Spatial Regimes of the Digital Playground

Cultural Functions of Spatial Practices in Computer Games

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In this article, the author investigates how computer games can be understood as sociospatial practices. Although spatiality has always been considered a central quality of any digital game, cultural and social functions of space have not been much theorized in relation to games. This article furthers a discussion on how they can be understood as spatial practices by proposing a first approach that makes an analysis of games as sociospatial practices possible. It introduces the concept of magic node as a manner to facilitate such a study of games. A case study of cartographical practices in real time strategy games exemplifies how games can be approached as such magic nodes.

Keywords: *games as spatial cultures; magic circle; node; actor-network theory; cartography; game spaces*

Since game studies gained momentum in the late 1990s, space has been considered a central category in game research. Especially Espen Aarseth's (1997) work has been influential in dealing with how space can be categorized, described, understood, and analyzed in games. As Aarseth already noted in 1997, space can be seen as a central trope of any game because the most important activity of the player consists of moving, creating, and sustaining environments. Whether environments are abstract or more recognizable, the player is always involved in an effort to spatially master a game world. Hence, on a very fundamental level an important function of any game is to involve the player in a spatial process and to encourage a strong identification with the spatial dimensions of the game.

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Aarseth's writing could be best described as *formal* in that it concentrates on fundamental discussions about the inherent laws of games.[1] In this setting, space is considered an important category for understanding what games are intrinsically about. This is of course an important groundwork for understanding games, but it has its limitations as a cultural analysis of them. The drawback is that it is a closed theory that does not easily open up to an understanding of games as social phenomena. It describes the formal laws of games and gives indications of their cognitive functions but tells us little about game space *as* culture.

Yet a concept put forward in game studies that does entail a cultural dimension is that of the "magic circle." As first proposed by cultural historian Huizinga (1938), it has become a touchstone for many writings about digital games (Burmeister, 2004; Huizinga, 1938; Zimmermann & Salen, 2004). Although the magic circle is more about games as space than about space in games, it is still worth examining in this article because the use of this metaphor has major consequences for the way spatiality can be understood in games. Following Huizinga's mentioning of this term in his 1930s essay *Homo Ludens*, it is asserted that the experience of game space can be best conceived as a semiclosed round space that is at the same time demarcated as separate from daily life while also being part of it. In terms of function, the magic circle then enables the player to distance herself or himself from daily life and be part of a ritual in which another identity can be established. Game space is thus regarded as a ritual and *intensified* place of cultural expression (p. 2).

Theorizations of the magic circle emphasize that during play new identities and spatial meanings are created in a delineated and intensified space and time. But the question remains what the cultural functions of such processes precisely are. In other words, to ask what function the game world has within the world at large. Huizinga (1938) tried to shed light on the specificity of its cultural function by claiming that the magic circle facilitates a place of order, whereas daily life could be best described as disordered. Hence, according to Huizinga games offer a safe haven of shelter from the chaos of daily life. When this function is translated into the function of space in games, one could state that, in contrast to daily space, game space is ordered and therefore counters daily spatial confusion.

I should stress at this point that I am not implying that Huizinga situated play outside culture or reality. He actually stressed the connection between play and everyday life. He also reminded us that play, albeit in a more diffused form, is part of many activities outside the magic circle and that circles can be more open or closed (Ehrmann, 1968; Sutton-Smith, 2001). Yet in the end he was convinced that play is about order, a belief that he shared with a follower such as Caillois (1958/2001), who talked of play as an antidote to the chaos of nature. Also more recent adherents such as Zimmermann and Salen (2004) spoke in their highly influential work *Rules of Play* of the magic circle as pertaining to *rules* and order. Hence, the notion of the magic circle always implies that games spaces are of an ordered disposition.

Playing With Order

However, is the presumption that game spaces are ordered well founded? As Taylor (2003) pointed out in her article "When Seams Fall Apart: Video Game Space and the Player," the predominant opinion that "the absolute authority of a rational scientific order" rules games, and in fact new media as a whole, should be reconsidered. She showed that such a perspective does not do justice to video games that are more than

"the sum of their code" and cannot be solely described as spatially ordered. She called instead for a more experiential approach that includes the position of the player. Taylor explained that the player has to operate on different spatial levels at once, both within the game and when negotiating between game space and her or his own physical space (Taylor, 2003, p. 1). Hence, one cannot call a game an ordered space at all, and the claim that games counter the disorder of everyday life does not hold.

