FCJ-112 Magic Frames: The Best of All Possible Virtual Worlds

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2 Each generation of videogame hardware promises increasing levels of graphical realism. This provides one of the major incentives for consumers to invest in the latest technology. The ferocity with which realism has been pursued over the brief history of gaming is attested to by the sheer pace at which new techniques and methods for making games look more realistic have been developed. In a mere three or four decades we have gone from vectors and sprites to polygon models, particle effects and complex physics engines. While realism certainly isn't the only visual style in games, it can be startling to think that titles such as *Doom* (iD Software, 1993) or *Half-Life* (Valve Software, 1998) were hailed as dangerously realistic graphical masterpieces, or that the Lara Croft of the first *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) was considered a sex symbol, or that *Need For Speed: Special Edition* (Pioneer Productions, 1996) caused jaws to drop as people watched the track whiz by at 640×480.

3 From the perspective of visual culture, then, this history may seem straightforwardly linear: gradual improvements have led to games becoming more and more like reality. This process is often lionised. James Newman speaks of 'the prevalence of marketing and advertising materials that foreground the graphical prowess of specific games or the capabilities of the hardware platforms' (2008: 46). Why is the idea of realism so prevalent? Everyone knows that games are nothing like reality and never can be. As such, 'reality' can't act as a simple teleological or regulatory ideal guiding the development of realism in games. Rather, visual realism is defined against previous seminal titles, current competition, cinematic and televisual convention, expectations raised by pre-release press and the prevailing distribution of hardware throughout the potential audience. The standards of realism at any given time are, as Friedrich Kittler puts it in a different context, a highly contingent 'compromise between engineers and sales people' (Kittler, 1997: 33). No doubt in a few years time, *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (Naughty Dog, 2009) will seem something of a period piece, but for now it's award-winningly realistic.

4 If videogame realism is dazzling and flighty, unrealism is a solid and dependable. Unrealistic elements are a feature of all genres and all stages of gaming history. Icons that signify potential actions, pop-up menus, 'heads-up displays' (HUDs) quantifying the avatar's status and various methods of representing the player's own virtual body (or apparent lack thereof) are all highly unrealistic visual elements. They are also very common across all the genres of gaming. Galloway (2006: 69) argues that the first-person perspective in games tends to marginalise montage in the sense of an editorial cut in cinema. However, a broader definition of the term – one which is not restricted to a cinematic antecedent – would recognise that multiple frames of many videogames *are* montage. The overwhelming majority of game screens involve overlays or partitions, and gameplay often demands the dynamic navigation of multiple frames. These elements constitute moments of counterplay with regard to the realist ambitions of many videogames.

5 There is no doubt that videogame developers and artists have created ever-more brilliantly realist graphics and spaces, [1] but there has always been an attendant need for players to parse what they see and hear – they have to frame the action. As such, in this article I will argue that multiple frames are constitutive of rather than inimical to the way players experience space. This way of conceiving game space challenges the metaphor of the 'magic circle', the boundary which gamers are assumed to cross so as to experience the immersive realism of the game. Where Montola, Stenros and Waern (2009: 12-14) explore how the magic circle of play can grow, in pervasive games, as 'Spatial Expansion' through contractually mediated forms of play behaviour, this article proposes an opposite trajectory with specific regard to the spatial experience of videogames. By way of a close reading that discovers some surprising materialist moments in the text that gave us the term 'magic circle', Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1970), this article will explore how the magic circle is less a boundary into which players enter than a set of practices they adopt – a set of 'magic frames'. Rather than being something that would disappear in the best of all virtual worlds, frames work with the various visual styles in gaming to produce ludic experience. This is even true of the realist style, which makes particularly clear how counterplay and play operate in a productive tension.

Homo Ludens in the Age of Homo Faber

6 One of the most influential writers on play, Johan Huizinga, read the realism contemporary with his own time as a form of counterplay. The originator of the theory of the 'magic circle' even went so far as to make realism one of the signs of a precipitous decline in the vital ludic aspects of culture:

7 > The nineteenth century seems to leave little room for play…the great currents of its thought, however looked at, were all inimical to the play-factor in social life… Even art and letters… seemed to give up their age-old association with play as something not quite respectable. Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism, and the rest of that dull catalogue of literary and pictorial coteries were all emptier of the play-spirit than any of the earlier styles had ever been… Culture ceased to be "played" (Huizinga, 1970: 218-219).

8 And yet, in an almost contemporary work, Walter Benjamin (2002: 127) asserts that '…what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for play is widest in film'. Meanwhile, Claude E. Shannon completed *A Symbolic Analysis of Relay and Switching Circuits* (1937) and Alan Turing published 'On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*' (1936). [2] Steiner (1970: 15), in a trenchant introduction to the English edition of the text, notes that:

9 > 'Even as *Homo Ludens* was being written, the "theory of games", whose beginnings go back to work done by von Neumann in 1928, was on its way to becoming an intellectual discipline. Soon von Neumann and Morgenstern were to apply notions of agonistic strategy and formal rules to numerous aspects of social, economic and military behaviour… Seen in the light of *The Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour, Homo Ludens*, though it appeared only nine years before, seems of another age.'

