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Gaming Beyond the Walls

Erasing the circle keeping the magic

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Abstract

The dynamic realm in which videogames exists within seems to cause contradictory perspective regarding its boundary and how to best describe the relationship between player and game. This paper would look into the highly contested concept of the magic circle that serves to define the boundary of a videogame, its core definition, additions and arguments brought up by other scholars, to understand the underlying issue of using it to study the concept of fourth wall breaks in videogames. It would look into the concept of outmersion proposed by Gonzalo Frasca and how it could potentially be an alternate perspective to study fourth wall breaks in videogames backed by long established theatre studies. Lastly this paper would seek to link established terminology in literature and philosophy to understand outmersive techniques incorporated by developers.

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1 Introduction

The concept of the fourth wall is a common literary tool that has been extensively used in media from films, books, television shows as well as theatre where it was first coined by French philosopher Denis Diderot in the 17th century. According to Diderot's definition, the fourth wall acts either as conscious division dividing the actors and the drama from its viewer or as an invisible screen through which the two join together into the joint experience of the theatrical moment.[1] The division of actor and audience unfortunately does not apply very well in the context to videogames as highlighted by Newman, as the player is considered both the actor and the audience in a game.[2] That is to say the player can be considered the "actor" as the actions they take influences the "stage", which is the field or area the game is taking place in. On the other side, the player can be considered an "audience" as they are also the entity that experiences the game by watching the consequences of their actions unfold in front of them.

Thus many scholars have come forth to propose a better framework to define the boundaries of videogames and the most compelling of them was based on Johan Huizinga's concept of the magic circle. To Huizinga, the magic circle is a 'play-ground' that is marked off beforehand where special rules are held, differing from the outside world.[3] This concept was further popularised by Salen and Zimmerman's Rules of Play using the lens of semiotics and design which pushes the concept towards it's application on digital media. They defined how the magic circle frames a distinct space governed by the rules of the game that is separate from, but still references, the real world.[4] Although the usage of the magic circle is still highly contested within the field of videogame studies, many scholars have brought forth their interpretations and proposed additions with the intention to build and refine the concept further. Followed by an equal amount of arguments contesting its lack of inclusivity for the dynamic and ever-shifting nature of videogames.

This poses a fundamental difficulty when the very basis of a videogame's boundary is so highly contested, how could we look at fourth wall breaks in the context of this interactive medium without a defined foundation? Perhaps seeking the boundary of a

1. Wolfe and Shank, Denis Diderot, 2024
2. Newman, The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame, 2002
3. Huizinga, Home Ludens, 1950, p.10
4. Salen and Zimmerman, Rules of Play, 2004, p.96

videogame creates a limiting field to study the fourth wall in videogames and it would be more effective to look towards an alternate perspective in this subject. One possible alternative would be the concept of outmersion by Gonzalo Frasca which derives from the concept of immersion.

Thus this paper would review the concept of the magic circle along with other perspectives like Calvillo and Cairns puppetry metaphor and Goffman's frame analysis to build an understanding of the relationship between player and videogame. It would then introduce the concept of outmersion by Gonzalo Frasca as a verifiable framework to understand the fourth wall in videogames followed by borrowing terminologies from literary and philosophical theories to study the techniques developers have used to invoke outmersion of players in their games.

2 Defining the boundary

2.1 Definition of The Magic Circle

When discussing a game's boundary, the first and most common framework that gets brought up would be the concept of the magic circle. The base idea of the magic circle is that it is a designated area gets marked-off when play begins, and whatever that is within the area is separated or has no impact to the rest of the everyday world. This concept can be traced back to a quote in Homo Ludens by Huizinga,

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. 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 around, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[5]

