Connecting Worlds. Fantasy Role-Playing Games, Ritual Acts and the Magic Circle


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Abstract: Categories Theoretical Perspectives: game definitions and the construction of the magical circle. Research Methodologies and Case Studies: Role Playing Games and the Fantasy subculture in the Netherlands. Abstract As I demonstrated in my article ‘The Other Game Researcher’ (presented at Level Up DIGRA gamesconference 2003), on the development of game studies and a game research methodology, I’m fascinated by the construction and workings of borders. Herein I discussed how game researchers are busy doing game studies: researching, writing and publishing articles, organizing conferences and creating a curriculum. I argued that creating a new autonomous discipline such as game studies mainly involves constructing boundaries on different levels. In this paper I will take the ideas as presented in ‘The Other Game Researcher’ a step further. Here I will focus on the construction of borders and spaces in games and play. Specifically the borders of play and space/time as they are constructed in my object of research: (fantasy) Role Playing Games (RPG). In this analysis I will not only focus on digital RPGs (Multi User Dungeons and Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) but also on ‘analogue’ RPGs such as the table-top ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ game and Live Action Role Playing (LARP). I will argue that these games are quite literally ‘worlds of play’, which tend to exist in a mixed reality. RPGs are not only constructed in the fantasy world of the game but also in the daily life of the players. Therefore the fantasy subculture surrounding these games, existing in the daily life of the players, is crucial in this analysis. I will focus on the construction of borders and space/ time in these games and the fantasy subculture in the Netherlands from various perspectives/levels. I would like to discuss how RPGs are at the same time included but also excluded from definitions of (digital) games and play. It will be argued why this ‘being on the border’ of RPGs is exactly what makes them interesting and useful to research. Secondly, I will discuss how the game space or the magical circle as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga called it, works in RPGs. I will discuss how in analogue and digital RPGs this is not an already existing and closed framework but a space that is being constructed in time. This theoretical analysis will be embedded in examples from the fieldwork I conducted at the yearly Elf Fantasy Fair in the Netherlands (2003 and 2004, http://www.elffantasy.nl). This festival is important in the Dutch Fantasy subculture as it attracts more than 20.000 participants, who are interested in fantasy and RPGs. To contextualize the Dutch Fantasy Role Playing scene in an international perspective I will refer to US (Fine and Mackay) and Scandinavian (Nordic role-playing convention publications) theoretical research and fieldwork on RPGs. By using this information I will discuss how the magical circle is being constructed with diffuse borders. In Fantasy Role Playing Games the magical circle is constructed and performed as a ritual space, in which players create identities and meaning because they are performing the game between worlds. References Aarseth, Espen, “Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer games” (1998). As LARP Grows Up -Theory and Methods in LARP (2003), Copier, Marinka, “The Other Game Researcher - Participating in and watching the construction of boundaries in game studies” in: Level Up Conference Proceedings (2003). Fine, Gary Allen, Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds (1983). Huizinga, Johan, Homo Ludens (1938). Juul, Jesper, Half-Real. Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds (Copenhagen, 2003). Mackay, Daniel, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game. A New Performing Art (2001). Montola, Markus and Jaakko Stenros ed., Beyond Role and Play. Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination (2004). Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman, Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals (2003).

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