



Engaging Reality

How games transgress the boundaries between reality and game.

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Abstract

In this paper I will investigate the travelling back and forth between the boundary of reality and the game world. Coming from the theoretical concept of the magic circle, I will use different writers to critically look at this boundary between the ordinary reality and the game world in order to better understand the boundaries itself. I concentrate my research on the travelling back and forth between these boundaries. I will then go on and investigate different game technologies, techniques and designs that allow us to travel between these boundaries. I will argue that today's games use innovating, persuasive and alluring methods to persuade players to cross this boundary.

Keywords: Magic circle, reality, game world, paratelic, paraludic, game design

Introduction

Games have changed a lot since that Johan Huizinga wrote his book *Homo Ludens* in 1938. But how do today's game differ from the one Huizinga researched during the writing of his book? In this paper I will research one aspect of games in which I believe games have changes a lot in the last 70 years. Huizinga is today seen as one of the founding fathers of game studies, he became this by being one of the first who wrote philosophical and anthropological work on play as an activity situated within our reality. "It are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (Huizinga, 1938. pp.10). Huizinga was therefore one of the first scientist to give us ways to address and situate games in science. For Huizinga play is a free and happy activity, a contradiction of severity. Play is also a highly social activity and therefore Huizinga also situates play as a cultural activity, forming a cultural/game sphere around games and play. But most of all, play is not situated in reality. "Play is not the 'regular' or 'actual' life. It is a withdrawal from it into a temporary sphere of activity with its own scope" (Huizinga, 1938. pp.8). Here Huizinga's concept of the magic circle comes into the picture. The concept of the magic circle is perfectly described by Markus Montola: "The magic circle of a game is the boundary separating the ordinary from ludic and real from playful" (Montola, 2009. pp.1). This concept was later adjusted by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman that had a more metaphorical approach to the concept of the magic circle. "the frame is a concept connected to the question of the "reality" of a game, of the relationship between the artificial world of the game and the "real life" contexts that it intersects." (Salen & Zimmerman, 2005. pp.94). While Huizinga really talked about the boundary being actually there, Salen and Zimmerman see more of a blurred version of the magic circle able to deform and being able quickly step in and out of reality and play. This is one way in which games have changed a lot since that Huizinga wrote his book on play and game theory. Games have become entwined with our reality and give rise to whole new genres of games, like pervasive games.

In this paper I will investigate exactly how we step in and out of the magic circle. "As a player steps in and out of a game, he or she is crossing that boundary-or frame-that defines the game in time and space" (Salen&Zimmerman, 2005. pp.94). I will address the process of stepping inside, or withdrawing from, the magic circle by looking at game technology, techniques and designs that allow us to travel between these boundaries. Knowing more precise how current technology, techniques and game designs are using methods to make us cross these boundaries, will hopefully lead to a better understanding of games in itself.

Theory: the descent into, and the withdrawal out of, the magic circle.

I am not the first one to research and analyze the concept of travelling in and out of the magic circle. Huizinga's concept of the magic circle is already 70 years old of course. In this chapter I will look at different angles and opinions given by different writers on the subject. We will see that each one gives us new insights to analyze and research this concept of travelling between reality and play.

Markus Montola

Montola writes about the magic circle as a contract that the player upholds and agrees upon. He looks at how these contracts are used in pervasive games. He starts, just like this paper, to address the magic circle from Huizinga's and Salen & Zimmerman's approach. Then Montola uses Cindy Poremba to show that: "the way the magic circle extends the rules of socially acceptable behavior" (Montola, 2009. pp.9). He sees that the magic circle is capable of changing the rules of reality and can therefore be used to change socially acceptable behavior. He shows an example; beatings that a boxer gives and takes inside the ring (which can be seen as the magic circle of boxing). Outside the magic circle in real life, these actions would break the law, and someone might press charges. We see that descending into the magic circle causes big changes in our perception of the real. Montola goes on to address the changes in the form of different cases, players and object that are/can be used in pervasive games.

What we get out of the text of Montola is a clear understanding that there are huge differences in the way we perceive reality from within the magic circle. Somehow we embrace new rules/reality by making the descent into the magic circle. Only we do not get any further to address the specific activity of traveling through.

Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman

Salen and Zimmerman also write about the way games and play force some kind of different meaning to objects and activities. They address also the magic circle in this way; "The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins." (Salen&Zimmerman, 2005. pp.95). They argue if this beginning, could be seen as an entirely new reality, derived from Huizinga's idea that magic circle exist within our reality. Or can the magic circle better be seen as an extension of our reality. This gives way to the question: what travels between the magic circle and reality? They say this depends on the angle from which you analyze games. Salen en Zimmerman write about games as being a system, which are either open or closed. Looking at games as systems of rules you might say these new magical realities exist upon their own and are not open to involvement of players or reality. Looking at games from a play perspective, games can be seen as open systems were the player's expectations, likes, dislikes and social relationships come into the magic circle. Here it seems that reality is able to travel within the newly formed 'reality'. And at last looking from a cultural perspective at games Salen and Zimmerman write that games are extremely open systems. Here meaning is exchanged both ways, from reality to the magic circle and the other way around. This seems that games can influence reality and reality can therefor also influence games.

Salen en Zimmerman show us that not only we travel between the reality and the magic circle, but other players, objects and all other kinds of feelings and tastes too. In fact, looking at games from a cultural perspective even allows us to conclude that meaning formed within the game can actually exit the magic circle to find new meaning in reality. René Glas does also make a similar conclusion in his writing of the pervasive game Foursquare, and writing that it can be used for political activism¹.

Eva Nieuwdorp

Nieuwdorp writes about this exact process of moving in and out of the magic circle in her paper on *The Pervasive Interface: Tracing the Magic Circle*. Writing about the interfaces of pervasive games she comes with new insight in the way reality and games coexist, and how players travel between them. Nieuwdorp's work clearly comes from the perspective of the interface, looking at the interaction of players with 'real' objects in the game. "the status of the interface as an intermediary between the user and the (technological) system he/she interacts with makes it the most important focus to determine the border that is crossed from reality to game" (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.2). Looking at the border or membrane (how Nieuwdorp refers to it) of the magic circle she very quickly comes to the concept that we must look at the differences of the reality compared to the virtual reality. "in every game the player needs to shift focus from the everyday world to the conventions and rules of the game he/she has entered." (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.5). This is the idea I described earlier by the writing of Markus Montola.

Nieuwdorp uses semiotics to analyze the shifting focus between objects in the real and game world. She comes to conclude that: "what happens in pervasive games is a change in the relationship between an object and its accepted conventional meaning that has been constructed in a specific cultural discourse" (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.5). In pervasive games rules seem to construct new meaning and conventions that help the user to see and perceive objects in a different ways. In this way an urban landscape can become an urban playground in pervasive games. My research to find and situate the travelling between the game reality and reality, comes down to this according to Nieuwdorp:

"Now that we have determined that the pervasive game world, just as the realm of everyday life, is in fact a semiotic domain with its own rules and conventions, and that the coming-into being of this game world requires an active mental shift from the player to his/her surroundings, we can direct our attention to the instance in which this happens. What we are looking to determine, then, is nothing short of a description of the state of playing." (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.7)

Nieuwdorp shows us that we are in fact looking at a change of the mindset and attitude of the player. The moment a player enters the magic circle, or the moment a player leaves the magic circle, is thus nothing more than a change of the mindset we are in. Nieuwdorp shows some more refinement and makes a distinction between play and games when looking at this mindset. This refers back to the dichotomy of play and games used in game studies, originating mostly from Callois framework of

¹ "bending the rules of a playful platform like Foursquare can be used for political activism." (Glas, 2009. pp.13)

ludus and *paidia* (Callois, 1958). Nieuwdorp addresses the work of Bo Kampmann Walther: "Walther views two different transitions between firstly the initial serious state of mind into play, which secondly in turn is required to make the transition into accepting the rigid rules of a game" (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.8). This leads Nieuwdorp to her two main concepts of movement in the mindset of players, the *paratelic* transgression and the *paraludic* transgression. The *paratelic* being: "the first transgression from non-play (reality" or lifeworld domain) into play" (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.8), and the *paraludic* being: "Once the player has crossed the threshold into the paratelic state (...), means accepting this game world and being able to function within it as a literate player" (Nieuwdorp, 2005. pp.9).

