

# Messages For A First Person Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is about explorations into the creation of powerful messages within the first-person shooter game Unreal Tournament. Unreal Tournament is interesting because of its popularity, large active community, affordability, and largely open-source accessibility. Creating messages in this environment puts the author in a twofold situation; with the interesting possibilities of VR editing on the one side, and on the other the challenge of having to create a message in an environment filled with predetermined expectations towards an ego-shooter game.

## Keywords

First-person shooter games, computer games, game editing, interactivity, visual expressiveness

## 1. MESSAGES IN FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER GAMES

Within first-person shooter games very powerful “messages” can be created. Examples later in this paper will illustrate this. These are the results of workshops with Interactive Media students at the Hyperwerk Basel, Switzerland and Architecture Students at the TU Delft, Netherlands.

The messages are not communicated through words or iconographic images, but through an expressiveness composed from visual, aural, and interactive aspects in a dynamic digital space. The messages are experienced through interaction. Since there is no clear, culturally based language with a long tradition, like spoken language, the resulting messages are more ambiguous. But they are understood thanks to the increasing “maturity” of the player, who has progressed from a reader of texts or a viewer of images to a user and now a player [1]. Or as De Kerckhove describes it “This is the passage from “point of view” to “point of being”: the “point of view” expects for each body to observe the world from its interior; the “point of being” implies an intense exchange between a single individual vision and the multiplicity of exterior visions.” [2]

## 2. POPULARITY OF FIRST PERSON SHOOTERS

First person shooter games are nowadays the most widespread VR application and many of the game engines, like Unreal or

Quake, offer easy to use editors for level design. This makes them a prime media for popular VR entertainment and creative use of VR. The community around the different ego-shooter games is large and multifaceted. It operates globally through the Internet and includes many levels of communication; playing games together, exchanging knowledge and data, as well as gossiping.

The aspect of popularity makes first-person shooters an interesting media to work with, because of the large audience that can be reached. Messages can be created in artistic ways, expanding existing realms of knowledge and experience, or used as bluntly as in America’s Army’s free first person shooter game that invites you to “Become a member of the world’s premier land force ...” [3].

## 3. SPECIFIC QUALITIES

Ego-shooter game levels have a particular aesthetic; they often have a “medieval” look because of the rough stone textures and sparse, low-energy light sources that are generally applied to the environments. The aesthetic possibilities are restricted to allow for fast graphics, but there are still a lot of possibilities regarding form, textures, illumination, and behaviour.

For architecture and interactive media students the design of game levels introduces a number of interesting new features and possibilities to the design process: 1) The user/client is the PLAYER. The player wants entertainment and fun. The player needs to be able to understand the possible actions. Player motivation becomes a key concern for the designer. The design of an ego shooter level has to focus on the creation of an interactive experience and the dialog between player and environment. 2) Levels are BUILT – 1:1 – real, not virtual – they are more than plans or mock-ups of a design – levels are real game environments for real players. 3) Levels can be MODIFIED. Modifications in response to comments from players become part of the design process. The quality of the final design increases through the enhancements that are introduced in response to the players’ feedback. 4) Levels are DYNAMIC and REACTIVE. They may look like stone, but they are made of bits. They can behave, trigger the player’s actions, and respond in various ways.

## 4. SEVEN SAMPLE MESSAGES

The following examples are the results of two workshops, in which the editor Unreal2 and Unreal3 were used to create levels. Special emphasis was put on exploring the specific expressive power provided by the first person shooter game.

First published at COSIGN-2003,  
09 – 12 September 2003, University of Teesside (UK),  
School of Computing and Mathematics, Virtual Environments  
Group

## 4.1 Workshop: Hyperlevel

<http://www.hyperwerk.ch/~hyperdat/unreal/>

This workshop was about exploring the expressive power, without a predefined theme for the messages. The first two examples elaborated on known aspects of ego shooter games and their 'reframement', so that the usual behaviour within a first-person environment becomes either destructive or especially pleasant. The third example focuses on special VR qualities, like mirrors, changing environments, and hyperlinks between different spaces, to translate a statement into an experience.

### 4.1.1 *Drift or Die*

This is a counterintuitive level, which asks the player to just let herself drift and enjoy the ever-repeating journey through a meditative sequence of rooms. Self-initiative is punished with one of the different ways to die that are modelled into the level, i.e. being squeezed by a platform or falling too far down.



**Figure 1: "Drift or Die" by Irena Kulka and Franco Schwörer**

### 4.1.2 *Dream Day*

This level is built as an absurd, kitschy, two-story house filled with cliché loaded images providing a dream world that can be leisurely explored. The atmosphere is just too pleasant so that the playing of a deathmatch within this environment actually amounts to a welcome contrast.