10 These latter three seminal projects would prove decisive in the development of mathematical game theory, communications theory and computing respectively. Both Huizinga and Benjamin seem to be venturing a response in the cultural and aesthetic spheres to profound developments in the nature of both play and technology. Turing and Shannon would go on to apply their theories of computability and information to games such as chess, roulette and the stock market. Turing in fact created a chess 'computer'. Although it was never built, it nevertheless did play a game that has been recorded through Turing simulating its moves himself – each of which took around half an hour of longhand processing. [3] In effect, this 'paper machine', this simulation of a simulating machine, was a set of rules about a set of rules; a game about a game; a metagame. And yet it had a curious effect on its maker. Turing writes, 'One can produce "paper machines" for playing chess. Playing against such a machine gives a definite feeling that one is pitting one's wits against something alive.' [4]

11 This moment of modernity sees the concept of play (expressed as 'play-room' in both Benjamin and Huizinga) being reframed by these thinkers in response to techniques that present or address the mass in various forms – photography, film and the spectacular in visual culture; serial processing in theoretical and practical computation; the industrial mode of production and everyday urban life in economics and sociology. Huizinga thought the relation was largely negative, he 'felt that the play-element had been on the wane in Western civilization since the eighteenth century, threatened by the drive for efficiency and the routinisation of experience it brought' (Malaby, 2009: 210). If Huizinga describes a diminishment of play-space in traditional areas of cultural value, Benjamin ties this to a new opening in a medium of mass reproduction. Essentially, Benjamin is identifying play in what Huizinga has identified as counterplay.

12 *Homo Ludens* and Benjamin's Artwork essay also differ in the way they deal with the status and validity of the work of art. Huizinga's attitude is patent in his distinction between the musical arts, which rely on presence and performance (including when they are consigned to writing), and the plastic arts, which by 'The very fact of their being bound to matter and to the limitations of form inherent in it, is enough to forbid them absolutely free play and deny them that flight into the ethereal spaces open to music and poetry' (Huizinga, 1970: 190). Aesthetic play-room and its defining 'magic circle' is here opposed to the use-value of products of plastic art, as a kind of spiritual freedom that is conceived in opposition to the material.

13 *Homo ludens* is explicitly contrasted to *Homo faber*. [5] Even style and ornament are subject to unavoidable constraints and even plasticity has definite material limits. Unlike arts of free

presence and performance such as music, material artworks are immobile from the point of view of the community. 'A work of art, though composed, practised, or written down beforehand, only comes to life in the execution of it, that is, by being represented, or *produced* in the literal sense of the word – brought before a public... The absence of any public *action* within which the work of plastic art comes to life and is enjoyed would seem to leave no room for the play-factor' (Huizinga, 1970: 190-191). The production of plastic art is separated from the public for which it is destined, diminishing its playfulness.

14 Plastic arts can be playful in nature, however, when they 'enter the social milieu' and become the objects of valuation and competition. This form of play is agonistic and recalls games of skill and the riddle. Free play overcomes the diligent material labour required to fashion the object only when the desire for acclaim and excellence overshadow any kind of use-value. Unfortunately, Huizinga does not directly extend his analysis to account for the effects that commodity culture has had on this conception of the relation between play and the work of art in particular. As a result we do not know directly from *Homo Ludens* what Huizinga thought of the ability of a technical apparatus to *produce*, to bring 'before a public'. The question does in fact return, if somewhat disavowed, in a discussion of the play-element in Huizinga's own time. Again the particular form of play in question is the agonistic, the competitive. In contrast to increasingly professionalised sports, '...now we come to serious business degenerating into play but still being called serious...':

15 > The impetus given to this agonistic principle which seems to be carrying the world back in the direction of play derives, in the main, from external factors independent of culture proper – in a word, communications, which have made intercourse of every sort so extraordinarily easy for mankind as a whole. Technology, publicity, and propaganda everywhere promote the competitive spirit and afford means of satisfying it on an unprecedented scale... The statistics of trade and production could not fail to introduce a sporting element into economic life. In consequence, there is now a sporting side to almost every triumph of commerce or technology: the highest turnover, the biggest tonnage, the fastest crossing, the greatest altitude, etc. Here a purely ludic element has, for once, got the better of utilitarian considerations... Business becomes play (Huizinga, 1970: 226-227). [6]