Though Huizinga's passage does encompass the common understanding of the magic circle today, the actual definition that was popularised specifically in games studies is the definition created by Salen and Zimmerman in their book Rules of Play. They made the application of the magic circle towards digital games, borrowing the feature of the circle from Huizinga.[6] The magic circle according to Salen and Zimmerman is a metaphor to describe the space in which a game takes place, where it could be seen simultaneously as an enclosed or open space depending on which schema is used to understand them. The "magic" within the circle is describe as the magical moment brought by the initiation of the game where people uphold the rules. The magic imbued due to the immateriality of its setting.[7]

5. Huizinga, Home Ludens, 1950, p.10
6. Salen and Zimmerman, Rules of Play, 2004, p.95
7. Salen and Zimmerman, Rules of Play, 2004, p.96

2.2 Arguments Against The Magic Circle

In light of it's popularity, there follows an equal amount of criticism from scholars who question the veracity of the magic circle as a framework to build upon a videogame's boundary. Their arguments stems from Salen and Zimmerman's definition of establishing a strict border between play and non-play. That play can only have a certain authenticity, in terms of freedom or pleasure, it must be sectioned off from the everyday world.[8] Pargman and Jakobsson offered a vehement critique against the magic circle calling it a strong-boundary hypothesis and how that brings up several problems in its usage due to the messiness of reality where the boundary between play and everyday life is often blurred.[9]

The question of the "magic" within the circle has brought in yet another round of contentious opinions. Pargman ad Jakobsson argued that players often do not adopt a lusory attitude or entered a paratelic state when playing games. As they conclude that everyday life encompasses game play instead of the other way around, as players shift their attention between mundane tasks and the game and it does not correlate to the everyday activities taking on magical qualities, rather it makes the magicality of the game into the mundane.[10] These counters Huizinga's original take on the magic circle by referencing sacred ritualistic acts that which marked special times in the lives of the individual and communities as games today have taken on a more ordinary role in the participants lives. This argument is further backed by Crawford, that due to the adherence of the magic circle, there is a lack of a more detailed consideration of the role of videogames within the context of everyday life, pushing the notion of gaming to be a unique and isolated phenomenon.[11]

Liebe has also argued on the stand of playing games on the computer. Due to the nature of the computer, the arbitrary immateriality of the magic circle does not exists within the context of videogames. As the limitation of the game in a computer is synthetically assembled by the computer program.[12] Salen and Zimmerman's definition of the magical quality of the circle derives from the spontaneity of creating play out of thin

8. Taylor, Play Between Worlds, 2006, p.152
9. Pargman and Jakobsson, Do you believe in magic?, 2008, p.227
10. Pargman and Jakobsson, Do you believe in magic?, 2008, p.232
11. Crawford, Forget the magic circle, 2009, p.10
12. Liebe, There is no magic circle, 2008, p.332

air and the immateriality of the space the game takes place, which directly contrasts the state the player is in when playing a videogame on a computer as spontaneity does not truly occur and they are not able to create anything outside the bounds that has been pre-determined by the code of the software.

2.3 Alternate Concepts

Steering away from the concept of the magic circle completely, there exist other suggestions tackling the relationship between player and videogame. Calvillo and Cairns proposes the usage of puppetry as a way to define the gaming experience of the player in a videogame.[13] As puppetry is experienced differently depending on whether it originates from the puppeteer or the audience,[14] the puppet becomes a medium for the puppeteer to control and act in an unreal world. However, the object that is manipulated by the puppeteer requires the audience to give life to it by suspending their disbelief in its factual nature. This effect which Tillis has coined the term "double-vision" applies towards the core of the gaming experience according to Calvillo and Cairns. They akin the gameplay as the soul of the game and the game environment as the body. Players take on the control of the game, manipulating it like a puppeteer and simultaneously breathe life into it by allowing, via double-vision, the circumstances within the game to be real. With the metaphor of puppetry as a framework for the gaming experience, the boundary of the videogame takes on a different light, one formed by control, ownership and facilitators.[15]

