

The Breaking of the Circle. Playing with, through, against medial boundaries.

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Abstract

Digital-networked games are created to foster a desired pattern of behaviour in their users, beyond the mere delivery of content, a trait shared with many innovative digital media developments.

This can be seen as an opportunity for creating media for better learning, or rather teaching, but there will also be ideological, propagandistic or commercial (mis)use. What is necessary is a broad approach in arts, ethics and aesthetics to target and tackle the permeating structures behind the obvious content, and hint on playing with medial borders - named here *second order gaming* - as an anarchistic, radical counterpart to rule-conforming, more conservative gaming and game design.

First order game - and media - design aims for a delivery of the content as challenging and as balanced as possible, to draw the player smoothly into the confines and safety of the 'magic circle' of play. Alternatively in its second order form design may point to the 'magic circle' as a place of necessary manipulation and the player's potential power over this manipulation as player/designer.

Keywords: Games, Play, Medium, Education, Media Theory, Media Education, Medium Design, Unusability, Metagaming, Transmediality, Pervasive Games, Gamification, Second Order Gaming.

Johan Huizinga once claimed that play takes place in a sacred place, a 'magic circle' that brings into "an imperfect world and into the confusion of life (...) a temporary, a limited perfection" [1]. Delivering this limited perfection of inherently meaningful choices seems to be the trademark of good game design: challenging and guiding the gamer at the same time, like a benevolent teacher. But what if the teacher isn't benevolent?

A well-received medium usually stays invisible while its workings and limitations run smoothly along with our expectations and experiences: It provides a 'magic circle' within to interpret and act, to learn, communicate and store. But what if the 'magic circles' are slowly dissolving, if ludic forms and functions diffuse into 'serious' applications and vice versa? If games can foster specific patterns of benevolent behaviour and attitude [2] they may be also effective as tools for manipulation and propaganda. Caillois [3] claimed that any contamination of play - not of gaming - by 'ordinary life' destroys it; so, by a reversal of this relationship, could there be creation instead of destruction? Playing implicates that one can change between alternating points of view, action, and empowerment [4], and tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious, turning it visible [5]. The changing definition of game and play, where they can be found, for what purpose they are challenged and who is involved, are challenging topics for arts, ethics and aesthetics.

1 'Magic circles' around us

When we set up chess pieces, open a good book, or partake in a seminar, we are about to enter an area defined conceptually, socially, temporally and/or spatially as something special, for and by the means of certain occurrences to be interpreted and acted upon differently than outside of it: Seeing a set up board of chess

and someone who moves a piece according to the rules indicates that we are involved in a game of chess; it is an invitation to join in a dialogue in the specific language of this game, with its own grammar and vocabulary. Like the board of chess,

“(the) arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order.” [6]

These are the classic well-defined ‘play-grounds’ that facilitate expression and understanding by ordering and limiting their respective range. They have perceptible markers that make us aware of treading on different ground, and implicitly or explicitly provide the rules we have to comply to, to get or to be inside.

As adults we are usually confronted with established ‘magic circles’, i.e. with balanced, culturally integrated games or given rule systems. As children and in the mode of *toying and playing* we generate and modify these circles. By isolating and simplifying areas of ‘given’ reality, we isolate and amplify a specific aspect and open it to experiment and personal adaptation. It resembles a procedural slight-of-hand satire of reality. E.g. children’s roleplaying of domestic settings extract specific aspects of relationships to be modified or mocked. Vygotsky gives an example of a ‘game’, where

“(…) sisters playing at ‘sisters’ (…) they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact the two sisters decided to play sisters makes them both acquire rules of behaviour. (…) Only actions which fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation.” [7]

Sutton-Smith argues that this is less the (re)playing of a given game but rather the result of generating one, of creating meaning beyond mere experience [8]. While growing up the awareness that there once was a mode and joy of *playing* this strange state of ‘sisterhood’, rather than just living it, will probably diminish.

Game proposal: If you are in a social setting - like being at a conference or sitting in a seminar - try to imagine rules to turn this setting into a game. How do you - and should all others around you - play "conference" or "seminar"? Try to look at it with the eyes of a child who wants to mimic these strange happenings. Are there conclusive rules, goals, winners or losers?

