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A Circular Wall?: Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Videogames

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Abstract

Within videogame culture there are many references to famous breaks of the fourth wall; Psycho Mantis’ reading of the memory card in *Metal Gear Solid, X-Men’s* use of the Sega Megadrive’s reset button, *Startropics’* use of the letter packaged with the game, and so on.

Though cited by videogame media as brilliant breaks of the fourth wall, this article contends that such breaks, and numerous others, are not breaking the fourth wall at all; ‘breaking’ implies the shattering of the suspension of disbelief, the acknowledgement of the audience or self-referentiality.

The hypothesis of this article is a new conception of the fourth wall in game-relevant terms, instead conceived as expansions and contractions of the magic circle. Expansions of the magic circle occur when the synthetic world of the game expands beyond the screen, encompassing the technological apparatus of the console/PC or the paratexts packaged with the game, so that the console, memory card, controller, or game manual momentarily become part of the fictional world. Contractions occur when the magic circle shrinks behind the display, e.g. Sonic tapping his knuckles upon the screen or the game crashing.

In unpacking and re-conceiving the notion of the fourth wall in gamic terms, this article hopes to provide a valuable analytical perspective concerning the use of these expansions and contractions by developers, players, and their impact upon wider media culture.

**Keywords:** Easter egg, fourth wall, Huizinga, magic circle, Metal Gear Solid, videogame
**Introduction**

The fourth wall is a term often invoked by the game player, reviewer, designer, critic and scholar to describe instances when the videogame medium consciously oversteps the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic, either drawing something *into* the diegetic world from outside, or expelling something *out* of the diegetic into the non-diegetic. The narrative, a character monologue, a musical score, and quite frequently the actor can transgress the permeable membrane of the diegesis, relocating themselves outside the limits of their fictitious world, consequently undermining the audience's suspension of disbelief.

Yet, whilst the notion of the fourth wall finds itself within a welcoming habitat amongst media such as books, television and cinema, the extranoematic effort demanded by videogames (Aarseth 1997), to physically interact, instantiates a completely different relationship between product and audience. As Frank Lantz recently pointed out (Edge Online 2009: online), whilst it is convenient to simply collate videogames as one medium alongside many others since they all use the same technology (the DVD drive, the television set et cetera), labelling the computer game specifically as media is perhaps a mistake in and of itself; games existed before computers, and games will exist when computer processing becomes merely one feature of many within the game. Yet this designation as singular media form persists, and whilst it can often provide productive analysis, it has also had many derisory consequences for our study of digital gaming, as many a ludologist is keen to mention; encouraging the straight, often unthinking transfer of ideas, perspectives, terminologies and methodologies from other media directly into the study of
videogames, equated as simply another entertainment medium. The prevalence of the fourth wall concept in game culture is a symptom of this unthinking translation.

**A Brief History**

The fourth wall of course finds its roots within the theatre, specifically in stages with proscenium layouts (Stevenson, 1995: 5). If we imagine the proscenium theatre as a square, then the initial three walls are firstly the back of the stage, and then the two sides from where the cast members would normally emerge; each is varyingly a literal or figurative wall the audience cannot see beyond. The 'fourth wall' is the remaining side of the square, situated directly between audience and stage. This wall is transparent, so that the audience may voyeuristically observe the events of the play, ensconced in their suspension of disbelief, understanding and enjoying their position as invisible onlooker. *Breaking* the fourth wall is when this transparency is reciprocated by those on stage, suddenly able to peer through the diegesis into the non-diegetic world of the seated spectator, and to admit as such, generally through addressing, acknowledging or directly engaging with the audience. Herein lays the problem for videogames: when you play a game, you fulfil the dual role of audience member and performer on stage, as Newman clarifies:

Importantly, the … relationship between player and system/gameworld is not one of clear subject and object. Rather, the interface is a continuous interactive feedback loop, where the player must be seen as both implied and implicated in the construction and composition of the experience.

(Newman 2002: 410)
In television and cinema, the use of the term 'wall' is something of a misnomer, as the content is shown from a variety of angles, distances and points of view. The fourth wall in this context becomes the screen, a technological division where the fourth wall breaks occurs through not only an acknowledgement of the viewer, but also through a character’s acknowledgement of the technological apparatus supporting the diegetic world; the camera, technical errors such as the presence of a boom microphone in the shot, and so on. Of course such technical flaws have been used throughout cinema and television history, recently illustrated in shows such as *Arrested Development* (Hurwitz 2003-2006), and as we will see this practice is still prevalent within the computer game complex (McAllister 2004).