We have now clearly situated what the traveling back and forth of the magic circle is: a change in the mindset and attitude of the player. I will use both *paratelic* and *paraludic* in this paper to talk about the different game technology, techniques and designs that allow us to travel between these boundaries.

Practice: How games use persuasive methods to transgress boundaries

In the previous chapter we have seen that the magic circle is in fact very often penetrated: objects, context, players and meaning all travel back and forth in and out of the game world. Therefore we have adjusted our understanding of the magic circle a bit, to a more organic and adjustable concept than that Huizinga showed us in the beginning of this paper. In this chapter we will look at how different games and genres of games use methods and techniques to persuade and lure players to travel through the boundary of the magic circle. During my research I have analyzed that there are different ways in which players can be persuaded. I have categorized them in three distinctive categories: social/cultural, technological and game design methods.

Social/cultural methods

I believe social methods derive from the concept of play rather than the concept of games. Here we see that social interaction and surroundings persuade us to travel into the game world. Children play with each other, and therefore persuade other children to enter the game. They represent playful behavior and thereby propose another mindset wherein play becomes possible. But we can also see a more direct approach/method that we use the change or introduce another mindset. It's not weird if a young child asks another "Will you come out and play?" or have a 'play date' with another child. The question introduces a new state of mind, and asks the other player to join him in it. The 'play date' also introduces this state of mind already looking forward to the activity the children will be performing in the future. During play, it are these social bonds and connections between people that allow us to enter the *paratelic* state of mind: a state where there are no strict game rules or boundaries, just mere play. We see that a lot of social activity surrounds play. The social sphere around games w Huizinga addresses by Huizinga in his book². I believe this sphere partially revolves around the notion of entering and reentering a playful state of mind.

² "the club belongs to play as a hat belongs to the head"(Johan Huizinga, 1973. pp.13)

Looking at traditional games like sport we see that cultural and social methods are being used. In team sports it is clear that the group culture imposes some methods to travel into the boundary of play, and even initiate the transgression into the *paraludic* state of mind. Sports' being a cultural and multiplayer activity becomes a method to enter a playful state of mind and descent into the world of the game. For example; group pressure to participate, but also cultural situated social rules within the group. Next to the cultural aspect there are still the social methods, also reminding the player to enter into the game reality. In this perspective a coach saying "Focus on the game guys!" becomes a reminder to not withdraw from the playful state of mind and therefore fall into reality, but remain within the boundaries of the magic circle. We again see that social and cultural groups like sport teams greatly resolve around the notion of entering and reentering the *paratelic* and *paraludic* state of mind.

We mostly looked at traditional play and games from their cultural and social perspective to address the traveling back and forth between these boundaries of the magic circle. These are all techniques that originate from the outside of the magic circle to come into the magic circle, a logical approach on how we enter play or games. I believe that today's games have found new methods to socially and culturally establishing and reestablishing these playful states of mind.

I will therefore look into social media games like Farmville, The Sims Social and Mafia Wars. All these games use social networks to distribute and introduce their game. The concept of distributing media like this, originates from social media itself. In this way social media make sure you and them can easily and quickly build large social networks around one user that registers itself. In the use of social media you can send invitations to all your friends from other platforms and from your own social network. Once a new person registers this process is repeated giving way to millions of user in for instance the case of Facebook. These social games are actually repeating the same methods used by social networks: making possible that you can invite friend to play along. In most games this is even connected to reward systems to speedup and accelerate this process. So if many friends of you join because of your invitations, you will become stronger, wealthier or better in the game itself. What we see here is a system that looks a lot like the question of that child asking "Will you come out and play?".

Next to the social element in this method of games, we also directly see the cultural roots of this system. Most of the time, you will have to let your friend know if you will decline or accept his offer to play. This gives way to the cultural aspects of individually situating yourself towards friends. You don't want to be a 'buzzkill', but you don't want to play either, what do you do?

In these social games we see a new process going on, compared to traditional play and games. Here the process of stimulating the *paratelic* and *paraludic* state of mind does not originate from the player, but originates from the platform or game itself. This would let me to believe that rational choices have been made to make and design these methods, to attract and seduce new gamers from within the game environment to enter the game reality.

