

## Metacommunicative Circles

The paper uses Gregory Bateson's concept of metacommunication to explore the boundaries of the 'magic circle' in play and computer games. It argues that the idea of a self-contained "magic circle" ignores the constant negotiations among players which establish the realm of play. The "magic circle" is no fixed ontological entity but is set up by metacommunicative play. The paper further pursues the question if metacommunication could also be found in single-player computer games, and comes to the conclusion that metacommunication is implemented in single-player games by the means of metalepsis.

It has often been argued that play and games are in a way self-referential. According to Friedrich Schiller (1967), play drive creates an autonomous aesthetic domain with its own "living forms" (*lebende Gestalten*), which are in themselves both eternal and transitory. – Schiller's approach to play is strongly connected with his aesthetic ideal and can be associated with Kant's notion of beauty as evoking disinterested benevolence. But Schiller's influence is not restricted to aesthetics. His idealistic notion of play had an influence on the conception of kindergarten by Friedrich Fröbel (Scheuerl 1994:92). – Following this line of thought, Johan Huizinga (1955) argued that play takes place in a realm of its own, a "magic circle" separate from the rest of the world because of its own rules and boundaries. Hans Scheuerl (1990) introduced the concept of circular movement to describe the nature of play, while Roger Caillois (2001) established the criterion of separation in space and time as a distinctive feature of games. Boundaries and frames which separate games from their social environment and establish a world in which play activities have only a meaning in themselves seem to be an important attribute of games.

But where there are boundaries, there is transgression of these boundaries. Referring to the concept of metacommunication that Gregory Bateson (1972) has rendered fruitful for play, I will argue that the idea of a self-contained “magic circle” ignores the constant negotiations that establish the realm of play. The “magic circle” is no fixed ontological entity but is set up by play. In his theory, Bateson focuses on play and restricts himself to stating that games are more complex than mere play. The paper will also consider metacommunication in games and develop the hypothesis that games employ the rhetoric figure of metalepsis to create the impression that they take place in a *magic circle*.

## Metacommunication in Play According to Bateson

Inspired by his observations of monkeys in the San Francisco zoo, Bateson put forward the hypothesis that play behavior comprises metacommunicative signals which are noticed and interpreted both by players and observers:

I saw two young monkeys *playing*, *i.e.*, engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to, but not the same as those of combat. It was evident, even to the human observer, that the sequence as a whole was not combat, and evident to the human observer that to the participant monkeys this was ‘not combat.’ Now, this phenomenon, play, could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of metacommunication, *i.e.*, of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘this is play’ (Bateson 1972:179).

A metacommunicative message refers to the communicative situation in which a speaker and hearer (or players) are involved. According to Bateson, the metacommunicative message ‘This is play’ establishes a paradox comparable to the one described by Russell and Whitehead as the paradox of the set of all sets, which are not

members of themselves. (I will not draw on the set theoretical explanation of the paradox here, but only refer to an example closer to life for an explanation: the one of the male barber who shaves all men of a village that do not shave themselves and no-one else. If he does not shave himself he would be a man who does not shave himself and therefore would have to shave himself. If he shaved himself he would not only shave the men who do not shave themselves but also a man who shaves himself – namely himself.) The message “this is play” implies a negative metastatement such as “These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for *which they stand* would denote” (Bateson 1972:180). Since “standing for,” according to Bateson, is a synonym of “denoting,” the sentence may hence be paraphrased as:

These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote. The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite (Bateson 1972:180).

Since the underlying paradox evinces the logical contradiction “bite and not-bite” we are faced with an infringement of the law of the excluded middle. But on which level does the paradox emerge in play?

Consider the example of two girls boxing in play. The bodily actions may be quite the same as in a real fight; nevertheless, the girls are not fighting at all, even though their fists may be clenched and they may even hit each other. Playful boxing is an iconic sign of real boxing with the difference that players, in contrast to fighters, will not end up with a bloody face or a broken nose. Evidently, there is a difference concerning the consequences of the two modes of behavior. The agents’ motives and intentions differ, too. While a real fight is carried out because of anger, fear, or hatred; a playful fight has no such causes.