Due to the sheer variety of methods available to break the fourth wall across numerous forms of media, it would be informative to clarify precisely what one can consider to be a traditional fourth wall break when applied to videogames. Firstly, a direct acknowledgement of the player by the game is a clear fourth wall break in the most conventional sense; therefore a character talking directly to the player would be a breakage.

Secondly, a display of self-awareness by the product to its own status as videogame, such as a character’s commentary on his status as videogame avatar; a break commonly used by games such as *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001). Thirdly, making a reference to an artefact, event or person that is obviously outside the fictional world of the game. A good example of this is can be instigated in *God of War* (SCE Studios Santa Monica 2005); upon discovering an Easter egg the player is awarded a hidden cutscene where the creative director of the studio, David Jaffe, engages in a humorous argument with the game’s protagonist Kratos, who quickly loses patience and quite humorously kills his author.
Fourth Wall, Magic Circle, Magic Wall?

Reviewers and critics seem to agree (Kipeo 2006: online) that Lexis Numerique’s *Evidence: The Last Ritual* (2006) is one of the prime examples of breaking the fourth wall in videogames. Firstly, the game directly acknowledges the player by sending an email to the address added by him or her at the beginning of the game, and also references non-fictional items by asking the player to use commercial websites alongside the fictional websites created by the developer in their progression through the narrative.

Yet crucially, the game always addresses the player as a character within the fictional world, and also treats all non-fictional websites as if they too were part of the fiction. The game makes no division between actors and audience, between player and game, between fiction and non-fiction, instead opting to blur the boundaries between game and everyday life. Thus we can view *Evidence: The Last Ritual* as a prime example of how the videogame complex does not *break* the fourth wall, but instead *relocates* the fourth wall entirely, moving it behind the player, as they are now placed by the designer within the fictional world of the game. Borrowing from Huizinga (1949 [1938]), we can articulate this as an extension of the magic circle, as the fictional world of the digital game expands beyond its previous boundaries into other software and hardware; your email client, your web browser, your phone, your netbook.

As hinted at earlier, a famous example of self-awareness takes place in *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001). The player travels through one level that is a nightmare taking place inside Max’s drug-induced dream. The environment turns out to be a grotesque version of the opening level of the game, which is Max’s family
home recently torn apart by drug addicts who murdered his wife and only child. After progressing through the level for a short time, you come across a note left by his deceased wife.

It reads simply, 'You are in a computer game, Max', and this instigates a memorable monologue from the player-character:

“The truth was a burning green crack through my brain. Weapon statistics hanging in the air, glimpsed out of the corner of my eye. Endless repetition of the act of shooting, time slowing down to show off my moves. The paranoid feeling of someone controlling my every step. I was in a computer game. Funny as hell, it was the most horrible thing I could think of.”

This is of course a traditional fourth wall break, and something Ernest Adams calls 'a slap in the face' in his Designer’s Notebook articles for Gamasutra (2004: online). This article disagrees completely with the sentiment, as do some of Adams’
fellow designers (Weise 2008: online). One cannot disagree that it is indeed a 'slap in
the face'; it absolutely is. But there is an enjoyment to be had in such breaks, a thrill in
the unexpected autonomy of the technology, like the child who dreams of her toys
living their own secret lives when she is not watching.

So whilst Evidence: The Last Ritual (Lexis Numerique 2006) expands the
magic circle, instances such as this in Max Payne (Remedy Entertainment 2001)
actually enact the reverse; they contract the magic circle. Suddenly the player finds
him or herself outside of the magic circle, momentarily cast out as the game inverts
the hierarchy of control, taking it away from the player. This is illustrated famously in
Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega 1991). If you leave the control pad alone for a few minutes,
Sonic will cross his arms and tap his feet, gesturing at the player frustratedly, before
eventually walking off-screen, resulting in a game-over.

This example of contraction, through the game asserting its own autonomy
and control, completely inverts the preconception surrounding videogames, perhaps
even our preconception of technology as a whole as a docile and pliable entity. We
believe that we are in control, and we always assume that the machine has no
personality or consciousness of its own. Such comedic contractions rely on, and play
on these assumptions.