**Figure 2: "Dream Day" by Marc Dietrich and Michael Huber**

### 4.1.3 *Darwin is Dead*

This level is about emphasising Chaos Theory over Darwin's theory. The textures and the use of mirrors make it hard to recognize the shape of the space. At some specially marked locations one gets teleported into a very different space, patterned with fractal images. On return one of the "Darwins" on the centre volume is replaced by an image from chaos theory.

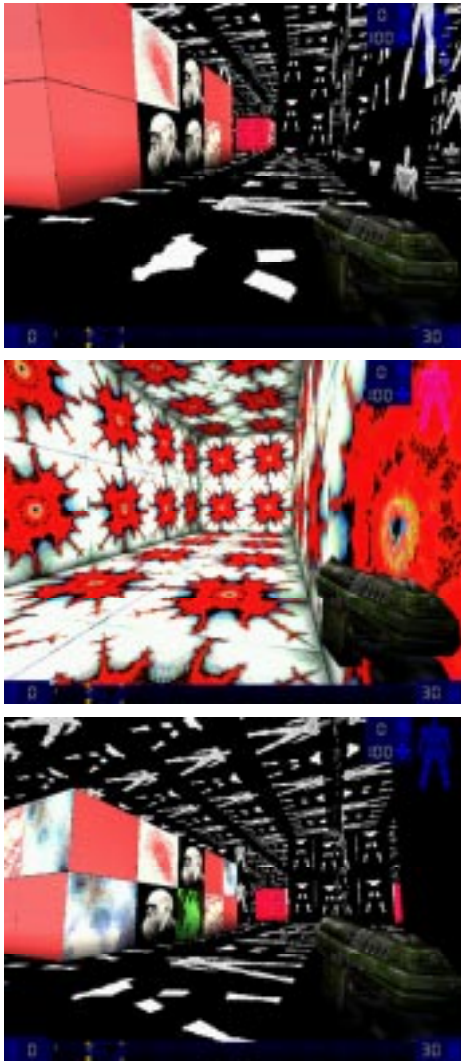


Figure 3: “Darwin is Dead” by Anja Kaufmann and Julia Kehl

## 4.2 Workshop: Mediated Discourse

<http://maia.enge.li/gamezone/parkstad/>

The focus of the Mediated Discourse workshop was to create messages about Parkstad, an urban project in Rotterdam. The main characteristics of the project are its location between different ethnic communities, the high density of different kinds of traffic in the area, and the aim to create a high-density district with a ‘large’ central park.

### 4.2.1 Under Construction – Creating your own Parkstad

In this level at first only the layout of Parkstad is visible, with the potential to make the planned city apparent. The buildings will grow if you step on them, which will lift you into the air, offering a new perspective and a “parachute” flight back down. The appearance of trees can be triggered as well.

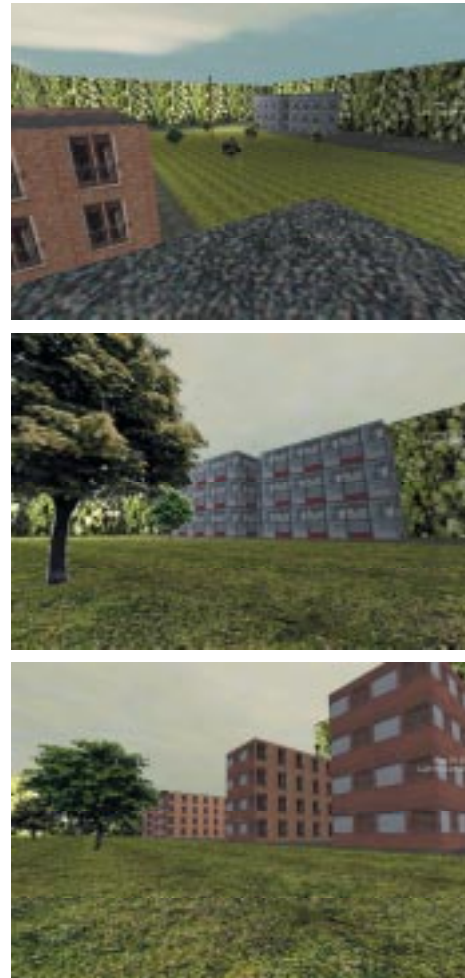


Figure 4: “Under Construction–Creating your own Parkstad” by Rob Kotte

### 4.2.2 Hidden Islands – Expanding Perspectives

In this level the city does not show its parks, but the birds give you hints about where the green islands are hidden. Each of the five parks represents a typical “park” theme, like “meadow with trees”, “zoo with rabbits”, “an exercise area for a sports team”, “a playground”, and “a pond”. All living beings in this level can be shot, the consequence of which is the spreading of nervousness, items out of place, and chaos in the whole system.