Another addition to the roster of concepts would be the frame analysis concept attributed to Erving Goffman. A frame is what allows the participants in any particular situation to understand the context within it. It is rules, norms, the expectations, the possible roles and so forth which are presently available to the social actors to make sense of it.[16] In a social encounter, according to Goffman, not everything is possible, social interactions are structurally ruled on the basis of shared expectations, accepted roles, patterns of behaviour, codes of interaction, etc. Crawford emphasizes that the true usefulness of the frame analysis as a theoretical tool positions the debates

13. Calvillo-Gamez and Cairns, Pulling The Strings, 2008, p.314
14. Tillis, Puppetry as a Theatrical Art, 1992, p.65
15. Calvillo-Gamez and Cairns, Pulling The Strings, 2008, p.315
16. Goffman, Frame Analysis, 1974

surrounding the videogame boundary on how it interacts with a wider social context.[17] This coincides with Chayko who iterates the importance of steering away from the binary of the "real" and "not real" when it comes to play and games with advancing modern technology.[18]

2.4 Magic Circle as the Fourth Wall

Even with the amount of contention surrounding the magic circle, there are still scholars who have used its framework to relate towards a videogame's fourth wall. At an attempt at this conception, Conway proposes the concept of expansion and contraction of the magic circle as terminologies to define the fourth wall breaks in videogames.[19]He explains that a "break" in a wall as a terminology is insufficient when a game makes no division between player and game, between fiction and non-fiction, instead it is more akin to the expansion of the border of the circle when the game opts to blur the boundaries between game and everyday life. The example Conway brought forth to explain the relocation of the fourth wall was in Evidence: The Last Ritual[20]. By including the player and other software like their web browsers and email clients separate from the videogame's software, as well as the player's other hardware like their phones into its fictional world, the game expands its borders of its magic circle outwards. Similarly in its direct contrast, the contraction of the circle is established when players are forcibly cast out by the game as the game inverts the hierarchy of control. Conway cites Sonic the Hedgehog[21] who illustrates this when the player leaves the controls idle for a few minutes. The player's avatar in the game (Sonic) would cross his arms and tap his feet, gesturing in frustration, before walking off-screen and resulting in a game-over. Conway likens the contraction as a game asserting its own autonomy and control, inverting the preconception surrounding videogames as a docile and pliable entity.

Although Conway still affirms the convenient usage of traditional fourth wall break concepts regarding direct address; a display of the game's own awareness of its artifi-

17. Crawford, Forget the magic circle, 2009, p.13
18. Chayko, What is Real in the Age of Virtual Reality, 1993, p.180
19. Conway, A Circular Wall, 2010
20. Lexis Numérique, Evidence, 2006
21. Sega, Sonic the Hedgehog, 1992

ciality as well as reference to an artefact, event or person outside of the the fictional realm of the game. Özdal and Çatak has brought up Conway's definition seems to regard the player as a passive observer that can be included and excluded depending on the designers decisions.[22] It disregards the player's condition within the circuit, as activity and passivity should be better regarded as fluctuations in videogame play and not opposites to one another.[23] Thus Özdal and Çatak tries to remedy this by building upon Conway's expansion and contraction of the magic circle. They propose the umbrella term of magic circle manipulation[24] to overcome the previous drawbacks.

The usage brings the terms deformation and perforation as two subcategories of the manipulation of the magic circle. Deformation as Özdal and Çatak proposes, gathers Conway's expansion and contraction of the circle together in games with the added mentions of the simultaneous shape-shifting occurrence that happens when the two techniques are used in combination. Perforation on the other hand acts as a term to describe elements that are seen in traditional fourth wall breaks in other medium.