16 The mass, the statistical and the technical are found in the context of communications technology – a field in which the work of Turing, Shannon and von Neumann were all of major influence – to be playful. It is difficult to tell in this formulation whether economic life is becoming playful or play is economised, probably because Huizinga lacks the interest and the capacity to further elaborate on the matter. Steiner (1970: 15) notes the Huizinga's distaste for psychology bars him from appreciating 'the economics of destruction and restoration in child's play', and argues that although the Dutch scholar 'cites Marcel Mauss' epochal monograph on gifts... [he] has little acquaintance with sociology.' Geyle (1963: 235) in his well-known characterisation of Huizinga as 'Accuser of His Age' goes so far as to argue that an unresolved contradiction between elitist and universal notions of culture underwrites Huizinga's entire *oeuvre*. With some irony, Steiner points out that Geyl's own critique of Huizinga is not free of its own contradictions. Huizinga's tendency to compare the present to the cultural achievements of a historical elite certainly caused justifiable exasperation in his critics, but Geyl sometimes reads as if he fancies he himself is writing a missive from a classless society – the postwar 'Western world'; a very paradoxical entity that for some unexplained reason does not include any of the nations that 'had fallen under totalitarian regimes' (1963: 235). Steiner (1970: 14) rejoins: 'Like many "clerics" of the new liberal intelligentsia, Geyl would have it both ways. Huizinga has the courage of his pessimistic convictions.' Geyl disapproves of Huizinga's narrative of decline, but can only save Europe's historical patrimony by virtue of some radical surgery to remove its Iberian, Italian and Teutonic (not to mention colonialist) malignancies.

17 What we can say is that in *Homo Ludens* play and counterplay are enfolded in a complex dialectic with mass culture as a new form of production; a spur to materialist critique. The public performance of free subjectivity Huizinga cites as fundamental to play is increasingly technological in nature, not least in terms of the very production of a mass public before which it is represented. Remarkably, for Huizinga, the 'sporting side' to commerce and technology makes pure multiplicities: communication is 'intercourse of every sort', with regards to 'mankind as a whole'. Such competition he discerns as ludic is increasingly measured against counting, measuring and disseminating machines and the social forms contingent on them rather than other individuals

assembled contemporaneously. Thus, in spite of a general increase in forms of counterplay in the cultural outlook just before the Second World War, the constitution of the 'public action' necessary to the play-factor comes to be centred on the apparatus. Play perseveres as a litany of shifted frames of possibility: the highest, the biggest, the fastest, the greatest.

18 The epochal diminishment of the 'space for play' lamented by *Homo Ludens* in the contexts of a heedless utilitarianism and modernity is 'for once' and on 'an unprecedented scale' countermanded in mass communications, technology and commerce. The play-element involved in this new space is, for Huizinga, the same that once accounted for any playfulness that is to be found in the plastic artworks of tradition, which now come to rely on esotericism. The work of art itself becomes simply an economic ghetto maintained by pure prestige and 'esotericism' which is playful due to the magic circle of its own jargon: '…esoterics requires a play-community which shall steep itself in its own mystery. Wherever there is a catch-word ending in –*ism* we are hot on the tracks of a play-community' (Huizinga, 1970: 229). With regard to material works of art, then, the agonistic play-function that once operated in them instead becomes a ludic feature of technological mediation, commerce and exchange. In such a cultural climate, art must sequester itself from the play of commodities, become playfully (or perhaps coyly) esoteric rather than robustly competitive: it must maintain an aura.

19 Film, whether as artform or commercial product, makes no appearance in *Homo Ludens*. This absence is related to the manner in which Huizinga conceives plastic artworks as constrained and immobile, and his animus towards artistic movements such as Impressionism, known as it is for lavishing great attention on that enduring symbol of the transience of phenomena: weather. The Impressionists made use of mass-produced tubes of paint to leave the studio and work *en plein air*. [7] Thus even as it allows a new form of movement to enter painting through the impression, the production of material artwork commands as much as facilitates the movement of the artist. Nothing could have been more disturbing from the point of view of a text that advocates a view of play predicated on the free and unconstrained movement of the human being than the potential autonomy of objects – it's remarkable enough (though generally unremarked) that a classic book on play at no point engages in a sustained discussion of toys and other material artefacts associated intimately with the ludic. We can only imagine what Huizinga may have made of Turing moving and pausing at the discretion of his ghostly chess machine, still less Pirandello's account, quoted by Benjamin, of the situation of the actor before the cinematic apparatus – a staccato form of movement governed by the demands of shot and montage. [8]

20 However here too Huizinga's formidable commitment to play as free, immaterial movement,which surprisingly discovered a play-element in mass communications technology, comes up against a limit-case:

21 > …dancing is an anomalous position. It is musical and plastic at once: musical since rhythm and movement are its chief elements, plastic because inevitably bound to matter. Its execution depends on the human body with its limited manoeuvrability, and its beauty is that of the moving body itself. Dancing is a plastic creation like sculpture, but for a moment only. In common with the music which accompanies it and is its necessary condition, it lives from its capacity for repetition. (Huizinga, 1970: 190).

22 Dance – an art form devoted to the purity of gesture – appears here as the zero-point of play within matter, an indistinct and anomalous space or threshold between the two that appears in the moment and in the intimacy of the human body itself. In *Homo Ludens*, the apparatus achieves a new freedom that also traces the limits of 'the human body with its limited manouevrability'. Mass communications apparatus and bodily gesture: two materialist moments of counterplay in Huizinga's ahistorical theory of the magic circle which both exist 'for a moment only' but live from a 'capacity for repetition'. To this may be added the 'dull coterie' of Realism, Naturalism and Impressionism whose orientation to the exigencies of the temporal and political disqualify them from play in the old sense, but for that very reason may make them in some sense paradigmatic of the new. The social aspect of production, the bringing of the work before a public, becomes a characteristic of the apparatus. In a very Benjaminian constellation, the beauty of play appears to this renowned humanist in its own passing away, but what this twilight reveals is the mode in which play survives the nineteenth century.