In a similar vein, although not specifically writing about space, Mia Consalvo (2005) argued that it would be too simple to speak of games as a uniform and ordered experience because every player and every game allow for different meanings. Harking back to cultural studies academics Hall and Fiske, she asserted that games have a "polysemic content" instead:

> Games such as those in the *Grand Theft Auto* series perfectly illustrate the conditions and consequences created by polysemic content. Players are given the opportunity to follow the game designer's storyline(s) involving mission completion, as well as chances to explore the space of the game world, which is almost completely interactive. More and less violent solutions to problems can often be found, and players can create their own "versions" of the game. Likewise, the PC game The Sims has no pre-set storyline, allowing players to explore all sorts of "what if" ideas they may imagine for their simulated people. (p. 2)

So Consalvo asserted that it is highly problematic to speak of games as singular experiences. According to her, games are actually not about the experience of order but about the pleasure of "*playing with order and rules*" (italics added). In particular, looking at so called "bad play" (e.g., cheating), she attributed to games the following cultural function:

> For many players, playing games is, in some measure, a playing with rules and their boundaries. Games offer a bounded space (although some games are more bounded than others, depending on how many people are playing) for the exploration of actions and consequences as well as the ludic expression of activities deemed inappropriate (if not illegal) in regular life. (p. 10)

When games are about playing with rules, Huizinga's contention that "play *is* order" as opposed to the disorder that dominates daily existence becomes untenable, also on a spatial level. It seems then more accurate to maintain that games play with the spatial rules and limitations of everyday experience. Just think about a racing game such as Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar Games, 1997), in which players can steer their cars precariously through London in a way that would not be greatly appreciated by the police or judges. It demonstrates Consalvo's view that games are not simply taking place in spatial order that is detached from daily existence. Players are not in search of static spatial rules and order but are playing with boundaries and rules in a manner that is deemed unsuitable in daily life.

Another experiential notion that in my view strengthens this contention has to do with the spatial *confusion* that is part of every game experience. Losing your direction in a game that invites you to explore the interconnected levels of a building or navigating through a landscape you cannot fully fathom can be a highly thrilling experience. Part of the fun of playing a RTS (real time strategy) game such as Age of Empires (Ensemble Studios, 2005) actually lies in experiencing a degree of puzzlement about where you are and where you are headed, struggling to gain and maintain a spatial

overview to win the game. Such examples show that a game in itself may be partly determined by codes or rules but that a player is always struggling to get to grips with these rules, therefore experiencing a certain amount of uncertainty that can hardly be described as ordered. Intensified by the interactivity of playing, she or he may enjoy the act of trying to create spatial order, but the pleasure lies more in the attempt than in the achievement itself.

Magic Solutions

Recently, several authors have noted that the magic circle is not always that closed. They have drawn attention to the porosity of the circle in pervasive games such as those that take place in public places where players and bystanders intermingle (Montola, 2005; Nieuwdorp, 2005). In addition, it has been ascertained that in fantasy role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), the concept of magic circle becomes problematic because demarcations become more soft and fluid when play can take place in "between worlds." Take, for example, players who perform similar roles online as when appearing "in character" on fantasy fairs (Copier, 2007).

Still, on a more fundamental, theoretical, and above all methodological level, the concept of *a circle* with boundaries remains tricky, even when its contours are perceived as more or less blurred. A circle still implicates a simple one-to-one, one-dimensional, and pregiven relation between inner and outer world (inside and outside the circle). As a static and flat metaphor, it triggers dichotomies such as inside–outside text–context, play–nonplay and simplifies what games are about. Acknowledging the semipermeability of the circle still keeps a modernist asymmetrical presumption intact, in which a cultural product such as a game is conceived as more or less separate and in a simple relationship with the so-called outer world.

