedia articles do not reveal that they have a history and they are presented as single articles without an author, as if they are the ultimate outcome of the concept.
A danger that I see in this way of presenting its content is that viewers of articles forget to be critical over what they are viewing and over what they are using as a source of knowledge. The persuasive quality of text will win here and will cause the article to be interpreted as truthful. It would be different if the articles would be presented as the way they were constructed, as single edits and their authors above them, all in chronological order. I took this approach and expose the mechanism of Wikipedia.

Besides the edits there are more factors that influence the construction of the article which are also not visible when you view the article. Factors like the *discussion* platform, protection policies, *bots*[3] and the *recent changes patrol*[4] to name a few. These factors will be covered in my project. I will use the articles that are related to my project as the content for my project, but it will be possible to view any Wikipedia article in my project in the form of an *epic web design*.

[3]   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bots
[4]   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Recent_changes_patrol

4 Technique: Alienation

In order to explain something about the medium itself you can alienate the user or viewer from it. You can use another medium to achieve the explaining, while still being online (in my case) or while still being in the theatre (Brecht).

Brecht was one of the first dramatists to use alienation techniques in this form: using another medium to explain this one. He therefore used for example film or projections to display chapter titles. Other forms of alienating he applied to make his audience adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism and to alienate them from reality were: the use of definite "gestures" of showing, transposition into the third person in order not to give the audience a chance of identifying themselves with the character being portrayed (which also includes the actor), transposition into the past, where the actor must play the incidents as historical ones and speaking the stage directions out loud.

Music was an important element in Brechts' *epic theatre*. It meant a certain break with the dramatic conventions. It could separate the different elements of the play or create a new point of view. "For the singing of the songs a special change of lightning was arranged; the orchestra was lit up; the titles of the various numbers were projected on the screens at the back ...; and the actors changed their positions before the number began. There were duets, trios, solos and final choruses. The musical items, which had the immediacy of a ballad, were of a reflective and moralizing nature." [5] The musicians were visibly installed on the stage.

My project is to transpose one medium into another medium, to create another point of view. I transform a *wiki* into a theatre script to

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[5]   Bertolt Brecht, <u>Brecht on Theatre – The Development of an Aesthetic</u>, © 1957, p. 85

explain the workings of the *wiki*. Using this form in particular will make it easier, simpler and also refreshing to understand the mechanism of a *wiki*. When you can make switches in the interface between Wikipedia articles in Wikipedia and Wikipedia articles in a theatre script you can accumulate your findings about Wikipedia in both forms. It is a paradoxical environment if you consider Wikipedia as very dynamic (hot) and a script as very static (cold) medium *and* I am consciously taking you out of Wikipedia, using Wikipedia as a topic for a Wikipedia user to develop an approach to at the same time. But this friction should contribute to stimulate a users interest and communicate my message.

I chose the form of a script, because I see a similarity in the way a script is constructed and the way a Wikipedia article is constructed. Both are linear documents, based upon what people say and when they say it. Also, in theatre a script is used to give very specific directions about how things should work. Although I am *showing* how things work rather than controlling or saying how things work in Wikipedia, a script is a useful form to explain the different layers and factors that exist in Wikipedia which influence the construction of an article. They show when they enter, and which way they enter. Since it is possible in my projects to generate a script for every Wikipedia article, you will be able to see how for every article the different factors have influence on the structure of an article. There is a difference between protected, semi-protected and non-protected articles, and for example between articles that are very controversial by topic (like the article about the Dutch politician Geert Wilders) and articles that are very specific as a topic (like the article about trees for example). My script environment will be able to make these differences visual.

That way you can apply it to everyday life, and not see it as everyday life. In a model you can experiment with different techniques to find the right way to communicate what you say which does not

need to appear as "real" or as "reality". By this I also mean that it is for example not really necessary to make parallels between the Wikipedia articles and the news. Providing the news of a particular moment can clarify certain situations in the world. But I think they only manipulate the story, which is in my case not the point. Without introducing the aspect of news, I originally considered including news into the design, it becomes more independent, with a closed structure. Making parallels to the news may cause you to think that this is why certain things happened, while it was not the case. It can be good to refer to the news, but again to create the right perspective to bring this aspect in, you should also be alienated to it. Like what Brecht did in his play *Arturo Ui*, where he referred to the fire in the Reichstag and to Adolf Hitler, but not presented it as such. By addressing this in the play, you could for example say that in the meantime something happened, but it is very likely that it did not inflict the article.