Examples: "cops and robbers", "cowboys and red indians", "house"

2 Medial imprint, transparency and expressiveness

Huizinga's 'magic circle', a 'place' that imposes a certain mode of perception and action upon its visitor, resembles the idea of a medium. As McLuhan puts it: "(...) any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary (...)" [9]. There are three attributes of media that are worth looking at, to understand how this imposition works:

First, media are *generative*. They are not neutral, passive containers, but imprint their characteristics upon their content. The limitations that span a defined space of expectable and expected possibilities *is* the medium, it is the first and foremost message delivered.

Second, established media become *transparent*. A medium functions best when it is not perceived as such, but stands back in favour of its obvious content, remaining beyond the threshold of our conscious perception [10]. We perceive a medium *as* a medium only if it unexpectedly limits our expression, if we are unaccustomed to it, and/or if it malfunctions.

Third, media are *expressive* content - "the medium is the message" [11]. A medium can change - or be changed - over time, it can be expanded, invented anew, corrupted, appropriated like its contents. A medium is thus per se a dynamic form, though for technical limitations or socio-cultural ease-of-use it is usually seen as a stable given.

For future digital-networked media this means that media will be intentionally *created* to elicit a specific kind of use and response, to foster a desired pattern of behaviour by their users, beyond the mere delivery of content. This can already be seen in services like

Twitter, Facebook, or the Kindle e-book reader, which change the notion of 'communication', 'community-building' or 'reading' by technically both expanding *and* limiting the acts, and by altering concepts of 'message', 'friendship' or 'property'. Subscription based online games can be seen as prime example for the deliberate encoding of a medium to send the superimposed message "do not stop playing" [12].

The attributes of generativity, transparency and expressivity may be especially perceptible in created digital new media, where the lag between novelty and cultural adaptation is quite short. These three attributes will thus be the starting points for a proposed approach to media studies, based on reconfiguration, transgression, transfer and malfunction, encountered and applied by users and designers of media in form of metagaming, pervasiveness, transmediality and unusability.

Ubiquity in computing, combined with converging concepts of learning, playing, working or communication, means not only omnipresence but also omnifunctionality. The 'magic circles' are becoming harder to distinguish, their protective, guiding, ordering and differentiating functions are changing. Games may not only be used as environments for enjoyment, expression and experiment, or as an 'occurring' socioculturally or individually stabilising entity [13]. The circle has been opened: Games and aspects of 'ordinary life' converge by deliberate design.

3 Games as medium for educational content

Games seem to be the ideal medium to deliver content to the user, educational or otherwise: they are highly contextual, are inherently challenging, motivating, gratifying and emotionally involving; they may support an active, integrated experience based on meaningful choices; they may adapt and react to the users actions; they require and reward specific patterns of behaviour like collaboration, networking, or the quest for mastership [14].

Games may achieve this not just by confronting the player with information, but by exemplification and support of the generation, communication and application of information. Games are not just descriptions of forms, but also the space where potential formations take place and are challenged to *happen*. In short: While classic

media deliver structured information, the potential of games lies in the provision of an authored structure - a medium - for the experimental, safe, meaningful and joyful *formations* of structured information by the user.

This usually does not take into account that the games we successfully play do have the same shortcomings as any other medium: They are usually accepted 'as is', as a creation of a benevolent designer, without challenging the games' function or their mode of operation. In fact, this would hinder the flow of the gaming experience. We are trained to not-see the diverse 'magic circles' as a part of our socialisation and cognitive development (as Piaget [15] can be interpreted) - a necessity for participation, but an obstacle for criticism or change.

4 Serious games, gamification and ludic design

There are trends to exploit these characteristics of gaming. Ludic design and gamification strive for interfaces which are game-like, enriched with game features, or which aim for an aesthetic appeal beyond matter-of-fact design [16]; they aim for better usability by already existing familiarity with game interfaces and mechanisms [17]; or for providing gratification for showing a specific behaviour [18]. Corporations like Zynga already demonstrate that the workings of a vast social network can be exploited for casual games like "Farmville". Beyond this always-everywhere-game, whose purpose lies in self-propagation and monetarisation, there are visions of total permeation of game-like features to any area of human behaviour, to give it a nudge to a desired direction [19] by mostly using a behaviouristic approach of action-and-reward.