Huizinga told us that culture is play, but his circular metaphor denies game agency in producing and being "the world." Claiming that games can be twilight zones, or that everyday life and play are of the same quality, does not solve this problem. The first solution is too modest, the second too relativistic. A more drastic measure is needed by a change of metaphor. I suggest turning to ANT (actor-network theory) for help.

Magic Nodes

An important exponent of ANT is the French anthropologist Bruno Latour. Although other ANT scholars often exclusively focus on techno-science, Latour (1993, 2005) has also been concerned with questions about the texture of "the social" in a broader sense. Therefore, his work can help us to get to grips with the function of games in our culture. More specifically, his theories can clarify what place games have as being part of a social network and how games are related to other social domains.

When one follows Latour's reasoning, asymmetrical relations as generated by the magic circle, such as inside and outside, fiction and fact, text and context, are paradoxes because one can only think in such oppositions by simultaneously presuming that the two sides of such dichotomies have something in common. Opposition thus entails translation. When such translations are not acknowledged, mediations become monsters. However, when one takes such translations as a starting point, a different

picture emerges, and categories come into being via such mediations. ANT aims precisely at this by taking these hybrids, associations, or translations as the central principle of its method. The social is perceived as an ever-changing web or force field in which certain strongholds or nodes attract stronger associations.

In line with this perspective, a game can be perceived as a knot in a network or as a *magic node*. Some games are more concentrated as knots, holding stronger associations. When a game is such a stronghold, its associations are more durable and its extent wider. Others games may be conceived as weaker knots because they attract a smaller formation of associations. In addition, some games may have stronger boundaries than others, but boundaries are an outcome of a process and are not pregiven. How strong such produced boundaries are all depends on the strength of the formation and the way "representatives" are concerned with producing borders. Furthermore, the intensity of play depends very much on where the player is situated in this force field. At the center of the knot intensity increases, whereas at places where the ties become more loose or weak the player is less "lost in translation."

The magic circle is a worthwhile concept insofar as it defines games as intensified experience. Furthermore, it has been helpful in coming to terms with the cultural function of play by speaking of games as rituals. But as the above demonstrates, the application of the magic circle can result in what Consalvo (2005) called an unnecessary "infantilization of the gamespace" (p. 10) when dichotomies such as orderly and disorderly space remain unchallenged.

That games take place in a more or less delineated (time and) space frame does not mean that they are secluded from daily life. It simply means that they are nodes of expression in a web that is in constant movement and that consists of many shifting nodes of cultural power. In relation to spatiality, an approach to games as magic nodes enables us to think of them as producing cultural meanings of space while at the same time being connected to a wide range of spatial conceptions that are also part of the social. It prevents us from envisaging games as isolated phenomena while still paying attention to the specificity of their spatial formations.

Approaching games as magic nodes instead of magic circles can help us greatly in our conception of games as sociocultural events that tie in with many other domains. Games should then be seen as nodes because they are social practices that are not separated from daily life. To borrow Rutter and Bryce's (2006) words, it enables us to view games as a "node of . . . cultural, technological, political, aesthetic and economic forces" (p. xiv). Moreover, they should be considered as *magic* nodes to be able to value the intensity as well as the enchantment that "entering" a game world also entails. Hence, games ought to be approached as playfields that incorporate and produce cultural translations.

To stay close to Consalvo's argumentation, games do not simply resolve or counterbalance "the problems of dislocation and fracture of community," as Newman (2004) claimed in his book *Videogames*, but they enable us to give new sense to sociospatial practices by playing with them and reshaping them. As such, digital games offer us playgrounds, where gamers can find an intensified space to express, and give meaning to, spatial regimes and spatial confusions that are part of our daily life.

Playgrounds

Although it has been suggested before that games offer us digital playgrounds to express and play with our daily spatial experience of living in a world that is

overcrowded and offers fewer and fewer places to play outside (Friedman, 1999; Fuller & Jenkins, 1995), it would not do justice to what games are about by just sticking to such a basic explanation of the sociospatial function of games. Which spatial issues exactly are addressed in a game and how they are dealt with by players should not and cannot be described in only general terms. Put differently, meanings are effects of fields of tension and are as such fluid (Law, 1999). To stay true to the idea of games as magic nodes (hence having no singular, preset meaning), we need to further refine what spatiality in games could be about.