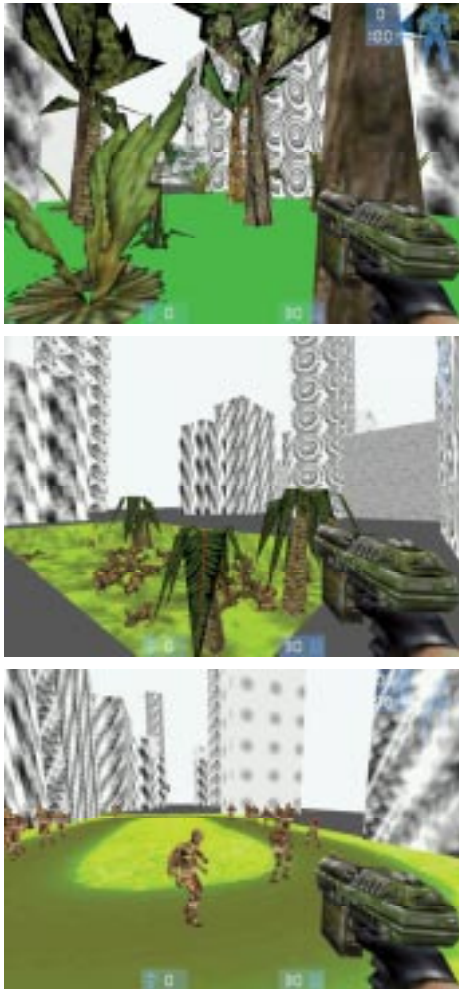


Figure 5: “Hidden Islands–Expanding Perspectives”

#### 4.2.3 Road to Parkstad – An Endless Drift

The multi-lane road within the planned Parkstad in Rotterdam will cut through the area very dominantly. This level confronts the experience from the roadside, with the drift along the road through the urban area.



Figure 6: “Road to Parkstad–An Endless Drift” by Bas Plasschaert

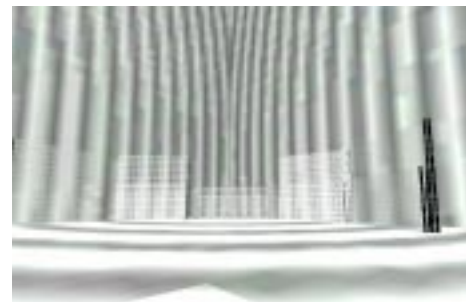
### 4.3 Workshop: Metaworx Unreal

<http://www.hyperwerk.ch/~hyperdat/unreal2/>

Metaworx is a planned travelling exhibition showing student work from four Swiss Universities. In the workshop the students were asked to either create a piece to be exposed or to create level that could serve as an interface to the exhibition or parts of it.

#### 4.3.1 Golden Calf: Metareal

This level shows an immersive, interactive exhibition of thesis work. In addition to the expandable exhibition space, there are spaces that illustrate the often painful process of the thesis work. There is the “nimbus” where the player floats comfortably but without control of direction and slowly gets desperate to find an exit. There is “hell”; after the players falls into a dark hole and sees nothing, feels very lost in the dark until he or she recognizes a dim light far away. And there is “heaven” with windows down into the exhibition. The windows show different perspectives onto the works. Visually the level is abstract, mostly black and white, and deliberately aiming at a contemporary graphical aesthetic.



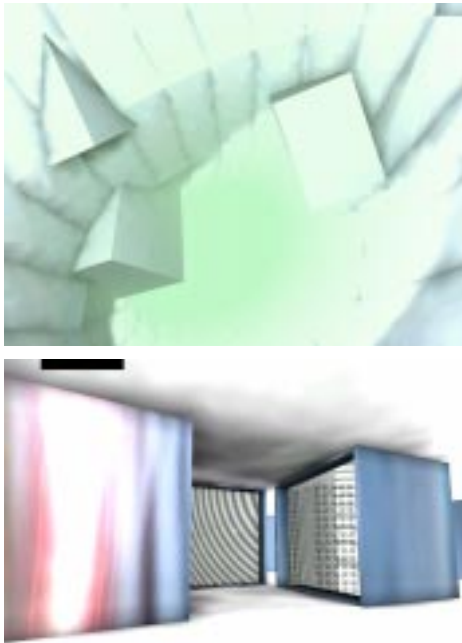


Figure 7: “Golden Calf: Metareal” by Luca Vincente

## 5. INSPIRATIONS FROM THE ARTS

As with any new media it is the artistic approaches that serve as eye-openers by indicating further potential power of a media. The following three examples where important inspirations for creating a highly exploratory atmosphere in the workshops.