2.5 Difficulty of The Magic Circle

Although the criticism of the rigidity of the magic circle were countered by advocates that there is a misreading of Salen and Zimmerman due to an ill-worded explanation [25], and by pointing out the disregard of Huizinga's point of view as the magic circle being one type of social space among others.[26] The problem remains that even if the magic circle still retains its functionality as a powerful metaphor, it is not exactly clear what that metaphor exactly represents.[27]

Pargman and Jakobsson have pointed out specific strategies scholars have chosen to handle this particular situation[28]:

1. Avoid the usage of the magic circle as an analytical concept.

2. Tweak and redefine the magic circle as an analytical concept.

22. Özdal and Çatak, Breaking the Fourth Wall in Video Games, 2022, p.49
23. Giddings and Kennedy, Little Jesuses and fuck-off Robots, 2008, p.32
24. Özdal and Çatak, Breaking the Fourth Wall in Video Games, 2022, p.49
25. Stenros, In Defense of a Magic Circle, 2012, p.4
26. Juul, The Puzzle Piece, 2008, p.59
27. Stenros, In Defense of a Magic Circle, 2012, p.5
28. Pargman and Jakobsson, Do you believe in magic?, 2008, p.228

3. Challenge the magic circle as an analytical concept.

As this paper is meant to tackle the concept of the fourth wall in videogames, and though studies have been made to comprehend the fourth wall using the magic circle, the concept's difficulty to delineate the intricacies of the relationship between the player and videogame is rather glaring and poses a need to tackle it in a different perspective. Thus this paper would like to proceed to seek a possible alternative to comprehend the boundary of the videogame and look into the potential of tackling the concept of the fourth wall in videogames from a separate perspective altogether.

It has found through the lens of immersion studies that such a potential seem to exist. Specifically the concept of outmersion by Gonzalo Frasca.

3 Outmersion

To understand outmersion, it is pivotal to build at least a rough outline of immersion in videogames. Keogh explains immersion as a term that usefully describes the ideal sensation videogames developers aim to imbue within their players, that is to be transported and enveloped in another world discrete from the actual world.[29] It is a well-known concept in the sphere of game studies as it is popularised by companies using it as a promotional aspect to market their game and is often regarded publicly as the pinnacle form of accomplishment in games. Salen and Zimmerman coined the term "immersive fallacy"[30] to describe this widely held belief.

Calleja has proposed an alternate model due to the broadness of the term and instead breaks immersion down into a multi-axis framework to consider the consciousness and presence in games. Using six axes of involvement that comprises of ludic, spatial, narrative, affective, shared and kinesthetic to break away from the popularised notion.[31] Calleja's framework is then further extended by Keogh who advocates for a phenomenology of videogame experiences that recognizes the relationship between player and game as a textual circuit.[32] Additionally Berge was able to point out Keogh's emphasis on the materiality of the game and locating immersion within the "ebb and flow of attention" addresses a criticism of Calleja's framework, which did not account for regarding the player's physical environment impacting their immersion within the game. Highlighting a conclusion by Cox, Imran and Cairns that the shifting immersion that Calleja describes in his model is actually their "attention" and that attention fluctuates through the various forms of involvement.[33]

As the definition of immersion is evidently a complex discussion that has the tendency to steer towards multiple terminologies, just like Berge proposes in their paper looking into the outmersive design in Hellblade and Control, this paper would also take on the same definition outlined by Berge by defining immersion as "the game-network's direction of player attention through the game and avatar".[34]

29. Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies* (The MIT Press, 2018), p.53
30. Salen and Zimmerman, Rules of Play, 2004, p.450
31. Calleja, In-Game, 2011
32. Keogh, A Play of Bodies, 2018, p.64
33. Cairns, Cox, and Nordin, Immersion in Digital Games, 2014, p.348
34. Berge, Rotten and Possessed. 2021, p.36

3.1 Defining Outmersion

Outmersion is a term coined by Gonzalo Frasca in 2008 by exploring Ernest Adam's perception of immersion and the cause of its interruptions.[35] It derived from recontextualising Adam's concept of strategic immersion where players critically distanced themselves from the game in order to analyse and evaluate it. So, outmersion is a term that relates to immersion while emphasizing on the player's perspective as being outside of the game.