'Moving cutting-off'

As such the elements of counterplay in *Homo Ludens* can be seen as instructive for thinking about play with communications technologies and in particular the specific topic of this article: videogames. In this light it is necessary to revisit the magic circle thesis with regard to contemporary realism such as that found in games – that is, where non-realist elements of counterplay are productive of the virtual space rather than somehow detracting from it. Such a revision would have to take into account the hints left in the wake of Huizinga: the materialities of the apparatus, the relation between the moment and repetition in dance, the paradigmatic and yet conflicted status of realism. What's needed is a concept that can think through both the playful and the visual. As such, interrogating the function of the frame may help to mediate the two – to mod Huizinga, we might dub it the 'magic frame'.

Why a magic frame? This particular proposal has been advanced by Pargman and Jakobsson (2008), who have questioned what they call the 'strong boundary hypothesis', according to which the space of play is cleanly demarcated from everyday experience. Through an ethnographic study of a group of hardcore gamers, Pargman and Jakobsson find a number of quotidian practices and attitudes to play that obviate the idea of play as a space of enchantment. Players were interested in maintaining social ties and practicing their skills and 'While not having much to do with the "magic" of games, these kinds of incentives and pressures were a large part of what games and gaming meant to the participants' (236). In response, the researchers draw on sociological precedent (in particular Goffman, 1986) to propose a 'weak boundary hypothesis' according to which players are adept at shifting their attention between different frames – play and the various quotidian situations in which they find themselves and 'There is nothing magical about shifting between these roles' (238). Pargman and Jakobsson go so far as to suggest that the popularity of the magic circle concept for game studies is due to the way that it flatters and makes consequential the field's object of study. Lehdonvirta (2010) has also found an overemphasis of the magic circle metaphor in academic approaches to MMO games.

While acknowledging this work, my current interest in the term 'magic frame' is not to affirm a relation between the game and everyday life, or the expansion of the magic circle to different contexts as do Montola *et al*. The latter contractual model is well-suited to pervasive gaming as a social form, but less so to videogames in which the problem is not simply entering a space of play, but understanding and reacting to dynamically evolving forms. Elsewhere (Jayemanne, 2005), I have recruited Bateson's (2000) concept of metacommunication to give an example of an *embodied* rather than contractual engagement with play. I have also (Jayemanne, 2009) explored these issues in the context of J.L. Austin's notion of the performative speech act and its legalist underpinnings. Austin attempts to exclude 'parasitic' utterances – speech acts uttered in a play or novel, for example – from his considerations on the grounds that they are merely 'hollow and void' representations of really binding speech acts. Austin assumes in this that parasitic utterances can be routinely distinguished from normal speech acts, but this assumes that the parasitic itself must signify in some fashion: as in the case of a frame and caption around a picture, for example. There I argued that rather than simply signifying the binary 'parasitic/normal', these signs can work in many different ways and thereby dynamically guide how players evaluate virtual space, arriving at a theory of *image actions*.

Taking up this theme in light of the materialist idea of play found in Benjamin (and the counterplay in Huizinga), it is possible to account for the role of framing in constructing the spatiality of contemporary games. Most importantly the concept of the frame brings to mind the operations of the camera made familiar by film, photography, television and video. Gameplay involves navigating virtual space through various viewpoints – the mobility of the camera is of such importance that often the first thing that alerts a player to design flaws is a shoddy camera. As Lev Manovich argues,

> The incorporation of virtual camera controls into the very hardware of game consoles is truly a historic event. Directing the virtual camera becomes as important as controlling perception functions in the subject in its own right, suggesting the return of "New Vision" movement of the 1920s (Maholy-Nagy, Rodchenko, Vertov and others), which foreground the new mobility of the photo and film camera, and made unconventional points of view a key part of its poetics' (Manovich, 2001: xii).

The counterplay in *Homo Ludens* also includes the microgestures (Jayemanne, 2005) by which players manipulate the camera – the minimal materialist play of dance becomes a vast *Spiel-raum* in counterplay. Benjamin (2002: 116) identifies this as a tactile, distracted mode of engagement more akin to an architecture than the singular frame of a painting. The regime of framing in videogames both facilitates tactile, embodied engagement and opens up space as an architecture. As such, the traversal, establishment and recognition of frames is central to the experience of play thought as an active process of manipulating temporal and spatial contexts. These frames may be realist in the sense of naturalism in FPS games, or they may be impressionistic as in the Japanese-style brushstrokes of *Okami* (Clover Studios, 2006).