The question nevertheless remains *how* games can be approached as magic nodes. In other words, how can ANT be used to understand game space as culture? Because not much research has been conducted about this subject, I try to give some suggestions of directions that could be taken.

Network Applications

One way of using ANT is to analyze game spaces as encompassing a wide social network, including different social spaces, players, and machines (Bryce & Rutter, 2005). This is the way in which media theorists Cypher and Richardson (2006) envisaged using ANT. They believed that computer games, and computer mediations in general, call for an approach that recognizes the fact that computers screens imply a different kind of engagement that is "sticky" (Chesher, 2004), in the sense that it is more than just visual but also visceral and haptic. As such, game space encloses the "social, the corporal, the material and the technical" (p. 256). It is their conviction that ANT allows us to view games as networks of relationships or as an "assemblage of computers, computer games, players, bodies, devices and all manner of other agents" (p. 257). Games can then be seen as networks of translations whose outcomes or effects are not pregiven (Cypher & Richardson, 2006).

Cypher and Richardson (2006) argued that ANT offers in particular a suitable approach for analyzing online games, such as *World of Warcraft*, where game play involves connecting with human and nonhuman agents in an open network structure that is not confined to one user and one computer. Although they remained rather vague about how such networks could be charted, it seems that they were not so much disposed to use ANT as a tool for mapping games as *magic* nodes. They appeared to advocate an ethnographic approach to games as networks in which the whole idea of games as intensified and magic domains is of reduced importance. Seemingly, they were more interested in applying ANT to render visible the relation that online games generate between different users and machine and places, hence using ANT to describe a network of social relations in which both machines and humans can be agents and which is geographically extended.

However valuable such an approach may be, I nonetheless claim that ANT is an equally powerful tool for analyzing game spaces as *magic* nodes. In other words, take the locus where the intensity of a knot is the strongest as a point of departure: the diegetic game space. It offers a suitable manner to assess how spatiality in games ties in with more widespread networks while still recognizing the ritual sphere that is entered when playing a game. Although such a network approach of game space will no doubt result in a less expanded and branched diagram of social traffic, this does not necessarily mean that it generates more restricted or consolidated nodes.

Mapping Playful Networks

How such an analysis of game space may look, I would like to demonstrate with a case study of practices of navigation and cartography in so-called RTS games. With a strong fan culture (e.g., http://www.civfanatics.com/, http://www.gamereplays.org/) and an enormous amount of active on- and offline players, these games can be called strong magic nodes that attract a lot of fortifications. As I show, as "nested series of action" (Cypher & Richardson, 2006, p. 257), they are at the same time strongly connected to more extensive networks of mapping and navigation.

Games such as Age of Empires III (Ensemble Studios, 2005) and *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games, 2005) invite the player on a journey in which environments have to be explored, claimed, and mastered. During this expedition, which is set in a historical and colonial sphere, the player is expected to delineate, appropriate, and colonize environments. What is particularly interesting about such games is that maps and mapmaking are essential activities for the player to be able to master "the world." In other words, moving through the game space in a successful way is very much bound up with the understanding and altering of maps. Through the use of maps that can be filled in and transformed, the gamer is encouraged to manage its spatial advancements. So the player creates a story of mastery or defeat in which interactive cartography is essential. Throughout this process, maps become mutable instead of fixed, changing appearances and meaning according to where the player travels and what is being altered in environments (e.g., mining, founding trade posts or towns, expanding borders). Hence, players create a spatial network in which mapping and exploring become translatable and form an ever-changing topographical network.

In such games, dominant spatial categories loose their stability and acquire hybridized qualities. This can be explained further by using the concepts of touring and mapping of the French philosopher De Certeau. In his well-known reflections on everyday life, he asserted that people have to deal with two kinds of spatial categories that entertain an incongruous relationship. On one hand, we are confronted with maps that are abstract, timeless, and stable and at odds with our personal spatial experiences. On the other hand, we are dealing with more personal spatial activities of exploration, which he calls touring. The latter is concrete, known, and changeable and part of a more personal spatial experience. In daily life, we have to deal with both maps and tours, while they are at the same time at odds with each other.