Playful fight can hence be interpreted as a sign of real fight. Signs of action differ from the action they refer to, especially in their pragmatic dimension, which concerns the effects on our lives. For example, the statement “Smoking 30 cigarettes daily will cause lung cancer” can be used to frighten people, but it cannot cause lung cancer; only the actual act of smoking may do so. Only performative speech acts of the subtype of the declaratives – as Austin (1970) called them – do more than refer to an effect; if uttered appropriately, they are able to cause the effect which they refer to. The utterance “I herewith declare you man and wife”, spoken by a registrar, really makes the couple husband and wife. As long as we do not confound signs with their objects there is no paradox. Words and utterances can mean objects and actions, but they do not exert the same influence on our lives as the objects and actions they refer to, and they do not have the same consequences. Signs and their objects are of a different kind or, as Bateson put it (in reference to Alfred Korzybski): the map is not the territory.

Play does not draw a complete distinction between the map and the territory, but uses metacommunication to mark the difference. The iconic representation of the bite does not mean the same as the bite, but nevertheless it does not simply negate the bite. Signs in play negate their objects through affirmation. A playful action denotes, and at the same time it does not denote, the “real” action to which it refers. Instead, it has a different meaning. The action to which the player’s iconic nonverbal sign refers is actually performed, but the meaning which this action has in a nonplay context is negated with the performance of this action. In this sense, there is a paradox. – For Bateson

play marks [...] the crucial step in the discovery of map-territory relations. In primary process, map and territory are equated; in secondary process, they can be discriminated. In play, they are both equated and discriminated (Bateson 1972:185).

Both in therapy and in play, metacommunication is part of communication:

As we see it, the process of psychotherapy is a framed interaction between two persons, in which the rules are implicit but subject to change. Such change can only be proposed by experimental action, but every such experimental action, in which a proposal to change the rules is implicit, is itself a part of the ongoing game. It is this combination of logical types within the single meaningful act that gives to therapy the character not of a rigid game like *canasta* but, instead, that of an evolving system of interaction. The play of kittens or otters has this character (Bateson 1972:192).

In play, participants have to be aware of this paradox, which is especially evident when we consider role play or acting. Actors have to play their roles as convincingly as possible, but at the same time they have to be aware that they are just playing their roles. – The concept of *mimicry*, as described by Roger Caillois (2001), is very similar to Bateson's concept of metacommunicative play. – An actor or actress who fails to realize the difference between theater and life is no longer an actor or actress. They behave like a schizophrenic who actually believes to be another person. The connection between play behavior and psychiatric anomaly is apparent, as Bateson has shown.

Play activities (not framed by games) must be self-referential; otherwise play cannot take place at all. Metacommunicative self-reference sets the frame of reference for play. Thus, a magic circle which encompasses play is not set up independently from play but by the act of playing itself. The magic seems to arise from the oscillation between the inside and the outside of play.

## Metacommunication in Games

The distinguishing feature between games and play is that games are played according to rules, whereas play is spontaneous and has

no previously established rules. The rules of a game determine the range of the players' possible moves and in some games, their temporal and spatial order. According to Salen and Zimmerman (2004), game rules limit the players' actions; they must be explicit and unambiguous, shared by all players, fixed, binding, and repeatable. While in play, every single action must give evidence that it is play, games have rules that set a frame for all activities. Game actions are thus dispensed from metacommunicative and self-referential discourse, whereas play is not. It is not the players who establish the sphere of the game but the rules, which create a circle within which all and only game actions take place. Is there metacommunication in games at all?

Rules of a game exist before the actual game is played. They are constitutive rules (Searle 1969), which prescribe the possible game-actions precisely and which are valid independently of whether the game is played or not. Thus, no game-action needs the marker "this is a game-action." The game situation is completely framed before the players begin to play. Additional communication about the game only has to take place when players arrange to meet for a game. Bateson's assumption that games are constructed around the question "Is this play?" (1972:182) refers to this determination. If it is already defined which activities belong to the game, metacommunicative play is no longer needed.

