

## Ludic Interfaces

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### Abstract

The recent success of Nintendo's Wii Remote and Microsoft's Kinect systems is an indicator of a process that makes ludic interfaces the core driver for a transformation in the sector of video games cultures. The changes we are about to see are of relevance to age- and gender-related issues, to the attitude and the style of the gaming community, and to a ludification of non-gaming cultural groups and settings. The authors of the chapter participated in coining the notion of 'ludic interfaces' and suggest investigating games cultures with regard to interfaces used for the interaction of (wo)man-machine systems. Historically, this approach responds critically to earlier theoretical positions that grasped video games from an object-based viewpoint (the video game image, the video game text, the video game algorithm) or from a player-based viewpoint (types of players).

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**Key Words:** Ludic interfaces, serious games, creative games, playfulness, ludification, games studies, philosophy of games, HCI.

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## 1. Ludic Interfaces versus Straight Interfaces

Many years before the Wii Remote controller 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 'Giant Joystick' (2006), Leif Rumbke's 'Wargame' (2005) or Jess Kilby's 'Center of the Universe' (2007) are art games with unconventional interface concepts based on playfulness as the main design objective. Jeffrey Shaw's interactive installation that uses a modified bicycle as an input device and an interface between single user and 3D environment differs considerably from technical solutions we know to navigate 3D environments. It introduces playfulness and the user's body as the main component of the experience. Mary Flanagan's gigantic joystick device is a phallic reminder and a discourse instrument about male-dominated game culture. We will call interfaces of this type 'ludic' interfaces to distinguish them from technically engineered interfaces like the ASCII keyboard or the mouse. Their 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 historical context
- critical

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- inviting co-creativity, user-generated or user-driven content (or radically oppose those possibilities).<sup>1</sup>

Traditional interfaces, however, are motivated and developed with these objectives in mind. They have to be:

- effective
- universally applicable
- predictable
- globally available
- unaffected by regional or historical context.

We will call these technically engineered interfaces ‘straight’ interfaces to distinguish them from their playful, ‘ludic’ brothers and sisters. Traditional research on human/computer interfaces has focused on the link between object and subject or, in other words, the game and the player. One of the questions that arise from such a methodological framing is about which instance in the game-interface-player system owns ludicity. Is it the game where playfulness resides? Is it the interface, or is it encapsulated within the player’s attitude?

It seems that interfaces always have a ludic potential because they are pivotal points between two systems. This seems to be the location where ‘Spiel’ can take place.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true with regard to computer-based interfaces. An essential quality of the digital medium is its ludic potential. Not only can it connect anything to anything, if the necessary interface protocol is developed, but it also makes everything that is translated into its language highly malleable, thereby opening up the protean possibilities of play.

Ludic interfaces appropriate what we find in computer games, artistic experiments, interactive media, media conversion, social networks and modding cultures. These new and innovative interfaces offer tools that are adaptive to cultural specifics and cultural change, and are sensitive to gender-related, age-related and ethnic specificities.



**Figure 1:** Jess Kilby: Center of the Universe. Ludic Interface installation 2007.

Jess Kilby's RFID tarot table consists of a hand-painted black table with letters and signs drawn on it and a set of white cards containing radio-frequency tags. The installation is an example of a ludic set-up where the interface contributes significantly to the magic of the game. Hidden information in 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 in 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 not work at all.

The same holds true for Mary Flanagan's 'Giant Joystick.' It is the interface with all its materiality, erotic connotations and haptic features that makes the ludic installation work so well.



**Figure 2:** Mary Flanagan: Giant Joystick. Ludic Interface installation 2006.

## 2. Ludic Potential versus Lusory Attitude

At first glance it seems that objects do not have a potential for playful application per se. A wooden stick can be a toy. A stone can be a toy. A cunningly-designed toy can be a toy – or it can not be a toy. It depends on whether the object is used playfully or not. It is not a property of a stone or a stick to be a toy as anything can be played with. It seems to be rather the application context that makes an object a toy in a given situation and at a given moment. Take a handful of LEGO bricks as an example and drop them in a 1970s European child’s bedroom. Then take the same bricks and place them in an Egyptian temple in 2000 BC. Finally, try placing the LEGO bricks in front of the curator of a contemporary design museum in central Tokyo. What you will find is that the bricks will be used as a toy in one of the cases and as a sacred object or a piece of design history in the other cases. Therefore, it seems reasonable to locate the ludicity not in the object itself but in a potential user at a given time and space instead. It has been suggested by Salen and Zimmerman, who themselves refer to Bernard Suits, that we can assume that a ‘lusory attitude’<sup>3</sup> is the main driver for playfulness vis-à-vis a toy or an object of any kind. However, this approach is problematic. What is a toy if objects are assigned ludic potential by their users? If a toy is an object that can be played with, a stone is also a toy. By taking a user-centred approach in the style of Salen and Zimmerman and extending their notion in the direction of intentionality, one would have to say that an object becomes a toy when users decide to play with it. Does this imply that objects that are not played with cannot be called toys? That would indeed make the LEGO bricks in the design museum non-toys. A

consequence of such an approach would be a split in the world of LEGO bricks, with some of them being toys at a given time and others being non-toys.

We seem to be caught in a dilemma! If we suggest that playfulness is owned by the object, we cannot explain how stones and sticks can sometimes become toys. If we suggest, on the other hand, that playfulness is constituted by the player's attitude, we declare that everything on this planet is a potential toy. There seems to be a way out, however.