30 In fact this notion of framing has a long history in visual-cultural debates. In the paper 'Photography and Fetish', Christian Metz (1985) locates the novelty of film in the combination of technologies which mobilised temporal and spatial frames respectively: stroboscopy and photography. Metz argues that the major innovation in animation is the control of temporal frames, whereas photography records space. In this conception, the moment framed by the photographic image allows possession of a lost time or loved one in the form of learning to love their absence, a potential it shares with the fetish as *object*. Meanwhile, precisely due to movement and the inclusion of sound, film is more apt to be an 'extraordinary activator of fetishism' (1985: 87) as *practice*. 'Thanks to the principle of a *moving cutting off*, thanks to the changes of framing between shots (or within a shot: tracking, panning, characters moving into or out of the frame, and so forth), cinema literally *plays* with the terror and pleasure of fetishism…' (1985: 88).

31 So here an apparatus 'literally plays' with movement as a moving frame. The distinction between a static moment in time which creates a photographic fetish object and a moving image which activates fetishism through constantly playing with visible and invisible spatial relations is explicitly related by Metz both to the 'problem of off-frame space' and a further dichotomy between private and public usage. By treating photos of deceased loved ones as the exemplary instance of the technology, Metz secures the discrete or unitary status of individual photographs – although even a photograph construed as hermetically self-sufficient may contain traces of the exclusionary function performed by its frame, which Roland Barthes (1981: 64) formulated in his concept of the *punctum*: an arresting feature that challenges the coherence of the image by disturbing habitual modes of reception, catching the subject in the act of looking.

32 This perspective is of undoubted importance, but there is another form of 'off-frame space' generally associated with photography in its more public functions: the caption that conveys socio-political context. Significantly in this regard, Metz (1985: 87) invokes Benjamin's concept of the aura as regards the photograph of the loved one in terms of distance and proximity but chooses not to pursue the related notion of its decay through dissemination in mass culture in which the 'off-frame' space is constituted by other images whose place in a series is often indicated by caption. In the latter case, the *punctum* disperses the effect of the frame rather than strengthening it.

33 The porosity of the visual frame and the related quality of the off-frame space are negotiated both by design and by use. Metz and Barthes, by insisting on the unitary status of the photograph and the rigidity of its frame, unveil an apotropaic dimension in terms of the preservation of aura (an intense subjective investment exemplified by the image of the deceased, but also signifying a temporal continuity with the past). Conversely, independent movement of the apparatus (as well as the movement of figures off-frame at which the subject would like to look) in film leads Metz to speak of a threatening aspect in which the difference between seen and unseen is actively played with, exemplified in his reading by the horror genre in cinema and the cultural spectacle of the striptease.

34 Benjamin, for his part, identifies the potential for movement already in photography (and generalised as the category of 'technical reproduction' or in the more recent translation, simply 'reproducibility') due to its public ability to disseminate images and thus render porous the frames and borders experienced as continent in traditional settings. The integrity of the individual photographic frame is vulnerable to both cinematic movement and its own inherent potential for iteration: in the context of mass reproduction the defensive function that Metz identifies is lost and the aura decays – exhibition value is maximised at the expense of cult value. That is, the off-

frame space is construed as a set of potential viewpoints, as a set of exhibition values structured by the potential movement of frames.

35 Similarly, in gaming the structure of viewpoints available to the player in a given title determine how the game is played. Any videogame is constructed to offer a set of potential viewpoints – everything that appears in one of these texts appears as a maximised exhibition value, whether it be a pre-rendered or dynamically generated background, a sprite or a 3D polygon model. Visually, the set of potential frames describes the forms of movement possible in the game. A frenetic action game such as *God of War* (Sony, 2005) benefits from strict control over the way the action is framed, allowing players to concentrate on their opponents without concern for losing track of their relative location, whereas in the survival horror title *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2004) the game thrives on keeping things unnervingly out of sight: in characters like the superhuman Wesker, even the normative human figure contains twisted organic potentials seething beneath its rendered surfaces. In both cases, an ensemble of framing techniques activate a fetishism, an intense subjective investment. Meanwhile 4X games such as *Populous* (Bullfrog, 1989) and *Civilisation* (Microprose, 1991) remained at an appropriately celestial isometric perspective, which guaranteed the uniformity of both the range and scale of the visual field. In setting the perspective, frames perform a vital function.

36 The presence of multiple tiers and levels that comprise the magic frames of videogames formally connects them with the notion of flow developed in Raymond Williams' influential *Television* (1990) [9]. Planned flow is presented as characteristic of broadcast television, in direct contrast to the discretion of prior communicational forms in which an artistic event was experienced in its own space and time. Conversely, 'The difference with broadcasting is not only that these events, or events resembling them, are available inside the home, by the operation of a switch. It is that the real programme that is offered is a *sequence* or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events, which are then available in a single dimension and in a single operation' (1990: 87). This dimension and operation itself owes a debt to a tradition of 'miscellaneity' which Williams argues can be traced to almanacs, chapbooks, magazines and the distinctive 'jigsaw effect' of the modern newspaper.

37 The form of engagement in the videogame, which tests the player's ability to navigate multiple frames and contexts, seems to be related to (or perhaps an intensification of) televisual flow, particularly as regards the flourishing of digitalised graphics in the latter. Game players can interrupt as well as initiate flows (Apperley, 2006). In her consideration of the social aspects of virtual realities, Margaret Morse (1998: 5) establishes television as

38 > … an interim phase in a process in which only part of the burden for the discursive maintenance and transmission of culture has been delegated to machines. Television has yet to master a full complement of pronouns in relation to the viewer: it is versed in addressing the viewer with *we* and *you*… but it is left to the genres of cyberculture to develop the full implications of the impression of being *inside* a virtual world… The interactive user is an *I* or a player in discursive space and time.