This enthralment with technology is continued in one of the most famous early
examples of the magic circle being contracted; 1993’s X-Men (Western Technologies
Inc.) for the Sega Megadrive. For the entirety of the game, the narrative is situated
within the AI-controlled 'Danger Room', where the AI has apparently malfunctioned
and refuses to stop generating dangerous scenarios, placing the characters in peril. On
the last level the characters are finally brought back into the basic Danger Room
setting and asked by Professor X to reset the computer to destroy the virus that has
infected the artificial intelligence. Yet, there is no in-game switch to do so, and what
the game actually required was for the player to perform a soft reset on his or her own
Megadrive by lightly pressing the reset button. Complaints were received concerning
this design decision as pushing too firmly would indeed reset the console, meaning
the game would start all over again.

Again, this is not a breaking of the fourth wall, as Professor X neither talks
directly to the player as player of a videogame, nor does he reference the Sega
Megadrive as the computer that needs resetting. He simply instructs the game
characters to reset the Danger Room’s computer. By encompassing the technical
features of the videogame console, and in doing so creating a new, novel form of
interaction with the game, the developer is once more not breaking the fourth wall,
but instead expanding the magic circle to include the hardware features of the console.

Another well-known, decidedly more dramatic contraction occurs as a plot
twist in the Gamecube title *Baten Kaitos* (Namco 2003), where the male avatar expels
the player, known in-game as his guiding spirit, from the gameworld, turning the
screen blank (simulating the television’s standby mode) before allowing you to return
to the world via another avatar; again, the developer shows a fascination with the
technological apparatus required for the functioning of the digital game.

In *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan 1998), the (at the
time) novel feature of haptic feedback becomes part of the gameworld when the
controller is taken over by a supporting cast member, Naomi Hunter. She remarks that
you (the player-as-avatar) must be stressed, and offers a massage, directing the player
to place the Playstation controller upon his or her neck in a particular manner. A
second or two later the device starts vibrating, attempting to mimic the sensation of a
neck massage.
Once more these examples illustrates not the breaking of the fourth wall in the
traditional sense, as it is not actively shattering the suspension of disbelief, but instead
illustrates how the fourth wall is itself relocated, enhancing the sense of immersion, as
it is moved from in front of the player to behind them, and they are drawn further into
the fictional universe of the gameworld, which now encompasses the technology of
the television set or game control pad.

In *Metal Gear Solid 4* (Kojima Productions 2008), examples abound which
blur the boundaries between the gameworld and the physical world. During the
single-player campaign, the protagonist, Old Snake, is accompanied by a miniature
robot known as Metal Gear Mark 2. This robot is controllable by the player via Old
Snake, being utilized for various stealth-based activities throughout the game. *Metal
Gear Solid 4* is exclusive to the Sony Playstation 3 console, thus the gamer of course
uses a Playstation 3 control pad (known as the Sixaxis or Dual Shock 2). In-game,
Old Snake can be witnessed controlling Metal Gear Mark 2 through the use of an
identical pad; yet again this obsession with console hardware rears its head, as the
magic circle expands to include the Sixaxis controller within the game world, as an
Easter egg to be discovered by the careful viewer.

For a game that thrives upon contractions of the magic circle, *Eternal
Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights 2002) provides an excellent resource.
One of its key features is a ‘sanity meter’ mechanic; a bar reflecting the protagonist’s
mental state that can be depleted in various ways. As the bar is drained, to reflect the
protagonist’s journey into insanity, various effects will be instigated by the game.

For example, a contraction such as a fake BSOD (‘blue screen of death’)
familiar to anyone who has used the *Windows 95* (Microsoft 1995) operating system),
will appear, fooling the user into believing their console has crashed, or the save
screen may ask 'Do you wish to delete all save files' with the only options being 'Yes' or 'Continue without saving'; either option makes it appear that all files have been deleted. Of course, whether this is construed as dramatic or comedic depends upon the player’s cognizance of the joke, as real complaints about these fictitious bugs and errors were all too common within the first few months of the game’s release. The game will also shift into more dramatic contractions, such as the controller suddenly refusing to respond to commands, leaving the player-character vulnerable to any nearby attackers.