Frasca continues to propose three distinct categories of outmersion: mechanical, fictional and meta-outmersion. Mechanical outmersion as described by Frasca occurs when the player critically analyses the game's mechanics and rules. This consist of sequences in games that bring the game's mechanics and rules to the forefront of the players attention, urging them to reevaluate their previous actions and reframe their strategy of play. Puzzle games have a tendency to invoke this critical analysis on their rules to proceed forward in the game. An example of it within single player role-playing games would be the game Chants of Sennaar[36], where the player has to learn and translate the fictional language of the game world by using pattern recognition, the process of elimination and sometimes pure guesswork to proceed forward. Players form their own mental blueprint of what each character in the language represents in their native language and use that knowledge to interpret sentences and instructions as they traverse the game. Different areas of the game introduces a different language that is build upon the previous one with its own set of rules, requiring the player to constantly reevaluate their mental model of the game's rules.

Fictional outmersion refers to the player separating themselves from the fiction of the world in order to analyse it. Frasca gives an example of fictional incoherence of a game to illustrate this point. A game that establishes its setting as a realistic world where the player's ordinary human character suddenly possess the ability to fly invokes the player to contemplate the true setting of the game. This contradiction within the fiction of the game would make players wonder if the game is actually set in a science fiction, or they would question whether their character in game is experiencing a dream. Berge's example in the final sequence of the game Control[37]

35. Frasca, Immersion, 2008
36. RUNDISC, Chants of Sennaar, 2023
37. Remedy Entertainment, Control, 2019

invokes this fictional outmersion. Throughout the entire journey of the game, the main protagonist who was presented as the director of the company and has a range of fantastical abilities, suddenly finds herself to be a normal clerk in said company, tasked to wash coffee cups and print documents. This forces the player to contemplate the true context of the protagonist and the actual setting of the story they have been playing all along, questioning whether the whole game was just the protagonist's daydream.

Meta-outmersion on the other hand takes the analysis outside of the game and into a critical analysis of the player's own reality. Frasca affirms the existence of meta-outmersion by the act of people sending hate mail towards developers due to having opposing views towards the game's portrayal of the world. Frasca further provides two categories for games to achieve meta-outmersion: the framing of the experience and the role of the moderator. Educational games, by the virtue of its own name, provides the framing of the game to be used to educate the player of a certain topic, pushing the players to contemplate its contents beyond the game itself. An example of this would be the game Never Alone[38] by Upper One Games that developed with the purpose of preserving the Iñupiaq culture and story by their own people. The role of the moderator also plays an important part of invoking the contemplation for the players. Frasca draws the similarities to Boal's role of The Joker in Forum Theatre that acts as both a referee and teacher within the scenes, encouraging participants to engage in a critical debate. It is akin to the structure of fairytales meant for children that relays a moral lesson at the end that the children can take away to understand the world around them.

An example of meta-outmersion would be the visual novel game Slay The Princess[39]. In the game, the player is given a task to slay a princess in a house on top of a hill by the game's narrator. The game presents the player with many options along the way and each series of options leading to different outcomes within the game. Upon reaching a particular ending, the game would restart a new and the beginning sequence replays. Upon multiple restarting of the game, the behaviour of the Princess in the house changes. The Princess's behaviour changes according to the choices the player has chosen in the previous outcome. If the player chose to save the Princess in the previous session, the Princess would appear more frail and demure in the current session. She

38. Upper One Games, Never Alone, 2014

39. Black Tabby Games, Slay The Princess, 2023

would physically morph into a cuter, smaller version of herself, her voice tuned higher and higher each time as the player continues to converse with her. All in order to fit the role of a damsel in distress for the player to gain the satisfaction of fulfilling the heroic role of saving her.

The game's narrative structure acts as a moderator that outmerses the player to contemplate the one-sided nature of a videogame, emphasising the artificiality of the characters within it that ceases to exists without the player's input.