39 While Morse is here evaluating a considerable variety of social cues and conventions that, for example, go into making 'news that looks like the news' (1998: 42), Chesher (2003) has come to largely analogous conclusions within a more strictly visual-cultural framework. Taking the concept of the gaze in cinema studies as a starting point, Chesher argues that in television the viewer's relation is more like a 'glance' and in videogames the player interacts through a 'glaze'.

40 The metaphor of the glaze serves Chesher in three respects, referring to the manner in which players' eyes 'glaze over', the strategies that games use to retain interest (a sense of 'stickiness') and the distorted reflections on the surface of lacquered objects. These correspond to 'spectacular immersion, interactive agency and mimetic simulation' respectively, which are not 'sequential categories, but simultaneous layers' (Chesher 2003:, online). These traits then represent a theory of some of the requirements necessary for the videogame screen to act as a magic frame and emplace the player in discursive space. Chesher elaborates the oleaginous sensation of the glaze:

41 > Unlike the voyeurism of the cinematic gaze, the psychic relationship of the glaze is sadomasochistic. At its most basic level, the pleasure of play comes from inflicting and receiving pain within the ludostatic frame… The glaze relation is generally closer to what Laura Mulvey refers to as sadistic fetishism rather than scopophilia (the love of looking). However, there is also a strong masochistic dimension to the pleasures of glaze-play. It usually takes many failed attempts at

completing difficult missions before the player finally succeeds. Failures are often more spectacular than successes… Much of the pleasure of play is in facing and cheating death. (Chesher, 2003: online)

42 Although Chesher's article commits to some overextended generalisations (the treatment of the relatively distant viewpoints of RTS games is less satisfactory), the stickiness of the glaze is presented as a bivalent and fetishistic – in particular, masochistic and sadistic – phenomenon. The screen is not a barrier but part of a game's 'cybernetic balance that maintains a hold over players', one of its 'ludostatic mechanisms' (Chesher, 2003: online). Much has been written on the agency which games give to players, but it is equally important to consider how that agency is produced. How is the glaze maintained, and what relation does the visual have to the 'ludostatic'?

43 For Chesher, the relation of the glaze incorporates certain traits traceable to cinema and television (as well as video, I would add), and Morse concurs: 'While interactivity is often understood as "control" over machines, it could also be considered a way of inhabiting the "you" produced by the virtual address of television' (1998: 5). In this formulation, the space that is occupied by audiences is informed by the complex and intertextual history of the media – the virtual addressee is situated by machines in such a way that they (ideally) feel comfortable with mediation. In television, this virtual address takes many forms and can range from the affable candour of the news anchor to the luminescent graphics which both signify networks and 'constitute incipient virtual worlds.

44 > Like the slipping and sliding of signifiers in dreams, a television spectator's travelling point of view and a graphic symbol in motion could virtually zip and zoom past one another along the z- or depth axis of television space, anticipating the development of computer-supported immersive and interactive media… Even when the graphic space is quite flat, it serves the exercise of the power to identify or change the subject. Add depth and motion, especially as highly controlled patterns of acceleration and deceleration that suggest the operation of volition, and a logo symbol is imparted with what is intuitively a sign of an anima or soul' (Morse, 1998: 72).

45 Particularly as regards televised news programmes, these forms of virtual address are designed to create a sense of immediacy, environment and situation in the viewer – a virtual reality. This is a version of Huizinga's stipulation that the work be 'produced' and 'brought before a public'. The sensation of plunging into depth innervates and activates the glaze, the spatial fetishism of videogames. Chesher correctly identifies this movement as often caught between sadism and masochism, although the concept of fetishism has a broader remit in the form of Metz's 'moving cutting-off'. The 'virtual address' in Morse's reading of television becomes the glaze in which navigating the regime of frames is established as a *practice*. The apparatus and the player's microgestures – the materialist counterplays of mass communications media and dance in *Homo Ludens* – innervate the space.

46 In this way, the magic circle is not something that players reach through, so much as something that is *produced* in and by their negotiation of game's set of frames. It is interesting to speculate along these lines as to just who the real 'space invaders' might be. Martin Amis' emphatically titled large format book *Invasion of the Space Invaders: An Addict's Guide to Battle Tactics, Big Scores and the Best Machines*, published in the heyday of the arcade era, figures the whole videogame phenomenon as a matter of transgressed spatial boundaries (including, as Steven Spielberg writes in his introduction, the distinction between public and domestic). In *Pong*, the goal was to prevent the ball from leaving the frame. In many other early games, such as *Pac Man* (Namco, 1980) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1982) the frame was extant as the labyrinth through which the player's character moved, but under certain conditions (wraparound gates in the former, summiting the first screen in the latter), the spatial relations could be reconfigured. As in Morse's reading of movement along the z-axis and Metz's ascription of a 'moving cutting-off' to the film camera, the serial establishment and rupturing of frames constitutes a sense of spatiality and related agency as well as the depth sensation of the glaze.

