Ludic Interfaces

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Years before the Wii console made a gaming audience refocus from content to interface, artists explored new forms of man-machine, machine-machine, and machine-woman interface configurations. Pieces like Jeffrey Shaw's *The Legible City* (1988), Mary Flanagan's *[GiantJoystick]* (2006), Leif Rumbke's *Wargame* (2005), or Jess Kilby's *The center of the universe has infinite paths of approach* (2007) are art games with unconventional interface concepts based on playfulness as the main design objective. We will call these interfaces "ludic interfaces" to distinguish them from technically engineered interfaces like the ASCII keyboard or the mouse. The installations, tools and concepts differ from traditionally engineered systems as they are often playful, rich in connotative power and surprise, custom-built, aware of regional and historic context, critical, and inviting of co-creativity, user-generated or user-driven content (or radically opposing those possibilities).

Ludic interfaces take the best from computer games, artistic experiments, interactive media, media conversion, social networks, and modding cultures to offer tools which are adaptive to cultural specificity and cultural change, and are sensitive to gender-related, age-related and ethnic specificities.

Jess Kilby's *The center of the universe has infinite paths of approach*, an RFID-enabled tarot card table, consists of a hand-painted black table with letters and signs drawn upon it and a white set of cards containing radio-frequency tags. The installation is an example for a ludic set-up where the interface contributes significantly to the magic of the game. Hidden information within the blank cards allows the RFID reader, a digital tarot reader automaton, to interpret information hidden from the human eye. Kilby's system interprets the information contained within the cards and displays videos of a frightening future. The game could certainly be implemented as a Flash simulation or be built for a 2D monitor display system, but without the materiality of the ludic interface, without the special lighting, and without the artist dressed in a fortune teller's outfit the game would be radically altered

The same holds true for Mary Flanagan's *[GiantJoystick]*, an enormous playable Atari joystick. It is the interface with all its materiality, erotic connotations and haptic features which makes the ludic installation work so well.

THE INTERFACE IS THE MESSAGE

If we conceive games as a system, a set of rules, a player, physical or virtual objects to play with, and a regional and historical context to be played in, we could try to find meaning in different aspects and aspect relations of the game. One could find meaning in the rules and the development of moves within the rule-system. One could alternatively search for meaning in the role the player adopts in the game. In particular the player's position in a socio-historical context could be interpreted as the meaning of the game. Another approach is however to interpret the interface between man and machine, machine and machine, or woman and machine as the crucial element in the production of ludic experience and ludic meaning. I want to call these approaches systematic, role-based, socio-historic, and interface-led.

Ludic interfaces lend themselves to shift focus from rules and roles to processes of deconstruction of rules, roles and socio-historic settings. For this reason game art often focuses on the interface – or, as I will demonstrate later, on an apparent lack of interactivity within the interface provided. Both approaches, i.e. the deconstruction of interfaces or the destruction of meaningful interface functionality, are artistic strategies to criticise commercial interface design and to suggest provocative alternatives to middle of the road interface standards. Ludic interfaces and Zero interfaces contain artistic statements intended to oppose ideological concepts in HCI (human computer interaction) and to set free playfulness in the process of (wo)man-machine communication.

LEAVING THE MAGIC CIRCLE?

The level of "lusory attitude" (Salen and Zimmermann 2004) that a game can provide seems to be enhanced by the interface used to play the game. A joystick glues the gamer's hand to any space fighter action game, a steering wheel feels good in the hands of someone playing a car racing game. On the other hand a fire button might alienate a gamer from conducting eco-friendly simulations and a rocket launcher device seems to be of little help for Mattel's *Barbie Goes Shopping* game (except in the case of extremely cynical gamers). The interface also sets up a tacit agreement on how to play and how not to play. A steering wheel device with a gas pedal connected to it imposes constraints upon the player's actions. It clearly suggests going right or left and accelerating or decelerating. The setup does not encourage us to go up and down, because steering wheels are not designed to control

Z-axis moves. The interface is therefore as much of an inhibiting device as it is an enabling one. We are controlled by the interface's constraints when we think that we are in control. Technically engineered interfaces are ideological in this regard, as they contain implicit rules, where we least expect them. Ludic interfaces and game art pieces like the ones mentioned above point our attention towards the potentially wide range of interaction patterns that we are usually not invited to partake in. Ludic interfaces oppose the ideological aspect of technically engineered interfaces by ridiculing their functionality or by opening up the field of possible interaction. In many cases ludic interfaces are build on the attitude of the trickster, the spoilsport or of the cardsharp.

Being a spoilsport is common artistic practice and artists like Tracey Emin demonstrate that neglecting the rules can be a lot of fun. It can also be serious business, as the example of Marcel Duchamp proved when he allegedly quit art-making for the sake of chess-playing. In 1923 Duchamp declared that chess "has all the beauty of art – and much more. It cannot be commercialized. Chess is much purer than art in its social position." He was immediately interpreted by art critics as having renounced art for chess, which he actually never claimed. The spoilsport act of playing chess in an art context created a debate situated in an art context and thereby built a magic circle around Duchamp's activity which was seen by many as destructive of the art circle's magic. From a historical perspective, however, it never was. Similarly Tracy Emin pretended to be the spoilsport with her *My Bed* piece (1998), which got her nominated for the Turner prize in the first instance – and some £150,000 for the bed thereafter. The provocation to exhibit a bed with dirty linen, not a painting or sculpture, made her the spoilsport first and then London's art world's most cherished child. Tracy Emin's playful act consisted in leaving the magic circle and re-entering it at the same time.