3.2 Correlation between Outmersion and the Fourth Wall

Now understanding the context of outmersion, we can look into the concept of fourth wall breaks that has been used since antiquity in theatre and how this two concepts are intertwined. Breaking the fourth wall, is an act done by the narrative that suspends the audience's disbelief in the very narrative they are consuming. As a theatrical device, it is usually achieved by on-stage actors acknowledging the presence of the audience. Modernist theatre has seen the standardisation of its device and its variety of techniques.[40]

According to Davis, Bertolt Brecht was considered the first playwright who pushes the social, political, and philosophical implications of the technique in modernist theatre. In 1940, Brecht notes of a technique he coins the Verfremdungseffekt [41], which loosely translates to the Alienation effect, serves to throw the impulse towards realism into disarray. Brecht sought to interrupt the cathartic, emphatic response from his audience when confronted with emotional intrigue in an attempt to restore a critical distanced form of observation. This would in turn foster a thoughtful and critical audience attitude in order for them to pay attention to the dramatic actions within in its full complexity. The term metafiction has also propped up within post-modernist literature first coined by William H. Gass in 1970. Waugh simplifies the practice of metafiction in literature by a quote from Goffman, that metafiction is a writing that results in its consistent display of its own conventionality, baring its artificial condition and explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction - both the fact that 'all the world is not of course a stage' and 'the crucial way it isn't'.[42]

40. Davis, Not a soul in sight!, 2015, p.86
41. Brecht, The Twentieth Century Performance Reader, 2013, p.101
42. Waugh, Metafiction, 1984, p.4

With this base understanding from a theatre perspective of fourth wall breaks, we can now see a clear connection with Frasca's concept of outmersion by a fundamental usage of invoking critical analysis of the audience or player towards the medium. Frasca himself has also referenced Boalian theories from theatre studies to draw his concept of meta-outmersion as stated above. As the connection between this two concepts are established, we can finally dive in-depth into techniques within videogames that breaks the fourth wall, recontextualising it towards the concept of outmersion instead of the border manipulation of the magic circle.

4 Erasing the circles

In this chapter, we will look into three examples of techniques developers have used to invoke outmersion within their players. Terminology within this section of the paper largely derives from literary and philosophical theories. Though scholars like Özdal and Catak explicitly states the requirement for videogames to have a separate terminology due to the unique status as an interactive medium.[43] There are still merits to build the terminologies in videogame studies by referencing from their predecessors. As noted by Pargman and Jakobsson, that game studies have a tendency to focus on gameplay or the act of playing in isolation — something that isn't inherently problematic — but this approach reflects a shift influenced by challenges in earlier research models and the evolving nature of games themselves.[44]

4.1 Metalepsis

Metalepsis is a narrative device in literary theory that manipulates the level of narrating with the level of the narrated events. As Marie-Laure Ryan puts it:

> Metalepsis is a grabbing gesture that reaches across the levels and ignores boundaries, bringing to the bottom what belongs to the top or vice versa.[45]

Neitzel further explains the examples are fictional characters who address their author or their readers, or narrators who enter the world of fiction created by themselves.[46] In Neitzel's interpretation of metacommunication between the videogame and the player using Bateson's paradox of which play simultaneously affirms and negates itself, extends towards the general usage of graphical user interfaces present in the majority of games. There is a fictionalization of metacommunication in games by addressing the fictional protagonist on a diegetic level as well as the real-life player in an extradiegetic level.

An example Neitzel brought up of this in practice would be the saving mechanics in Metal Gear Solid.[47] In the game, Snake, the protagonist controlled by the player, learns that he is able to call the headquarters and request for a status report on his

43. Özdal and Çatak, Breaking the Fourth Wall in Video Games, 2022, p.47
44. Pargman and Jakobsson, Do you believe in magic?, 2008, p.239
45. Ryan, Metaleptic Machines, 2004, p.441
46. Neitzel, Metacommunicative circles, 2008, p.289
47. Konami, Metal Gear Solid 1, 1998

health from the paramedic. When the paramedic complies with Snake's request, the game is saved for the player. The act of saving the game adheres to the paradox of the "play" within the "play" of the game.