This is, in itself, nothing to be afraid of, even if the approaches will grow refined and more subtle over time, and will see an increase in ideological, propagandistic or commercial (mis)use. What is necessary, though, is a broad approach in arts, ethics and aesthetics to target and tackle the permeating 'magic circles' and hint to *playing* - or higher order gaming - as an anarchistic, radical counterpart in contrast to rule-conforming, more conservative gaming [20]. As Piaget states, "(...) play begins at the point at which assimilation begins to dominate accommodation" [21],

meaning that given aspects of reality may be reinterpreted, appropriated and jested for the sake of playing. Huizinga mentions

"(the) spoil-sports (...) called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. It sometimes happens, however, that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings." [22]

As in the tale of the emperor's new clothes, the 'magic circles' are aspects of reality that have to be 'seen' as just a potentially insubstantial social agreement to turn them into something to play with.

Game proposal: Agree on three digital texts influential for your area of expertise, run them through Wordle (www.wordle.net) and select the ten most common terms; alternatively you may agree on the ten most important terms for your area of expertise. Arrange alternating three-minute question-and-answer-settings where one player gets interviewed by the rest of the players. During the interview, the latter is not allowed to use the ten terms and scores negative points for every mention of one of them.

Examples: "black-white-I-you-yes-no-game", "Bullshit-Bingo", "Taboo"

5 Stepping on 'magic circles'

Game design may thus follow two roads. One is to deliver the content - the game, as we usually perceive it - as challenging and balanced as it can be created, to draw the player smoothly into the confines and safety of the magic circle. This is the classic path of game design. Or alternatively it may hint on the 'magic circle' as something expandable or mobile, where potentially everything can be played with, where the decision to take the game serious in its given form is up to the player.

Metagaming and transmediality are two ways for the player to turn the game into a toy, or a resource to create other medial forms.

These actions focus on the expressive and generative attributes of games and media.

With metagaming a game's frame of reference is temporarily or indefinitely transcended, modified and embraced anew. Among the modes to achieve this are mundane features like menu functions, cheats and walkthroughs, more complex semantic or systemic approaches like exploits and emergent gameplay, and also approaches that require technical skills, like skinning, modifications, extensions and conversions. Metagaming allows the player to modify her gaming – or learning – experience by self-setting goals, tweaking rules, integrating game-external personally meaningful material into the game's mechanisms and narratives, and share the results with other players [23].

Transmediality describes processes of 'transferring' content and context of one medium to another. The concept of 'medium' used here is not restricted to a technical medium like print, photo, film, but covers any means of expression bound to a given medial grammar and vocabulary. Genres, tropes and stereotypes for example can be seen as conceptual media, where an artificial limitation of expressive range supports authorial creation and the users' re-creation of meaning [24].

These actions imply that the user is aware of these possibilities and is inclined to play with them. But how can one challenge creative "spoil-sports", "heretics" or "conscious objectors", as Huizinga calls them? I would like to propose two ways to achieve this: By participation in or witnessing of pervasive gaming, and by participative confrontation with unusable games.

Game proposal: Take a dear theorem or practice of yours, turn it into a story and mail this story to your neighbour. Let him or her turn this story into a game and describe its rules and goals to the next player. Repeat this with the description of a painting, of a serious software application, etc. and finish, again, with a story. Compare original input, tweenings and result.

Example: "Chinese Whispers"

6 Pervasive gaming

If ubiquity is the calm working of digital devices everywhere, anytime, intermeshed with any social or technical function, then gamification is its ludic counterpart.

Ubiquity would mean the expansion of digital-networked media's 'magic circle' beyond the line of sight, already a problem recognized by media ethics [25]. Pervasiveness is the playful, sometimes anarchistic side of serious gamification, a way to turn a previously transparent circle unexpectedly opaque. Pervasive games are the result of unauthorised appropriations of temporal, spatial or social aspects of the ordinary world. As Montola puts it:

“When the three expansions of pervasive games are taken to extremes, the ‘magic circle’ starts to lose its meaning as a contractual boundary between ludic and ordinary. Extreme temporal expansion leads to ordinary life becoming a pervasive game. The same happens with space if the ordinary world is seen primarily as a game world: There cannot be a game world without the ordinary world. And, finally, a game where everyone is only an unaware participant is no longer a game.” [26]

Examples for this transgression, again, can be found in children's play: innocent pedestrians become welcome obstacles in a wild game of tag; cracks in the pavement provide for a game of improvised hopscotch; or the city turns into the background for a scavenger hunt.