47 *Defender* (Williams Electronics, 1980) was a groundbreaking game in many ways, particularly in terms of spatiality. Where most earlier games had been confined to the pragmatic limits of the screen, *Defender* not only introduced spaces beyond the immediate frame by scrolling across a simulated landscape, but presented a map (the 'Scanner') locating the current position of the player's vessel, humans in need of the titular defending and enemy assets within the overall level. 'The Scanner is a brilliant innovation: in effect, it means that you are playing on a screen nine or

ten feet wide' (Amis, 1982: 59). The Scanner in this game consisted of a strip running across the top of the screen – a separate frame which also contained status information: the number of lives, auxiliary weapons and score. Games such as *Pac Man*, *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids* (Atari, 1979) also utilised a separate area of the display for scoring, but in these cases the 'off-frame' space is the abstraction of accumulated points (essentially, a temporal measure of success or survival). In *Defender* the off-frame space is integrated in a manner that dynamically generates the gameplay. 'Using the Scanner, you can police the entire battle area; you can go looking for trouble or you can, for a time, avoid it. In really fast and desperate play you look at the Scanner more than you look at the screen… there are long-term strategic matters to consider right from the start' (Amis, 1982: 59).

48 To crib a military distinction between strategy and tactics, in games in which the off-frame space is accounted for solely by the abstraction of points, tactical play within one screen is all that matters as the only strategy is accumulation. With *Defender* and the Scanner players must be aware of the tactical situation on the immediate screen as well as the strategic context of the level as a whole. This relation between two frames of reference made the game 'perhaps the most thrilling, sinister and tortuous [*sic*] yet devised' (Amis, 1982: 58). Amis, at the most feverish moments, watches the Scanner space in a way that a player would never concentrate on the score in *Space Invaders*. An off-frame space that was an abstracted quantity in the latter game takes on qualitative significance. The successful Defender must be able to track and act upon multiply framed visual contexts at once, must maintain an intimate relation with the off-frame space. An innovation in the use of frames transformed the gaming experience both temporally and spatially.

49 Another example of the effects of framing can be seen by comparing two games in the same series: *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Games Studios, 2002) and the sequel *TES IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Games Studios, 2006). Both of these games involve 'sandbox' gameplay in vastly expansive worlds – that is, their design emphasises the lack of overt narrative or ludic framing in favour of a sense of player freedom. Both games face a problem of orienting the player within such spaces. Often completing a given quest involves travelling to a particular locale and dealing with the inhabitants in some fashion. Where *Morrowind* largely left the navigational duties up to the player's own industry, *Oblivion* introduced two new ways of framing the game space: fast travel between locales and a 'Quest Marker' that orients the player to the next leg of whatever quest they happen to be on by placing a red indicator on the on-screen compass.

50 While these developments have ameliorated the tendency of *Morrowind* players to get lost and frustrated as to how to proceed (especially in light of the scattered journal system in which objectives were recorded), the ability to snap between locations can make the sheer size of the *Oblivion* game world seem modest by comparison. Similarly, the compass indicator reduces the incentive to spatial exploration given that players are given the most direct way to their destination. As such, some experienced players have interpreted this and other changes as a simplification of the series from sophisticated PC titles to more casual console-oriented fare. These player's weren't shy about expressing their opinions [10] and as a result, the developers included an Easter Egg character in *Oblivion* who offered sarcastic and thinly veiled commentary on the changes. The character M'Aiq (member of a feline fantasy race who tend to speak of themselves in the third person) will sometimes comment obliquely on the Fast Travel option, 'So much easier to get around these days. Not like the old days. Too much walking. Of course, nothing stops M'Aiq from walking around when he wants'. As to the compass, 'M'Aiq is glad he has a compass. Makes it easy to find things. Much better than wandering around like a fool.'

51 Fast Travel, unless players consciously choose to ignore it (a determinate spatial practice in and of itself), re-punctuates the movement into the z-axis that Morse credits with a particularly evocative potency, modifying the quality of the ludostatic glaze. Similarly, the compass marker can make NPCs who ask the player to help find a lost artefact or gather some nearby herbs seem downright lazy: the apparent size of the *Oblivion* game world, which in terms of sheer virtual real estate might is large by videogame standards, is compressed by the lack of a need to wander through it. There is, for some players, a perceived affront to the eloquence and simplicity of the gesture of walking through space that characterised the earlier title. Whether individual players happen to find *Morrowind* or *Oblivion* more compelling, from an academic perspective this example indicates how different ways of framing movement engender different experiences of spatiality, even within titles

of the same game series. What may be viewed as counterplay from a strictly realist perspective is in fact productive.