Though this applies to almost all games with a save mechanic, there are games that takes this metacommunication between player and game much further. In the game Undertale,[48] you play as a human child who has fallen into the Underground: a large, secluded region under the surface of the Earth, separated by a magical barrier. The player would encounter various monsters and occasionally engage in combat on their journey to find their way back to the surface which they came from. In the game, players have a choice of fighting or sparing their opponents during encounters. Choosing to fight results in the player attacking the monsters and depleting their health as seen in most standard turn-based role-playing games. Mercy, which is what allows the player to spare their opponents, on the other hand allows the player to convince their opponents to lay down their hostility and reach a peaceful resolution between both parties. In the final battle of the game if the player repeatedly chose to show mercy towards the majority of their opponents during their entire journey, they would be faced with Asgore, the King of the Underground. At the start of the battle, Asgore would use his weapon to reach towards the player's game interface and shatter the mercy button, leaving the player without the option of sparring him and forcing the player to fight him until death.

This action of a character within the game world reaching beyond the confines of the perceived diegetic space and manipulate elements in the extradiegetic space meant solely for the player, showcases the character's perspective of the player, creating an interesting play with the metacommunication entanglement of the player and the game. Forcing the outmersed player to contemplate the perspective the characters within the game has towards them as a player entity, bringing in this unsettling notion that the in-game characters possess the ability to observe the player themselves. Plus the need to assess the mechanical aspects of the game that they have established from the previous gameplay sections and pushing the player to find a new strategy to overcome the current challenge.

48. Toby Fox, Undertale, 2021

4.2 Transition from Ready-to-Hand to Present-at-Hand

Ready-to-hand and present-at-hand are the two concepts formulated by German philosopher Martin Heidegger in his book Being and Time.[49] These concepts were Heidegger's way to explain the relationship between the object and the individual. Ready-to-hand is the way people perceive tools as instruments to fulfil a task. When an object is perceived as ready-to-hand, it becomes invisible to its user while it is able to continue its standard functionality within the user's hands. This concept draws similarity towards the theory of presence as well. Presence, according to the International Society of Presence Research is explained as,

> a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual's current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology, part or all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience. Except in the most extreme cases, the individual can indicate correctly that s/he is using the technology, but at *some level* and to *some degree*, her/his perceptions overlook that knowledge and objects, events, entities, and environments are perceived as if the technology was not involved in the experience.[50]

Lombard and Ditton's concept of presence in literature has categorised presence theory into six distinct categories: "presence as social richness", "presence as realism", "presence as transportation", "presence as immersion", "presence as social actor within a medium" and "presence as medium as social actor". They defined presence as perceptual illusion of non-mediation in which the medium appears to become either invisible, or transformed into a social entity.[51]

On the other hand, present-at-hand is the way people reflect upon the tool, studying the tool instead of using it. According to Heidegger, a transition from a ready-to-hand into a present-at-hand happens when a tool loses its usage to the individual and is made to be perceived as a different object, one that takes on a "broken" quality.

As a player plays a videogame on a computer, the computer takes on the qualities

49. Heidegger, Being and Time, 2010
50. International Society for Presence Research, The Concept of Presence, 2000
51. Lombard and Ditton, At the Heart of It All, 1997

of a tool perceived as being ready-to-hand. The player neglects the existence of the computer as they use it as a means to interact with the videogame. This likens to the idea of the psychological component of presence as immersion. Which is roughly defined as users being engaged and engrossed within the medium, navigating the medium as an extension of oneself and experiencing a double-awareness.[52] Though a computer in the context of a device used to play videogames does not literally become "broken" upon playing a game, developers have leveraged this transitional concept by shifting the players perspective of the computer as a tool use to interact with the application of the videogame into being a part of the game itself.