But usually self-referential metacommunication takes place when a game e.g. a card game, is played. For example, when players change their communicative role from ally to opponent and begin to speak like friend or foe, flattering each other or using playful verbal injuries against the opponent. Metastrategic discourse of this kind is not prescribed by the rules of the game; hence it is not part of the game although it is still a mode of play. This is a very fragile communicative situation because there is always the danger that playful rudeness or simulated verbal injuries might be taken seriously as a personal offense.

Thus, games evince a kind of double framing. Firstly, the game is framed by its own constitutive rules. (In addition to the constitutive rules, which define the game, the games may be regulated by additional regulative rules, which determine the players' activities in various ways. For example, the atmosphere of the play regulated by its social setting as informal, relaxed, funny, or competitive; and even professional.) Secondly, but only optionally, a game may also be framed by play accompanying the game. The social setting is an important incentive to the players, but it is not constitutive of the game. (In surveys dealing with the reasons for playing digital games, "playing with others" has often been given as one of the main reasons, see e.g. Ermi et al. 2004.)

In sum, playing and gaming must be distinguished. A game is not play, but play tends to occur concomitantly with games. A game activity or gaming is a rule-governed activity guided by the intention to win. – Searle assumes that a rule underlying all games is that each party should try to win. – A play activity or playing, by contrast, refers to an activity not framed by constitutive and fixed rules but by metacommunication. In English, it is unavoidable that the expression "playing a game" also contains the verb "play" which should theoretically be distinguished from the concept of "game". The expression can also be read as a hint that gaming without playing seldom occurs. (The term "gaming" is usually a synonym of "gambling" or "playing for a stake". In gaming, usually a certain amount of money is at stake. In the sense it is used here, only winning the game is at stake. Gaming can describe the seriousness of a player who wants to win a game.)

## Metacommunication as Metalepsis in Single Player Computer Games

The social frame which permits players to play comes to existence whenever players meet for a game, which includes multiplayer computer games. Even when played in the bodily absence of other players, they fulfill the prerequisites of metacommunicative play. But this is not my concern here. I will focus on single player computer games.

By definition, these computer games have only one player. There is nobody with whom the single player can discuss his or her moves so that no metacommunication can be expected unless the player assumes the computer to be the other player. But *playing* with a computer seems to bear some problems. Computer programs have an affinity with game rules since they share the attributes of being unambiguous, repeatable, fixed, and binding (Neitzel 2009). For using a computer one must give unambiguous commands defined in advance. Play, by contrast, is based on ambiguity; the frame of play is fluid because it is only established during play. Therefore it is very unlikely that play, which is concomitant with the game when several players interact, occurs in a single player's interaction with a computer game. The computer is a game-machine, not a play-machine.

Yet single player games have devised strategies, which simulate metacommunication. They can be found at various levels of the game and involve the single players in their different roles as gamers or players. I would like to examine such strategies in the following.

The strategy of fictional metacommunication can be traced back to the early times of computer games; it can be found in games such as Infocom's ZORK (1980), which is a so-called *text adventure*. As the genre name suggests, ZORK operates with written text only. The game may start as follows (player input being marked as > and lines added for further reference):



- 1 West of House  
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with  
a boarded front door.  
There is a small mailbox there.  
> open mailbox
- 5 Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet.  
> read leaflet  
leaflet, taken  
'Welcome to Zork'  
Zork is a game of adventure, danger and low cunning. In it  
you will explore some of the  
10 most amazing territory ever seen by mortals. No computer  
should be without one.  
> go north  
*North of House*  
You are facing the north side of a white house. There is no  
door here, and all the  
windows are boarded up. To the north a narrow path winds  
through the trees.
- 15 > go east  
*Behind House*  
You are behind the white house. A path leads into the forest  
to the east. In one corner of  
the house there is a small window which is slightly ajar.  
> open window
- 20 With great effort, you open the window far enough to allow  
entry.  
>enter  
*Kitchen* *Score: 10*  
You are in the kitchen of the white house. A table seems  
to have been used recently for  
the preparation of food. A passage leads to the west and a  
dark staircase can be seen  
25 leading upward. A dark chimney leads down and to the  
east is a small window which

is open.

On the table is an elongated brown sack, smelling of hot

peppers.

A bottle is sitting on the table.

The glass bottle contains:

30 A quantity of water

> open sack

Opening the brown sack reveals a lunch, and a clove of garlic.