This theme of technological corruption is used as an extremely important contraction within the narrative of Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan 2001). In the game narrative your advisor, Colonel Campbell, is revealed to be an AI (artificial intelligence) construct gone haywire, and the AI's distortion escalates until Snake is told to turn the console off, and also greeted with the infamous ‘Fission Mailed’ screen instead of ‘Mission Failed’ as an indication that the AI is completely contaminated. Again, the computer draws the magic circle in upon itself, taking control away from the player and instead seems to threaten to autonomously implode. The user is left helpless, seemingly at the mercy of technology gone (literally) mad.

The Blind Breaks

The common link amongst a number of contractions is that they can be legitimately labelled as standard fourth wall breaks. Indeed, there still exist many common, mundane breakages of the fourth wall. Yet the problem persists that the majority of these more obvious breakages of the fourth wall are consistently overlooked. For example, the all too common representational break of dirt on the
‘camera’ following the player in a third-person perspective. Dirt stuck on the screen implies the user is watching through a camera, further implying a camera crew, which of course all implies the player is watching television; all the features something attempting to immerse the player should avoid. Or of course, the omnipresent graphical feature of lens flare, again acknowledging the presence of a camera. These graphical features are used frequently across many games, from roleplaying to action, where cold weather makes the screen frost up, or dirt, dust and water collect upon the lens, and so on.

Whilst this would normally be an unavoidable technical flaw in many of its native mediums, it is actually introduced by the videogame developer to heighten realism, as audiences have come to associate such technical flaws as an admission of reality, as if the producer is admitting that there are certain natural forces that technology still cannot overcome, such as the sun causing lens flare. We, as the audience, have become so used to such visual glitches occurring in our everyday consumption of media, that we have become blind to them, ignorant of their meaning, as Marshall McLuhan quipped, 'we don’t know who first discovered water, but we know it wasn’t the fish' (McLuhan 1966: 70). Simply put, we as media consumers have become so accustomed to the vicarious experiencing of events through television and film, whether that be activities such as athletic sports, motocross racing or piloting aircraft, that we are oblivious to the semiotics of lens flare and dirt on the display, as these features seem natural and correct, their overt meaning, as a sign of mediation (and therefore, to a degree, simulation) is overwritten and negated. In a media saturated culture, lens flare does not signify a lack of reality, it signifies an excess of reality (Merrin 2005).
**Breaking or Enhancing?**

Why then, are these contractions and expansions conjured by the developer? What is the motivation is behind these often sophisticated and complex expansions, and what they have to tell us about the videogame medium and culture?

Again, it is informative to consult the history of the fourth wall. Traditionally standing as the guardian of our suspension of disbelief, the fourth wall is seen as necessary for immersion. It was the area between stage and audience, the wall of the cinema screen, the television set, it was the barrier that allowed us to see into another world without becoming part of it.

Breaking the fourth wall is breaking the suspension of disbelief, whether that was Bertolt Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ that sets itself as the polar opposite to the suspension of disbelief, or a wink to the camera in a film such as *Into The Wild* (Penn 2007) that attempts to surprise the audience through a breaking of narrative convention. No matter the technique, to *break* the fourth wall is normally to *break* the suspension of disbelief, to remind the audience it is just a film, just a television show, just a performance.

Yet in videogames, the inverse will often apply. As mentioned above, many of these so-called fourth wall breaks actually serve to further immerse the player, extending the immersion beyond the screen, and this is where we find the term 'breaking the fourth wall' extremely lacking. Instead of breaking, there is movement, as the wall expands outwards to absorb whatever the game developer deems appropriate to enhance the immersive quality of play.

This expansion is taken to an extreme when the paratext, being the game manual, box or anything else included or associated with the game, becomes a crucial part of the game experience, for example in 1990’s *Startropics* (Nintendo IRD 1990).
for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Packaged with the game was a mysterious letter. The whole plot of the game revolves around the character’s missing uncle, and at one point in the narrative, the player-character receives a seemingly bizarre message from his uncle urging him or her to 'dip the letter in a bucket'. Plunging the packaged letter in water would reveal a code required to make further progress in the game; in doing so the magic circle expands to drag the gamer, letter, bucket and water into the reality of the gameworld. Similar to an ARG (Augmented Reality Game), *Startropics* creates new paratexts from the surrounding environment, asking the player to improvise by actively merging the gameworld with the physical world, and in doing so blurs the boundaries. Though this seems an innovative and enjoyable ludic strategy, such practices can set dangerous precedents inviting commodification and deceptive corporate manipulation, as noted by Stewart (2009).