However, these games do not so much reproduce these categories as actually hybridize them. Supporting Consalvo's contention that games are about playing with order, touring becomes entangled with cartography, and mapping is not a clearly delineated and ordered practice. Hence, dominant social categories are not reproduced but are translated into new spatial and hybridized connections.

Touring the Map/Mapping the Tour

Let me explain this further. Touring in such games consists of the movement of the player through territory. Unknown environments are mostly depicted as black and quite literally as *terra incognita* (Figure 1), and they have to be explored by the player to become visible and can be altered by, for example, founding towns, founding military fortifications, or digging for resources. What is striking about the way such landscapes

Figure 1. Screenshot From *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*
Source: © 2k Games, Inc. Permission granted.

come into being is that the player always views them from a bird's-eye perspective. Although the player is engaged in touring an environment, this is done not fully on the level of individual experience but from above. As Friedman stated, the landscape through which the player travels acquires cartographical qualities because players identify with the environment in a more abstract manner by constantly looking at landscapes from above. Accordingly, the player has less of a subjective identification with visited landscape and environments (Friedman, 1999). In Latourian terms, one could state that the game space consists of landscapes as hybrids of objective and subjective spatial (re)presentations.

I would like to add to Friedman's observation that the mini maps that the player constantly has at her or his disposal become hybrids as well. As screens-in-screens, or graphical user interfaces, players interactively and dynamically use them during their spatial progress through the game. In *Age of Empires*, for example, the player is in a constant flux of moving through territory, which is translated into an expansion (filling in) of the mini map (left corner of Figure 2). Conversely, one can click on the mini map to move to an area on the big screen. It is even possible to click on an explorer on the main screen, go back to the mini map, click on the area you want to send her or him to, and subsequently move her or him to that chosen spot on the main screen. Hence, mapping and touring entertain a highly dynamic relationship. The player indeed becomes a mapmaker, but this cannot be described as a straightforward depersonalized endeavor. It would be more precise to call the player a cartographer on tour. In this process, maps become mutable mobiles. They become more fluid and transformable and are also loci to go to. At the same time, landscapes that have to be explored acquire cartographical qualities and a to-be-looked-at-ness. Spatial categories

Figure 2. Screenshot From *Age of Empires III*

Source: Figure 2 was created under Microsoft's "Game Content Usage Rules" using assets from Age of Empires III, © Microsoft Corporation. Used with permission.

actually obtain so much fluidity that these games do not reproduce but undermine dominant categories. De Certeau's argument that maps and tours have become separated realms in Western cultures does not hold for these games. Established categories are not reproduced, but hybridized and different spatial networks are created.

Networks of Spatial Entertainment and Belonging

As magic nodes of spatial relations, these games also tie in with more expanded networks of navigation and cartography. First, they can be situated in a field of spatial imaginations that share a fascination with spatial exploration. As Jenkins (2005) explained, they can be put in the same league as early SF pulp fiction and imaginary quest such as *Alice in Wonderland*, where the story also develops through an exploration of unknown territory, and plot and character are of minor importance. He also drew a parallel with playground attractions such as the roller coaster. Akin to such attractions, they offer a recreational sensation of sightseeing. As different from such attractions and stories, they offer the participant the opportunity to interact and transform landscapes and maps. Hence, as part of this greater imaginative network, they form nodes where notions of navigation and spatial exploration are reworked in particular ways.

Jenkins rightly observed that such games should also be situated in a Western tradition that revolves around a fascination for new world exploration. Nostalgia for being an explorer and cartographer who marks out "new" territory has always prevailed in, for example, travelogues and certain board games. However, up until

recently, the actual possibilities of making environments and maps have been limited (Fuller & Jenkins, 1995). Games do offer potentials for being an active explorer and mapmaker. Still, I would like to add, they not so much involve a spatial reproduction of being a new world explorer but rather entail a transformation of past endeavors to map and conquer new lands. Being a new world traveller is not so much reconstructed but rather transformed into a playful activity, in which mastering space becomes more a personal power struggle than an accurate historical reiteration of how spatial relationships have been shaped by external hegemonic forces (Lammes, 2003). Games translate spatial hegemonies into play, thus necessarily changing them into something more personal and subjective. Also, in this sense one can speak of the hybridization of spatial relations: Players are endowed with a power of marking territories and empires and can thus create their own (post)colonial stories by translating world histories into personal stories.