Lev Manovich [6] thinks that the digitization of our perspective on the world will lead to a mingling of the cultural layer of digital media — in which we think in terms of representation, order and structure and function and effect, like the encyclopedia and the story, story and plot, composition and point of view, mimesis and catharsis, comedy and tragedy — and the computer layer of digital media — through these means we may think about how the computer functions, realizing how digital objects are created, distributed and archived by computers. This means to think in terms of computer language, in terms of how databases collect and archive data and how this data is being used. This understanding of the computer will influence, according to Manovich, our understanding of reality with concepts of the computer world. You could say that our understanding of the computer alienates us from real-

[6]   Lev Manovich in <u>Theater & Technologie</u>, published by Theater Instituut Nederland, 2007, p. 28

ity as well, which is in a way a good thing, because it makes us aware of technology around us. So by understanding the principles of one medium, you are enabled to create a different understanding based on another medium or something else, like reality.

The alienation technique of using a narrator or voice-over can help to explain Wikipedia in an explanatory document like a script. Maybe it can be used like in the films *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, by Lars von Trier, where the narrator has an unclear point of view that changes as the action evolves or remains absent for a while. It may seem unobjective which will leave users left to themselves making a judgement over what is happening. The narrator in these films speaks in past tense and the story is being shown in the present.

5 Mimesis (artistic representation) / The Interface

Hotel Modern, a group of theatre makers who use miniature settings and live animation to construct their theatre, invites their audience to witness live how they make their representation. The audience gets involved, because they see how the animation gets constructed. Because they are aware of the medium itself, the audience is able to develop a critical point of view. On the web this matters as much as in theatre. Because the performance is so obviously live, you see how a representation is constructed. It is more transparent. Knowing how a representation works and what it does, a user can start questioning it and approach it critical from their own perspective.

In her book *Computers as Theatre* Brenda Laurel, who studied both theatre and computer science, argues that we often fail to see that we are using representations of tools and activities on the computer and do not notice how that makes them different from real things[7]. I agree, although she speaks of representations like interface metaphors here. But it applies just as much to information design for the web. It is all constructed, designed and manipulated by professional and amateur programmers, designers, editors, journalists, copywriters, art directors, advertisers, bloggers, etcetera. Wikipedia is no exception. My design shows a Wikipedia article mingled with the other layers that Wikipedia has: the history of the edits, the users, the duration of the article, the discussion. So you will be able to step in and out of the content of the article and adapt an attitude of inquiry over the different edits that were made to the article, and not take the whole article for granted and get carried away with it. It can still be presented as a whole, in my case a dramatic script, but the mingling of the layers and their visuality makes readers no longer see the article as one voice.

[7]   Brenda Laurel, Computers as Theatre, © 1993, 1991, p. 7

My interface is a web page that shows a Wikipedia page and a generated dialogue from that page, as a hidden layer that is exposed and underneath a Wikipedia page. There is the possibility to search for more Wikipedia articles while the script should every time be generated when the Wikipedia page is loaded, to show that the two are related. But it should also be possible to generate the dialogue script by itself, if you have the intention to at first only look at that. So there are two ways of navigation in order to allow a comparison. By this way I am making a mirror interface that exists of two layers and can be controlled from each one of them because they are equivalent.

In the script I will make use of the scripting elements that are common in theatre scripts to expose the different aspects of Wikipedia. In a theatre script, the author can leave directions for the director. This happens in cases where an author wants to manifest certain control over the execution of his work, like the theatre scripts of Samuel Beckett:

From *Endgame*:

```
HAMM:
Enough of that, it's story time, where was I?
(Pause.  Narrative tone.)
The man came crawling towards me, on his
belly.  Pale, wonderfully pale and thin, he
seemed on the point of—(Pause.  Normal tone.)
No, I've done that bit. (Pause.  Narrative
tone.)  I calmly filled my pipe—the meer-
schaum, lit it with . . . let us say a vesta,
drew a few puffs.  Aah! (Pause.)  Well, what
is it you want?
(Pause.)
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From: *That Time:* (spaces are Beckett's)