There is of course a certain risk contained in the strategy applied by Emin and others. The risk consists of not being able to re-enter the circle one just left. Tracy Emin is clever enough to keep this risk very low. She does so by positioning clues to the art world and the art market. The bedlinen does not differ substantially from a painter's canvas and everyone familiar with the history of painting in the 20th century will immediately recover Claes Oldenburg's spoilsport masterpiece *Soft Bathtub—Ghost Version* (1966).

It is the way artists show their spoilsport activities, rather than the fact of not following the rules, that makes spoilsport strategies a driving force in the development of the arts. Other than Huizinga's (1955) assumption that

the spoilsport leaves the magic circle, there is a playful mode of trespassing the rules, that reinitiates the magic circle in the very same moment it seems to have broken into pieces.

INTERPASSIVITY

Interactivity is at the core of gameplay in any conceivable computer game. It seems impossible to imagine how gameplay would work if there was no interactivity between human and computer involved. But what happens if a gamer writes a script to enable his or her avatar to perform certain actions in the absence of the player? The game artist who lets the game engine go on its own and rejects his responsibility to control the avatars does not get entangled into the quest of loss or win, and he rejects the basic rule of any game, which is: You have to play! The spoilsport, however, does not leave the arena completely. He remains a voyeur, a spectator of an action he enjoys passively. In this regard the introduction of auto-executables, i.e. software agents physically detached from the players, and other modes of delegated play can be righteously called interpassive gaming. Pfaller and Zižek point out that the psychological aspect of interpassivity is grounded in our subjectivity. Pfaller and Zižek convincingly demonstrate how certain works of art seem to provide for their own reception. One cannot help feeling that these artworks enjoy themselves or that we enjoy through them (Van Oenen 2008). The mechanism described by Pfaller and Žižek can again be found in games and their modes of performance. It is not only in Game Art but in everyday gamers' practice where interpassive phenomena can be observed. Delegated enjoyment and delegated fear are possible forms of letting go in First Person Shooters. We know that it can be fun to just camp in an massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) and watch others play through the eyes of an avatar. We have experienced delegated death fears when about to be shot and we know peer players who take some masochistic interpassive delight in being fragged. But even less martial areas of disguise and simulation like the SecondLife environment will disclose the interpassive delegation of love, lust and longing.

ARTISTIC INTERPASSIVITY: ZERO INTERFACES

Leif Rumbke's *Wargame* restricts interface action to a "Stop the Game" command only – implemented as a nuclear fire button's binary single function. The interface in striking red and impressive size limits the player's interactivity to one single non-reversible command. Conceptually related but

functionally inverse are game artists like Corrado Morgana's *CarnageHug* (2007). The game runs in auto-execution mode and does not allow for interactivity except for the minimal "Start" command. *CarnageHug* uses the Unreal Tournament 2004 game engine, to set up and run a bizarre, self-playing spectacle. Morgana removes the weapons from the level, leaving the player pawns passive and purposeless. He also has the player pawns attack each other with ever more powerful weaponry in a ridiculous massacre without player-based gameplay objectives or other constructive teleological human-player commitment. The game runs in a disinterested manner as far as winning and losing the game is concerned. If we are prepared to follow Kant's suggestion that disinterest will open the door to understanding the faculties of the observed object, interpassive works like Morgana's *CarnageHug* therefore qualify as works of art or at least focus our attention upon something outside the magic circle of normal gameplay.

Morgana is a spoilsport in the traditional sense of the word, because he denies us the simple pleasure of man-machine interaction and intentionally shrinks the potential of the interface usability down to degree zero. The interface is a "zero interface" that mocks interactivity. However, the piece does not make us completely leave the magic circle of the game. We take part in a reinterpretation of its. The tournament action as we know it is reterritorialized into the artistic arena. And almost at the same moment that we think of having left the magic circle of Unreal Tournament, we find ourselves caught in the magic circle of the game called art. We keep watching and we keep being caught.

Machinima, as the paradoxical attempt to watch gameplay without playing, is another popular non-sport where the spectator becomes spoilsport and traitor on the game's premises. Machinima puts the viewer into the voyeur's seat and keeps oscillating between cinema and game experience without fully committing to any of them. It is "meditative inaction" – as Christiane Paul rightly calls it – that ridicules interaction in games (Paul 2006: 28).

If we can enjoy the outsourcing of enjoyment, we have to either declare this as a perverse, a hysteric, and a neurotic attitude in a Lacanian perspective (Van Oenen 2008), or analyse it as a sophisticated spoilsport attitude of staying in the magic circle when pretending to leave it.

Ludic interfaces and zero interfaces are devices for artists to play the spoilsport in an environment where "fair play" means nothing else than playing by conventional rules.

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GAMES

The Legible City (1999) by Jeffrey Shaw

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Wargame (2005) by Lief Rumbke

The center of the universe has infinite paths of approach (2007) by Jess Kilby

CarnageHug (2007) by Corrado Morgana