1) “NextLevel” (by Miriam Zehnder, Eric van der Mark, Patrick Sibenaler, ETH Zurich, <http://caad.arch.ethz.ch/~patrick/LOCAL/research/playground/>) investigates the relationship between game, architecture and narratives. It is a reinterpretation of the novel “Through the Looking Glass” by Lewis Carroll. Alice, the story’s main character, imagines different worlds for the different characters of the chess game. The design of the game level was not done as a direct translation of the novel, but “aiming at understanding the essence of the idea and then creating meaningful interpretations” [4]. The environment is hybrid and hyper-linked; it contains contrasts on the visual as well the behavioural level. This makes the journey through Alice’s world a real adventure with unpredictable encounters, like: Gravity does not always function as expected; speed of movement is relative; or what seems to be an enemy may turn out to be one’s own mirror image.

2) Jodi’s “untitled game” (<http://www.untitled-game.org/>), game levels in which the interface has been reduced beyond the minimum is a “subversion of the aesthetic expectation of opaque source codes and understandable output” [5]. The reduction of the visual aspect to black and white ‘pixels’ provokes a distorted perception of the movement in the game. Nonetheless, the changing visual patterns and the sounds remain the only level that can be interpreted and after some time one can recognize patterns familiar from the known shooter game. The effect is a heightened awareness of these shooting patterns as well as the

insight, that even this most abstract representation can be as terrifying as the realistically rendered game.

3) Max Moswitzer and Margarete Jahrmann dig deep into the possibilities to alter the game and combine it with other information sources. Their newest example “Nybble Engine” (<http://www.climax.at>) is about hacking the server part of Unreal Tournament and, for example, replace shooting by sending anti-war emails to the president of the United States. They have overcome the discrepancy between shooter game and message and are exploiting the game with all its qualities for their aims. “An aesthetic message is usually the deconstruction of a conventionalized text form or a media text. It is receded by destroying semantic portions in order to increase the aesthetic information.” [6].

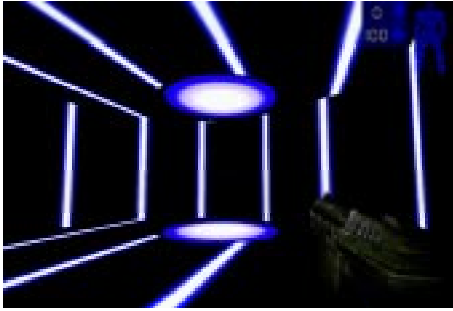
The arts examples and the workshop examples are quite distinct regarding the depth of exploitation of Unreal Tournament’s power and potential. While the arts examples really aim at expanding the boundaries, the workshop results were focussed on detecting the potential expressiveness.

## 6. OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The results from the TU Delft workshop where exhibited for two weeks at the Architecture School and we realized that we are dealing with two kinds of semantics; there is a very big discrepancy between the understanding of a level by an Unreal Tournament player and the understanding within a thematic discourse, which must originate from the difference in motivation. The player works with a shooting-and-survival strategy, while the thematic discourse focuses on experiencing the message through VR means. To close the gap between the two aims, the discourse level has to be empowered by creating messages that merge with or overpower the shooting-and-survival instinct of the UT players.

From the perspective of semantics the Unreal Tournament player’s approach is to read the shape of the space and connect it with possible game strategies, much like a chess player. Moving objects and creatures will draw attention, demand caution, and ask for immediate recognition as enemy, harmless thing, or team mate. Further signs and indicators are either iconic, i.e. health packs, ammunition or weapons, or built analogous to physical occurrences, like doors, bridges, and pathways.

In our message-oriented approaches, we tried to push the semantics beyond the obviously known from the first person games. By introducing novelties, it was also important to consider the need of the player to learn about the novel things and then create the respective opportunity. Few signs or configurations, like the teleporter in figure 8, turned out to be immediately readable.



**Figure 8: Teleporter in “Nextlevel” (Patrick Sibenthaler)**

Our experience was that VR semantics, beyond the ones directly translated from a physical reality, are only slowly developing. Players are already very familiar with different modes of navigation also in environments with distorted gravity and different ‘speed-zones’. But moving through walls, which is a natural thing to do, from a VR point-of-view, still feels very unnatural to most players.

The messages created in the workshops are less composed from readable signs but aimed at creating situations that can be experienced and understood in connection with past experiences.

In a currently running workshop emotions are emphasized to explore the expression of feelings and search for respective media-specific expressivity.

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