> eat lunch

(Taken)

35 Thank you very much. It really hit the spot.

> open bottle

Opened.

> drink water

You have to be holding the glass bottle first.

40 > take bottle

Taken.

> drink water

Thank you very much. I was rather thirsty (from all this

talking, probably).

The usual way of navigating through the ZORK world is by typing orders, such as “go north” (l. 11), which are given to an unspecified addressee in the world of ZORK. In such moves, the player is an addresser who utters the order, and there must also be an addressee to comply with the order, but who is this addressee? Since the player is faced with nobody else, the commands seem to be addressed to a fictional character in the game world by the mediation of the computer, but the answer which appears on the screen conveys a different impression. An unknown voice writes back: “*You* are facing the north side of a white house” (l. 13). This means the addressee can be no one else but the single player, that is, the same person who gave the previous order. As a result, the single player turns out to be both

addresser and addressee and is entangled in a self-referential communicative loop. The player is both inside and outside the diegesis of the game at the same time. As the participant who gives the order, the player is outside; as the one who is addressed by the text of the program, the player is inside the fictional game world. In terms of systems theory (Luhmann 1995), the player is an observer who is observing him or herself. Action and the observation of this same action are carried out at the same time. This textual strategy introduces an element of play into the game since the self-referential system of address exemplifies well the dilemma which characterizes play according to Bateson, the dilemma of being and not being in a given role at the same time.

On the operational level, the commands of the player and the answers of the program can be compared with performative speech acts, even if they do not have the form of a statement but of an imperative. The imperatives typed by a player do not operate like commands but immediately have factual results in the fictional game world. Typing "open window" means that the "you" in the fictional world *is* opening the window.

However, at the level of the players' interaction with the machine, there is no self-reference. As far as the computer is concerned, players who type orders, such as "go north", actually produce a sequence of electronic signals whose effect it is to trigger a sequence of digital operations and hence have an utterly allreferential semiotic effect.

In his illuminating article *Gamic Actions* (2005), Galloway distinguishes between diegetic and extra-diegetic operator (this means: player) actions. The addressing-system of text adventures shows that these actions cannot be separated, but both belong to the process of playing the game. To actually *play* the game, the metacommunicative entanglement is unavoidable.

A new communicative scenario begins with the kitchen scene (l. 22). The programmed addresser now speaks in the voice of a coun-

selor thanking the player (l. 35, 44) and giving advice ("You have to...", l. 39). In line 43, with the remark "I was rather thirsty (from all this talking, probably).", the addresser's voice assumes the new role of a personal speaker who does not only refer to his own bodily needs ("thirst"), but also turns self-referential and metacommunicative with a comment on his own "talking". There is hence a situational catachresis, a break in the continuity of the participants' roles. Now, the addressee is no longer the same as the addresser, and the player, no longer isolated in soliloquy, is faced with an addresser who seems to be a true interlocutor. Here, the intrigant, as Aarseth (1997:127) calls this communicative instance, shows his face: "an immanent adversary who inhabits rather than transcends the game."

The strategies of metacommunication in ZORK, in which intra- and extradiegetic frames are manipulated, are well-known from literature. In literary theory they have been described as *metalepsis*. *Metalepsis* is a narrative device that manipulates the level of narrating with the level of the narrated events. As Marie-Laure Ryan (2004:441) 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." Examples are fictional characters who address their author or their readers, or narrators who enter the world of fiction created by themselves.

Ryan distinguishes between rhetorical and ontological *metalepsis*: Whereas rhetorical *metalepsis* maintains the levels of the stack and follows the principle of LIFO – "last in, first out" (Ryan 2004:439) – in rhetorical *metalepsis*, the levels of narrating and the narrated world remain distinct, although there is some rhetorical reference from one to the other. Ontological *metalepsis*, which results in real life interferences from the world of the narrator to the narrated world or vice versa, is even at the root of ZORK as well as of any other computer game. The player who, at the desk in front of a home computer, types orders such as "open window" (l. 19), "open sack" (l. 31), or "open bot-

tle" (l. 36) is rewarded with immediate obedience not only of undisclosed agents but also of inanimate objects, such as windows, sacks, or bottles. Players of computer games thus seem to have the power of metaleptic interference into the world of fiction that, in principle, should exist independently of the world of their own social environment.