Comedic contractions of the magic circle are extremely varied in terms of form and presentation, though as mentioned, many fall under the umbrella of what we commonly refer to in videogame vernacular as 'Easter eggs'. In fact the Easter egg has become such a common contraction that it has become a convention in itself to be played upon, such as in the *Grand Theft Auto* series’ (Rockstar Games 1997-present) famous 'NO EASTER EGGS UP HERE' signs placed in hard-to-reach locations across their virtual cityscapes; creating a new category of Easter egg to be discovered, an ironic 'meta-egg'.

*Fig. 3 – An example of the Grand Theft Auto Meta-egg*
In *The Curse of Monkey Island* (LucasArts 1997), during sword fighting sequences, as a nod to LucasArts’ *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) heritage, if the gamer presses shift and J, the swords will now make lightsabre noises. Certain games maintain the comedic trope known as 'Stop Poking Me', began by Blizzard Entertainment in 1994's *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*; this is when clicking on a character a certain number of times initiates a soundbyte where the avatar expresses anger, frustration or confusion at the excessive clicking. The majority of contractions analyzed are comedic in nature, and can be still categorized as traditional fourth wall breaks, largely provided as rewards for exploration or experimentation by the dedicated player, to use Richard Bartle’s terminology (Bartle 2008: online), they are targeted towards the ‘Spade’ players of game culture, those who like to dig deep into the gameworld.
In using such contractions the developer positions the audience in the role of what Jim Collins describes as the knowing bricoleur (2009), he or she who derives pleasure from their agency within the postmodern text, for example intertextual recognition and bricolage based on functional and stylistic conventions that are played upon by both producer and consumer.

For dramatic situations though, it seems an expansion of the wall, rather than a contraction, is generally favoured by the developer, and this is where the concept of breaking the fourth wall is glaringly incompatible. Again, if we turn to Metal Gear Solid 4, the protagonist comes into conflict with the infamous Psycho Mantis character. This antagonist is legendary within the game's fictional universe for his specialization in mind-reading and telekinesis. During this particular encounter, to prove the potency of his power, Psycho Mantis asks the player to put the controller down so he can demonstrate his skill. A few seconds later, in accordance with Psycho Mantis's instruction, the controller vibrates on one side or the other, moving itself left and right at his command. Again, the fourth wall is not broken, but instead moved, as the magic circle expands, so that the player goes beyond and inside the fourth wall, and immerses his or herself further into the fictional world of the videogame. A direct connection is made not simply between avatar and gameworld, but hardware and gameworld, object and gameworld, player and gameworld. As the fiction becomes momentarily tangible, so is the potency of the magic circle increased.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this article illustrates how the concept of 'breaking the fourth wall' is at the moment insufficient for describing the possibilities of interaction between the user and the fictional world offered by the digital game. The inherent
potential for these games to not only break the fourth wall, but to expand it, relocating it entirely behind the player, as a tool of immersion, is something quite unique, and actually in complete opposition to the effect of breaking the wall in the first instance.

Whilst breaking the fourth wall is traditionally the flow of diegetic into the nondiegetic world, certain videogames reverse this flow, drawing the nondiegetic into the diegetic.

Instead of continuing the unproductive practice of labelling these examples erroneously as fourth wall breaks, we need to employ a new terminology appropriate to the digital game medium, one that comprehends precisely how and why they alter the player's experience. The critical element of this new perspective lies in viewing these phenomena not as the wall breaking, but instead as the wall moving, as the contracting and expanding of a dynamic magic circle within which the player is immersed. In doing so we can gain a much more exact understanding of their use within game design, culture and consumption, and what this has to communicate about the new possibilities for expression offered by the digital game complex.

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**Video Games and Media**


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SCE Studios Santa Monica, *God of War* (2005)


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i  “Outside of thought”, used by Aarseth (1997) to describe the digital game’s requirement for decisive physical activity above and beyond page turning or eye movement.

ii  An Easter egg is information (text, sound, imagery) hidden by the developer within the game for discovery by the player.