```
C: not a sound only the old breath and the
leaves turning and then suddenly this dust
whole place suddenly full of dust when you
opened your eyes from floor to        ceil-
ing nothing only dust and not a sound only
what was it it said come and gone     was
that it something like that come and gone in
no time gone in no time
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        [Silence 10 seconds. Breath au-
dible. After 3 seconds eyes open. After 5
seconds smile, toothless for preference. Hold
5 seconds till fade out and curtain.]
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From *Watt*:

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The house was in darkness.
Finding the front door locked, Watt went to
the back door. He could not very well ring,
or knock, for the house was in darkness.
Finding the back door locked also, Watt re-
turned to the front door.
Finding the front door locked also, Watt re-
turned to the back door.
Finding the back door now open, oh not open
wide, but on the latch, as the saying is,
Watt was able to enter the house.
```

The technology that I use to generate the theatre script is a live xml export from Wikipedia which contains all the forms the Wikipedia article has had since it was originated, requested from my code, translated into the form of the theatre script with *Python*. I use the *Python* modules *BeautifulSoup, datetime, calendar,* and regular expressions to filter all the elements from the xml I need. Adding html, javascript and css turns this all into a web page.

With the history of edits of a Wikipedia article in this xml file, it is possible to subtract identical data from one edit when comparing it to a previous edit, to remain with only the data that has been added or deleted in a particular edit. Because the edits are made by a Wikipedia user, they represent in their new form a single message by this person. The same was applied to the discussion page. In general these are the story lines.

A theatre script has all kinds of aspects that I can use to make the mechanism of Wikipedia visible: the title, the author, the translation, the origin, the premiere of the play, character descriptions that can explain a hierarchy between the characters, stage directions, time

specification, introductions to the play, to scenes, chapter or scene titles, instructions for the director, instructions for the actors like how to play a particular emotion.

With these aspects I can fit in the different aspects of Wikipedia that are necessary to know about in order to understand its mechanism. Aspects like the title of an article, the author(s), the creation date of an article, the generation of my script, the revisions of an article, the inserts, the deletes, the time of the edits, the interference of Wikipedia's automated text correction software(bots), the interference of the *recent changes patrol*, the interventions of Wikipedia administrators, the protection of an article, the identity of Wikipedia users.

I can for example make a distinction between the authors of the article by characterizing them as users, anonymous users, bots, administrators, high profile users of Wikipedia (users that are for example commissioned to make edits to a protected article), *recent changes patrol* officers and Wikipedia administrators. I could for example say:

```
NsKillen: Recent Changes Patrol Officer. Reso-
lute. Frank.
Cluebot IV: Anti-vandal bot. Won many Barn-
stars for detecting vandalism on Wikipedia.
71.208.53.116: an extra
```

Or I can give a synopses of a scene:

```
Beginning Spring 2004 – at sunrise

Scene 3
Where we witness how ClueBot IV corrects
71.208.53.116 on his vandalizing behavior.
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6 Time

"When he appears on the stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants." Bertolt Brecht

What is said above describes another alienation technique: not to give an opportunity of identifying with the character and to keep the possibilities for the development of the play open, so that an audience member cannot expect anything, and therefore not predict what will happen. In order to understand what is happening and what will happen, spectators have to focus and remain critical about what they see. They have to make up their own judgement.

This is something that already happens in Wikipedia articles. One cannot predict anything the characters have to say, because everybody improvises. The only predictable element is that at a certain point, according to the mechanism of Wikipedia, a bot or a recent changes police officer will revert what has been said, whenever something vandalizing or inappropriate (according to their standards) has been detected.

I can make use of the fact that sometimes nothing is happening to the article, by adjusting the design of the script to a pause between two edits. With the timestamps in Wikipedia on edits it is the case that they are by default set in UTC, the server time. But users can specify in the preferences on which time they are. This is an interesting aspect to keep in mind with such a global platform as Wikipedia to make use of. Everybodies' clock ticks different. But a clock present on a stage or in a page can generalize a moment. Letting it stop or disappear can make you loose awareness of time.

While generating the theatre script, not everything might fall into place with what the design intended. I could make use of the errors that I detect and program a special message whenever they occur, so that they can still say something about the mechanism of Wikipedia, if I can specify what kind of an error it is.

The question remains open in this project is to which extent the "epic" web design can scale, i.e. be applied to other sites and employed as a general design method. With my project and this essay, I am creating a point of departure for my own work as a media designer and encourage others to investigate this question.