Metacommunication, which is the basis of play and which can also be found whenever people play together, is integrated in single player computer games by the textual figure of metalepsis, which can be called a simulation of metacommunication or fictional metacommunication. The fictionalization of metacommunication in computer games is not dependent on the use of text, but is also an operational strategy used in games that have a graphic surface. In these games the player no longer has to type "open window" but simply presses a button on the keyboard or a game controller to open a window in the diegesis. Games based on a graphic interface try to conceal the metaleptic entanglement, obvious in text-based games. But it is still observable, as a last short example from the METAL GEAR SOLID series may show.

In the METAL GEAR SOLID games, the protagonist, Snake, has the task to conduct important secret missions in foreign territories while avoiding contact with the enemy. To obtain the goal of the mission – rescuing an ally or destroying the enemy's weapons – the real gamer usually has to save the game occasionally. In the series, this game activity is integrated in the game's diegesis. The diegetic (fictional) and the extradiegetic (operational) levels are thus interconnected. At the diegetic level of all the games of this series, Snake has to sneak into buildings of the enemy all alone, but he remains connected with his headquarters and also with a paramedic by radio. The headquarters advise him how to find his way through the enemy's territory; the paramedic keeps Snake's state of health under surveillance.

Shortly after the beginning of the mission in the first METAL GEAR SOLID (1998), Snake receives a call from the headquarters. In addition to getting information about the mission, Snake learns how to contact the headquarters and he can ask the paramedic for a report on his health status. When the paramedic complies, the game is saved. The action of saving the game by recording the state of health has two addressees, the fictional character Snake, and the gamer who wants to save the game – METAL GEAR SOLID 2 (2001) and 3 (2004) operate accordingly. The paradox created by the metacommunicative message “this is play,” in play, is particularly evident at the operational level of the game: addressing the gamer means addressing the protagonist, and addressing the protagonist means addressing the gamer, while recording the state of health at the diegetic level actually means saving the game at the extradiegetic level.

## Summary

Bateson’s paradox, according to which play simultaneously affirms and negates, is able to account for the manifold shifts between communication, metacommunication, and self-referential communication in computer games. In play, the borderline between real life and its negation in the sphere of mere play must be constantly explored since there is no distinct marker to distinguish between play and nonplay. According to Bateson, playing involves permanent metacommunication, which sets up a frame for play and occurs simultaneously within that very frame. This means that no “magic circle”, in which the players step for playing, precedes play, but that it evolves only with the beginning of play. The borders of the magic circle are constantly negotiated, and probably changed.

Games, on the contrary, mark their boundaries very distinctively by their own rules which determine what is allowed as a game activity, and what is not. The rules of a game set game activities free from setting up a play sphere by metacommunication. They make game

activities possible at a purely functional level. (Nevertheless, there are also game activities that have a symbolic meaning in addition. For example, placing a piece of a board game on a certain field of the board can mean buying a street or occupying a city.) Gaming – a term that can be used to describe playing a game with respect to its pure functionality – is almost always accompanied by play that uses the game only as starting point for play amongst the players. Play can go parallel with games. If the *magic* is found on the functional game level or in the play activities surrounding this strictly framed circle, is a question only the players can answer.

Single player computer games evince no metacommunication. However, they simulate metacommunication by the device of metalepsis. Single player computer games set up a fictional play situation in which metacommunication from the fictional level to the player world can take place. – This is not the case in all computer games, but only in games that create a game world and do not merely show objects on the screen which can be moved around by the player. The latter, which do not create a fictional world, have been called games with an opaque interface by Bolter/Grusin (2000). – The difference between this kind metacommunication and metacommunication in play as described by Bateson is due to the fluid frame of play. While play is only established in the process of playing, being constantly subject to possible changes, metaleptic metacommunication is part of the game program and a central issue of computer games. Thus, the basic indecision of play in respect to its status as real or fictional (or as territory or map) is implemented in digital games as constant metaleptic entanglement. The magic of any circle does not evolve from any strictly drawn borders but from the penetrability of these borders.

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