Technological methods

Looking at the examples of social media games we can say that is not only the game itself but also the technology and algorithms that allows for games to make these persuasive methods. Looking into

what scientific studies provide in the field of interacting and persuasive technology I stumbled upon the work of Peter Paul Verbeek. Verbeek writes about “the fading border between man and technology” (Verbeek, 2009. pp.1). He defines persuasive technology as being: “Here intelligent systems and environments are explicitly used to influence human behavior, by persuading humans to act in some specific way” (Verbeek, 2009. pp.3). Verbeek goes further and writes about possible impacts persuasive technology can have for society. He sees for instance that through the use of persuasive technology we are giving technology properties that previously only were used by man. This brings Verbeek to his main subject: the power over man’s own intentionality. Verbeek sees these kinds of technology as a threat to the freedom of man to choose and act independently from technology, and detects a fading of human moral in the use of persuasive technology. “The promise of ease and freedom to do difficult tasks seems to shift into a threat of our freedom and responsibility” (Verbeek, 2009. pp.9).

While Verbeek does not write about games at all, we see some similarities in the way he addresses some subjects. We indeed find it easy that technology sends all emails to your friend asking if they want to play. In the definition of persuasive technology we can also see similarities. Games using these persuading methods do work with intelligent systems (algorithms) and platforms (social media/chat programs) to influence our behavior. Because in real life, without this technology, we would perhaps never have told anyone of this new game that I am playing. While with social media games, I will even tell my far related cousin who is living on the other side of the globe that I am playing a new game. So these game methods are indeed changing our behavior toward one another.

I want to explore this, perhaps extreme, view on technology in games a bit further. Montola and Nieuwdrop both wrote about pervasive games in their papers. To further explore the notion of technology in games I will use a case study from René Glas of the pervasive game Foursquare. Glas also looks very specific into the boundaries between play and reality. He analyzes this boundary with the appearance of cheaters in Foursquare. Glas sees that in a pervasive game the boundaries between reality and play have become very thin and object can often represent the same thing. Foursquare is in that way no exception: “As an application heavily dependent on user-generated content and honest behavior when it comes to check-ins, *Foursquare* offers ample opportunity for cheating practices.” (Glas,2011. pp.6). This forms the concept that cheating can be seen as a social activity within play, which is somehow possible or permitted by the game technology. Glas writes that the “deviant practices challenge the boundaries between play and ordinary”(Glas, 2011. pp.11). Glas later writes that by cheating it is possible to pull the ordinary life into the game reality.

Glas writes in a very clear manner about the boundaries of reality and play. You can therefore make up from his writing that cheating is the reversed method to the way social media games bring gamers into reality. It seems cheaters are doing exactly the opposite, bringing reality into games. The process of cheating is partially a social process, like the social methods that I described earlier, but also has a technological aspect. Cheating is the search for the limits that reside within the programmed boundaries of the game, the search for leaks or loopholes in the system. Therefore we see that this kind of travel between these boundaries of the magic circle is also co-dependent on the technological aspects of the game.

Game design methods

It becomes clear that although sometimes the technology, social and cultural aspects of games influence the player to step in and out of the magic circle, there are also the choices in design and game rules. These methods can be described as game mechanics that are designed by the makers of a game, but have the same influential power as the methods I described earlier. I will now look at some cases to show you how some game design methods are used to create just this persuasive aspect of games.

Once I played a game called Utopia Kingdoms³, the game derived from an older completely text-based version called Utopia. Utopia Kingdoms is an online, mostly text based, strategy game where sometimes thousands of player fight with each other in different virtual worlds. One of the core concepts is the fact that you mine resources and send your fighting forces out across the world to fight against other kingdoms. But all these things take time, actual time. Every minute or so, you will get resources, which mean you cannot build anything most of the time. Then you will have to wait. Waiting for your armies to return from battle takes time as well. Almost every aspect of the game is based on the fact that everything takes real time. So this means you will log out of the game if there is nothing to do, but must remember and not forget when you can build or fight again. This means you sometimes have to wait a couple of hours, and sometimes you can even wait days. But this also means you have to sometimes get up at 5am to give new orders to troops or build that new building you have been waiting on for days. The players that do this the best are probably also the best players of the Utopia Kingdoms.