In the game Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem[53] on the GameCube, there is a sanity meter mechanic. It is a bar that reflects the protagonist's mental state and it can be depleted in many ways. To reflect the protagonist's journey into insanity, the game would present it as "glitches" on the player's console. Blue screens that usually indicates a crash on a windows operating system appears, tricking the player into believing the game application running on their console has crashed. Save screens with the options of "delete all files" or "continue without saving" that causes the game to seemingly delete all previous files regardless of the players choice. Though these examples are merely an "act" without actual consequences, it still forces the player to switch their perspective from using the tool, their console in this game's context, into reflecting upon them. Pushing the outmersed player to critically consider the state of their console while playing the game.

4.3 Freedom of Play

James P. Carse famously quotes, "It is an invariable principle of play, that whoever plays, plays freely. Whoever must play, cannot play."[54] Videogames who toy with the player's agency teeters the line between the act of play and not-play. Deliberately revoking a player's agency within a game forces a meta-outmersion of the player to contemplate their stance in relation to the game and their reality. Fostering an interesting perspective to the player, potentially changing their views regarding their own reality.

52. Calleja, In-Game, 2011, p.67
53. Silicon Knights, Eternal Darkeness, 2002
54. Carse, Finite and Infinite Games, 1986

The game Doki-Doki Literature Club, which is a psychological horror game donning the mask of a dating simulator, sees the player supposedly playing the role of a student in high school who joined a literature club to potentially romance three different girls. It is important to note the "supposed" role of the player within this game as the player would find out upon progressing in the game that they were not playing a role of a high-schooler, but in fact the role as a "player" of the game itself. The club president Monika, who was not designed to be one of the romance candidate in the game, would hijack the game through manipulating user interfaces, controlling the player's cursor, and even erasing the existence of other characters. All to force the player to be left with the sole choice of choosing her regardless of the player's intentions. The game's illusion of choice takes away the player's agency in the game, forcing the player to contemplate the simulated autonomy of their technology and the perceived consequences of that autonomy. Ernest Adams describes this phenomenon as a "fantasy-killing"[55] element in his Designer's Notebook articles for Game Developer (previously Gamasutra), but Conway argues that there is a sense of enjoyment, a thrill in the unexpected autonomy of the technology on hand[56].

55. Adams, Bad Game Designer, 2004
56. Conway, A Circular Wall, 2010

5 Conclusion

The magic circle being a highly contentious concept denotes its vagueness as a comprehensive metaphor to study the fourth wall in the context of videogames and looking through its lens results in a tendency to limit the potential of being inclusive to the range of relationships that can be established between player and videogame. Switching to the perspective of outmersion allows for a more dynamic framework, not just techniques to alienate the player from the game, but also include co-attentive moments that causes a push and pull effect.[57] As outmersion is not to be taken as a direct opposition to immersion, as clarified by Berge, the outmersed player does not only experience an alienation from the game in the context of having to critically evaluate the mechanical, fictional and their own reality in regards to the game, it also causes the player to be immersed even further into the game prompting deeper engagement with it.

Perhaps the terminology to describe fourth wall breaks in videogames should be reevaluated. As the boundary between player and videogame tends to take on a Schrödinger's cat state of existence, defining it's boundary would be a inciting a gruelling task of debate on the semantics of each fuzzy border. Though the usage of the term 'fourth wall break' still proves itself useful due to its widespread use across different media. In videogames, the term could be substituted with the act of outmersing the player from the game instead, which could potentially invoke a more comprehensive understanding on the state of the player upon experiencing the alienation effect developers have curated in their games.

Outmersion incites critical contemplation of the player's expectations and challenge their views in regards to the particular game's topic, provoking various questions ranging from power, agency and complicity. Disrupting the notions of a videogame solely being a fun and safe space[58], yet still possesses the ability to draw players further into it's narrative, invoking a sense of positive discomfort[59] within the player. As the scope of this paper only manages to touch upon single-player role-playing videogames mostly on the computer and console, there are still opportunities to explore how the concept

57. Berge, Rotten and Possessed. 2021, p.43
58. Stenros, Playfulness, Play and Games, p.73
59. Jørgensen, The Positive Discomfort, 2016

of outmersion as a videogame's fourth wall break could hold up against other game genres on other gaming platforms.

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