52 If *Defender* indicates the capacity of a 'moving-cutting-off' to construct an expansive 2D off-frame spatiality, the two *Elder Scrolls* games show that the practices of framing can also have important effects in more contemporary 3D game environments. As punctuations, frames produce the experience of depth, embodiment and space. The off-frame space of a game such as *Defender* is folded in on itself as the field of vision is identified with the movement of the avatar. Benjamin (2002: 116) argues that the movement of frames (montage techniques) engenders a tactile and distracted mode of engagement distinct from traditional notions of optical and contemplative reception. This allows an illuminating approach to forms of non-realist repetition in 3D games: recurring NPCs, textures and other models. Many games which trumpet their realist intentions send the player off to kill dozens of identical enemies, through kilometres of eerily similar terrain or a copse composed of repetitions of the same tree. If players were primarily adopting a contemplative, optical assessment of these elements as if they were leisurely entering a magic circle to soberly compare its contents to reality, no doubt some immensely popular games would be found wanting. However if the primary mode of engagement is a distracted and tactile one where these elements are not evaluated semiotically in their own right but passed over like as Morse puts it 'the slipping and sliding of signifiers in dreams'. Each sign's individual meaning is subordinated to its potentials for repetition: the way it signifies off-frame space and thus frames the 'moving-cutting-off' of gameplay.

53 Attending to regimes of framing can help examine how games construct spatial experience, raising certain questions: how does a game construct its off-frame space? How does it create its form of virtual address and maintain its ludostatic glaze? This attitude enjoins us not to see the magic circle as an enclosing so much as a set of practices that *open up* the many forms of spatiality in videogames. And in fact, perhaps we aren't so far from Huizinga as all that. If he did envisage a magic circle in which culture-as-play stood separate from utilitarian and economic considerations, it was not through a lack of awareness of the precariousness and contingency of such operations. For Huizinga culture was the culture of the elite, and so by definition he took to task what he saw as modernity's grievous category errors. What he saw was a change in the way that play was produced, 'brought before a public', and his reflections on this change are incisive regardless of his moral evaluation thereof.

54 Geyl (1963: 238), even in pleading the case for the defence against Huizinga's accusations, notes that *Homo Ludens* 'could only spring from an unusual mind equipped with a tireless curiosity about the phenomena of life' – that is, a recognition of the need to attend to determinate practices and resist the urge to systematise. In Geyl's (254) view, this was a contradiction Huizinga arrived at early in his career and never overcame (or perhaps had much invested in never facing squarely). Systemic speculations are indeed behind the more ridiculous sections of *Homo Ludens*; erudite attention to particular practices animate the most beautiful. The magic circle (which in this context probably has more to do with medieval alchemy than *Pong*) is only one set of such practices, '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' (Huizinga, 1944: 23). Huizinga, as previously noted, is for all his discomfiture at modern forms of power, primarily interested in the production of both artworks and social groups. By attending to these special rules and just how they obtain it is possible to advance on the materialist moments of counterplay in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and address how videogames create, if not exactly the 'best', the *variety* of all possible virtual worlds.

Notes

[1] Montola et al. also discuss 'Temporal Extension' and 'Social Extension' through their contractual model of the magic circle. Although videogames are subject to many forms of temporal framing (level breaks, cutscenes, save game structures to name just a few), due to length concerns, this discussion will focus on spatiality.

[2] Kittler calls this '…probably the most consequential Master's thesis ever written…' (Kittler, 1997: 153).

[3] The game can be found at https://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessgame?gid=1356927. Turing collaborated with D.G. Champernowne on his paper machine. The computer lost, incidentally.

[4] Evans and Robertson (1968).

[5] *Homo Faber* by Max Frisch (1961) concerns a technocratic man of science who believes that apparent repetitions are not miraculous but merely highly statistically unlikely. Faber however suffers through a vanishingly probable repetition of his own, a love affair with has devastating consequences.

[6] There seems to be a contradiction here between Huizinga's treatment of sport and commerce. He maintains in *Homo Ludens*, citing the increased prevalence of the 'player' over the 'gentleman', that increased professionalisation of sports reduces the play-spirit inherent in such activity. It is unclear why professional competition and the use of technology to record and disseminate elite results does not render sport more playful in the agonistic sense as it does in commerce, unless perhaps the *agon* is itself a relatively devalued form of play – and yet for all that, perhaps the only one to survive into modernity. As the discussions of sport and communications are juxtaposed in the text, it is possible to infer that Huizinga believes that in modernity, the agonistic is detrimental to play in traditional forms even as it opens up the possibility in heretofore 'serious' activities. The latter are playful because the agonistic goals can be chosen freely, in defiance of use-values or material considerations, while the *agon* appears as a demand, a use-value, in the institutionalisation and rationalisation of sport.

[7] 'Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and ready made products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are "ready-mades aided" and also works of assemblage.' – Marcel Duchamp, Talk delivered at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961.

[8] "'The film actor," Pirandello writes, "feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With a vague unease, he senses an inexplicable void, stemming form the fact that his body has lost its substance, that he has been volatilised, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence... The little apparatus will play with his shadow before the audience, and he himself must be content to play before the apparatus.'" (Benjamin, 2002: 112).

[9] Csikszentmihalyi in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). The former applies to television as a medium of multiple framings, while the latter is a psychological theory.

[10] Some players have set out their grievances at length. See for example the aptly titled "Why Oblivion Sucks": https://sites.google.com/site/damicat/

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