What prevents us from saying that ludicity is constituted by a socio-historical setting, in other words, that culture owns the property of playfulness, or that play is constituted within culture? That sounds like a resurrection of Huizinga's point.<sup>4</sup> However, we would understand culture in a much smaller sense than Huizinga did, not as an anthropological constant but as an instance of a set of cultures that are coded and recoded at any time. From this point of view playfulness would be an asset in a dynamic field of coded cultures. Playfulness would – as a consequence of that – also have different shapes and flavours according to the cultural codes it is embedded in. We would possibly have to sacrifice a notion of historically stable playfulness and have to replace it with a multitude of playfulnesses: Spartan playfulness, Roman or Carthaginian playfulness, medieval playfulness, modern or postmodern playfulness, and today's ludic attitude.

To investigate more specifically how play occurs in any of the historical conditions mentioned earlier, it seems worthwhile to look at the hardware and software connecting humans to a device or a built environment. These interfaces can be computer keyboards or skateboards – and sometimes both.



*Figure 3:* Tobias Leingruber: Skatekeyboard 2010.

### 3. The Interface is the Message

In order to understand the potential of interfaces for any human-machine interaction, it makes sense to look at games as a rich field of interaction set-ups and concepts. We conceive a game as a system of rules, a player, physical or virtual objects to play with, and a regional and historical context to be played in. When we try to find out what is in a game, we might look for meaning on different levels of the game. We could find meaning in the rules and the development of moves within the rule system. We 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. However, another approach is 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. We want to call these approaches:

- ludocentric
- role-based
- socio-historical
- interface-led.<sup>5</sup>

Ludic interfaces lend themselves to shifting focus from rules and roles to processes of the deconstruction of rules, roles and socio-historical 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 and 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.

### 4. Leaving the Magic Circle?

The level of 'lusory attitude'<sup>6</sup> 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 and 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 an accelerator pedal connected to it imposes constraints on the player's actions. It clearly suggests going right or left and accelerating or decelerating. The set-up does not encourage us to go up and down because steering wheels are not designed to control z-axis

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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. Straight 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 direct 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 straight interfaces by ridiculing their functionality or by opening up the field of possible interaction. In many cases ludic interfaces are built on the attitude of the trickster, the spoilsport or the jester.<sup>7</sup>

## **5. Interpassivity**

Interactivity is at the core of gameplay in any conceivable computer game. It seems impossible to imagine how gameplay would work without interactivity between human and computer. But what happens if a gamer writes a script to enable his/her avatar to perform certain actions in the absence of the player? The game artist who lets the game engine go on its own rejects his/her responsibility to control the avatars, s/he does not get entangled in the quest of loss or win, and s/he rejects the basic rule of any game, which is: You have to play! However, the spoilsport does not leave the arena completely. He remains a voyeur, a spectator of an action that 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 rightly called interpassive gaming. Pfaller<sup>8</sup> and Žižek<sup>9</sup> point out that the psychological aspect of interpassivity is grounded in our subjectivity. They convincingly demonstrate how certain works of art seem to provide for their own reception.<sup>10</sup> One cannot help feeling that these artworks enjoy themselves or that we enjoy through them.<sup>11</sup> 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 also 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 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 masochistic interpassive delight in being fragged, but even less martial areas of disguise and simulation like the Second Life environment will disclose interpassive delegation of love, lust and longing.<sup>12</sup>

This is where the ideological roots of ludification seem to stem from. The interface that could well hold an emancipatory nucleus of user-freedom and user-liberation is often not much more than a shell to keep the individual in a passive mode. Different from the television screen that is obviously encouraging consumerism and passivity, the games consoles pretend to introduce an element of activity that is actually only interpassivity in disguise. The subversive potential of interfaces must be looked for in the ludic interface solutions that artists and

interface hacktivists develop. The area that extends beyond efficiency management, predictability and globalisation is where interface cultures will emerge that hold the key to custom-built, critical and playful interface devices for the future.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The vague definitions of ludic interfaces that we refer to are from the unpublished programme specification of the European Masters in Ludic Interfaces.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Zur Aktualität des Schönen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), Chapter 9, The Magic Circle, accessed at <http://health-7.com/Rules%20Of%20Play%20Game%20Design%20Fundamentals%20Ebook/The%20Lusory%20Attitude>.

<sup>4</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955 [1938]).

<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive explanation cf. Fuchs, Mathias, 'Ludic Interfaces', in *Artists Re:thinking Games*, eds. Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett and Corrado Morgana (Liverpool: FACT, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*.

<sup>7</sup> Mathias Fuchs, 'Ilonpilaajia ja Pelihaita: Spoilports and Cardsharps', in *Proceedings of the Playfulness Conference* (Tampere, Finland, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivität. Studien über Delegiertes Geniessen* (Wien and New York: Springer Verlag, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject* (Paris: Traverses, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Pfaller, *Interpassivität. Studien über Delegiertes Geniessen*.

<sup>11</sup> Gijs Van Oenen, Gijs, 'Interpassivity Revisited: A Critical and Historical Reappraisal of Interpassive Phenomena', *International Journal of Zizek Studies* 2, No. 2 (Rotterdam, 2008): 1-16, accessed at <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/96/230>.

<sup>12</sup> Mathias Fuchs, 'Cyberprovincialism', in *Coded Cultures. Exploring Creative Emergences*, edited by Georg Russegger, Matthias Tarasiewicz and Michal Wlodkowski (Vienna, Yokohama: Super.net, 2008).

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