In the case of Utopia Kingdoms we see that something profoundly strange has happened. Real life time is taken as the core element of the game. Real time has transgressed into the magic circle as a standard feature of the game. This means that the game now demands you to actually wait most of the time and login again when you can proceed. Therefore the game gets a grip on when you are entering the magic circle. If we look back at Verbeek writing about technology influencing human behavior, we see that it is actually already happening. In fact, it has been happening for quite some time now, the first game Utopia was released in 1998 and claims on their front page: "Running since 1998, Utopia is one of the oldest running online games in the world." (utopia-game.com). Ever since games like Utopia have made techniques a lot more online games using the same principle have been launched: Glory of Fellowland, Lord of Ultima, Grepolis, Farmerama.

This concept of real time is directly integrated by the modern games on your mobile devices and by social media games. Examples are: Happy Park, IMobster, Rock Battle Live. Here you see that also real life time is used as a core element of the game. But mobile devices as well as social media are far more entwined to our daily lives than most other games. This means that games can even add extra features to lure players back into the game/magic circle while also using the concept of real time. I played Happy Park⁴ for about a month. In the game they use pop-ups on your mobile phone to let you know when buildings are finished or when new buildings are available. So the game actively lets you

³ utopiakingdoms.com

⁴ itunes.apple.com/nl/app/happy-park/id432921216?mt=8

know that now you are supposed to play again, thereby introducing the *paraludic* state of mind. Note that these actions skip the whole transgression into the *paratelic* state of mind.

I can only say that I believe these techniques to be a commercialized version of the original idea to link actual time to virtual games. To constantly get involve or be persuade by a game was eventually also the reason why I stopped playing the game. So I became (subconscious) offended by the influence the game was opposing on me. There are also other ways to design games that make special rules to seduce and persuade players to play. I will use one last case to show that there are indeed games that, instead of throwing the magic circle right in your face, try to blend its existence.

Jane McGonigal writes in her paper '*This is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play*' about the case of the pervasive game that later announced as Beast. The game launched secretly. In the movie trailer of the Steven Spielberg's film A.I.: Artificial Intelligence a weird sentence was written in the end credits. 'Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist'. When searched the 'unknowing' player would stumble upon an intricate network of sites that where all coming from 2142, the date in which the movie playes. McGonigal describes that soon many online users would search, puzzle and discover many more sites revealing even more difficult puzzles and questions. Microsoft and Dreamworks both denied the existence of a game for months making players actually believe that somehow the internet had become an artificial intelligence, and was able to retrieve information out of the future.

For players of the game there was no difference between the magic circle and reality. "For more than three months, this *game* was a very real world"(McGonigal, 2003. pp.3). Looking back this had led to insane play behavior: "working literally around the clock; some players complained of losing not just sleep, but also jobs and friendships"(McGonigal, 2003. pp.2). What the Beast clearly shows us that we can also by vanishing the boundary between reality and play influence human behavior, perhaps even more so than by actively trying to pull players inside the magic circle.

Conclusion

In my investigation into the traveling between the real world, *paratelic* and the *paraludic* I have come across different new ways to approach and analyze games. I first theoretically situated how this travelling can be addressed using different writers within game studies. After that, I did a more analytical approach of the subject and looked into different social, cultural, technological and game design methods that are used to make traveling between these different states of mind possible.

We saw that many games and play in some way are using methods to lure people into their game worlds. This opens up a new way of understanding and awareness in the way we perceive games and also interact with games. We have come to believe that using these methods; games changes the way we interact with hem and perhaps also change the way we want to interact with games. I myself have not played many of these games due to the fact I always find them to troublesome. They keep reminding you to play the game itself or share your game with everyone else. For me, that's not what gaming is about.

That the makers of games have a responsibility to think carefully about the use of these methods has become clear if you look at the case of the Beast. The game has managed not only to influence

human behavior but also influence people's lives. In this retrospect we might say that Verbeek is indeed right about persuasive technology, and we should be aware of the risks that are at stake by making these games.

I feel like this paper is far too short and narrow to really grip the importance of analyzing and understanding games in the way they influence our travel between all the states of minds. Just the notion that games can use these methods to increase the amount of users or playtime will be a book on itself. However, I think that within this paper I addressed some important new aspects at how we could look at games. I hope this will give rise to a new understanding of games and open up new areas of researching games. Many of the topics addressed in this paper are also directly subjects to do further research on.

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