Digital Cartographies

These games are clearly connected to other realms of imagination. Yet as the above connection with (post)colonialism shows, they form associations with less fantastic networks of spatiality as well. Another web in which they are manifestly embedded is that of digital cartography. Since the emergence of new media, maps have changed drastically. Not only can they look rather different from older maps, but also the way we use them has been significantly altered. We can now interact with maps while using them. Older maps may have offered some possibilities of modification (e.g., adding notes), but now users have the opportunity to really interrelate with maps while navigating. Be it a navsat that alters its itinerary when the driver chooses to drive elsewhere, Google Earth (see http://earth.google.com/), which allows a user to add personal features, or a map in a computer game that is partly created by the player or players during the game, cartography has become less fixed and is now coproduced by users and players alike.

We can now "tinker" with maps and can thus change their spatial meanings. Within the given parameters of interactivity, one can modify trajectories, dimensions, markers, and cartographical appearances. This is radically different from how maps have been used and conceptualized before: From the Renaissance, maps were "frozen" and depersonalized spatial representations that all too often served particular ideological needs (Anderson, 1991; Crampton, 2001; Harley, 1988). However, since the emergence of new digital media, maps have lost their preset qualities, and it has become possible to manipulate them.

The games that have been discussed here are particular performances within this wider techno-scientific network of digital cartographies. The Lithuanian writer Viestarts Gailitis (2005) stated that with GPS technologies "the subject becomes the object, and we are nothing more than our own remote control" (p. 497). Yet as the above analysis has shown, computer games differ from GPS applications in that they do not simply present us with an objectification of our personal spatial itineraries but actually overcome the one-directional translation of which Gailitis spoke. They forge a weaker link with GPS devices and a stronger link with an application such as Google Earth, which also allows users to mix observant roles with subjective and personal experiences of space (http://earth.google.com/). As games, they change Gailitis's metaphorical remote control into a more personal extension.

The games that I have discussed are part of a wider techno-scientific network of digital cartographies but should not be conceived as mere reactions to "serious" mapping

practices. They also have agency in this wider network of digital cartography. One can for instance think of how playful game designs, including cartographical features, are being translated into serious applications, such as military training programmes (Lehman, 2007). Another example of such a translation is how members of Internet sites such as Ancientworlds build virtual archaeological reconstructions of the past that are related to the studied games in the way a civilization is chosen and cartographically depicted (see http://www.ancientworlds.net/). Such examples show that these games have power within a greater web of digital mapping practices. Games may have their own intrinsic tensions that "fasten" them as magic nodes, but they are also part of a wider field of tension in which new alliances and translations are constantly formed.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, the concept of magic circle needs reconsideration to be able to analyze games as sociospatial practices. As a flat and demarcated metaphor, it encumbers an approach to games as an intricate part of spatial culture. The theoretical notion of a circle triggers dichotomies such as inside–outside and order–disorder and as such forms an essential obstacle for looking at games as being part of greater sociospatial networks. I have proposed to view them as *magic nodes* instead, a term inspired by ANT. The notion of magic nodes allows researchers to acknowledge the special quality of games as intensified and playful practices while at the same time allocating to them an intricate and important position in culture.

Because ANT calls for a situated method (Law, 2000), there is no single and universal manner by which to analyze games as magic nodes. A possible route to take has been suggested by Cypher and Richardson. Their approach actually underscores the structure of games as nodes, but the magic and intensified quality of game spaces is of less importance in the method they proposed. In a case study of mapping techniques in RTS games, I have exemplified how one can treat games as magic nodes that translate and coproduce sociospatial practices. This opens up indispensable possibilities to analyze game spaces as "material semiotic" (Law, 1999) practices that are intertwined with, and part of, more extended cultural networks.

Note

1. *Formal* is not to be confused with a (neo)formalistic approach that is rooted in a specific cognitive tradition.

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