Modern incarnations can be seen in the reinterpretation of urban architecture as playground and stage [27], as a playing grid in e.g. "Pacmanhattan" [28] or an obstacle course in street minigolf or "Urban Golf" [29]; in a global scale as "Geocaching" [30]; for cyberspace as contested resource in "Nethernet" [31], or as *parcour* in "Wikirace" [32]. Temporal or social boundaries may be transgressed in a milder variation of the game of assassination [33] in "Cruel2BKind" [34], or in alternate reality games like "World Without Oil" [35]. Artists like ImprovEverywhere or Aram Bartholl, rely on the effect of unsuspected but playful permeation of the real and the virtual.

The playful appropriation of public or private property, real or virtual, can also be quite low-levelled and mundane: forum trolling or the hijacking of comment threads [36], at least when creative instead of destructive, can be seen as an invasive but playful form of political statement or aesthetic intervention.

When done in public, these actions can be a reminder for spectators that 'magic circles' are generated and generatable anywhere. The confrontation may elicit reactions ranging from disregard to spontaneous participation, from annoyed irritation to joyful amazement.

Game proposal: Every player gets five tokens. The game master writes down three different activities on as many strips of paper as there are players, to be randomly drawn by them. Of these activities one can be performed alone, i.e. mentioning of a specific, unusual phrase, term or opinion in front of someone (+1 point); one that involves another person, i.e. speaking about a specific topic (+2 points); and one that another person has to perform, i.e. taking a stance against a specific topic (+3 points). Set a time to stop - or do not. Every player has to fulfil the three tasks without the others noticing it. If someone witnesses such a try - or thinks he or she just did so - a "Gotcha!" may be called. But if in error, the caller has to give the accused one token (+1 point). This game is played while other activities take place.

Examples: "J'te gage que...", "Erwischt!"

Unusability

While designers of digital devices and software aim for usability, i.e. medial 'invisibility' of their products, unusability can be seen as benevolent sabotage detrimental to the smooth use and working of the target [37]. Unusability as an aesthetic or educational approach strives for the user's - maybe unwilling - understanding of medial limitations and preconditions, by aiming for irritation, wonderment and a disruption of trust in them. This happens through design decisions which deliberately and unbeknownst by the user turn a device, program - or game - unworkable, aporic, disbalanced and disturbing, where it should be intuitive to use, guiding, fair and entertaining.

Though unusable games are in their carefully created dysfunctions as manipulative as usable games in their smooth functioning, the unusable ones do not provide a setting how to resolve the higher order problem within the given game. Within the unusable game, there is in the end no other course for the player than to decide *not* to play the given game any more.

Unusable games may pronounce their intention beforehand like Frasca's "September 12th - a toy world" [38], or draw their effectiveness from the ignorance and trust of the players like in "Barnga" [39] or Shirt's famous "Starpower" [40]. The proximity to acidic satire, like Wong's description of the perfect war simulation [41], is obvious. Any game rendering a specific feature of form or content into a caricature, so overdrawn that it hinders satisfying play, may be seen as generating unusability.

If in a game we regret acting like we did, usable games give us a chance to do better next time, to adapt to the conditions of the game. Unusable games force us to repeat the same regrettable actions over and over, until we regret playing the game as it is, i.e. without alterations of its rules or its narratives to do better. In contrast to pervasive games that may include passive bystanders into the game, unusable ones effect only active players, according to Will Wright's statement that games are probably the only medium holding the users responsible for their actions [42] - and thus also gives the chance for personal guilt, anger or grief.

The upsetting of trust, in either unusable form or content, may in its more radical variants intentionally trigger irritation, frustration, fear, or aggression, thus part of the game concept should include helping the player to cope with the experience, or helping to understand the rationale behind the approach. As an aesthetic or educational design decision, this may also raise questions whether it is ethical to confront players with the fragility of 'magic circles', especially if individual blind spots or socio-cultural taboos are touched.

Game proposal: Decide on a popular game from the genre 'war', 'fight', 'sports' etc. and add everyday complications omitted for sake of simplification and playability, until the game has become unplayable [43]. Alternatively join a forum supporting an extreme political position. Try to get a regular user to distance him- or

herself from a thread's dominant statement by means of over-affirmation [44]. No discernible trolling is allowed.



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