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Internet Connections: Rethinking the Video Game Console Experience

In this paper I will elaborate on the question what happens when the Internet becomes a part of video game consoles. This is not a question concerning only technical side of the consoles or game design but extends to the questions how games could be studied and the workings of a digital culture in general.

In recent years video game sector has grown biggest in game market. In 2008 “game console software sales totaled \$8.9 billion with 189.0 million units sold” whereas “computer games sales were \$701.4 million with 29.1 million units sold”.¹ Our starting point and the case at hand is Microsoft’s video game console Xbox360 and its operating system “the New Xbox Experience”. Compared with the old operating system it has a new kind of graphical interface. What is even more important, from our view, is the way the internet is encompassed within its environment. Unlike competing next generation consoles (PS3, Wii), the Internet is not brought to Xbox360 in its obvious representation. There is no web browser in the Xbox360. This however does not mean that the Internet is absent or irrelevant to the NXE. On the contrary the Internet is a ubiquitous part of the NXE: it is constantly present but not on the screen.

When the internet is not represented or given a representable identity, it is present in the form of non-existence described by Galloway and Thacker in their book *the Exploit* (2007). For Galloway and Thacker non-existence has nothing to do with absence, lack, invisibility or non-being. Non-existence is full. It permeates through the whole NXE and Xbox360 environment while not being visible. In the following I will try to show how the connection of the Internet and the console form a constitutive logic for video games. It establishes different kind of virtual possibilities for actualizations. Thus Galloway and Thacker say that non-existence is not totalizing but tactical.²

§1 Platform

In his two writings “Protected Mode” and “There Is No Software” Friedrich Kittler has criticized the tendency of technological culture to hide the meaning of hardware and emphasize the meaning of software. For Kittler graphic user interfaces come in between the user and the machine as systems of operation and hide the machine

¹ <http://www.theesa.com/facts/salesandgenre.asp>

² Cf. Alexander Galloway & Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 2007, 135-136. For Galloway and Thacker nonexistence is a weapon of emancipation from the limitations of control society. What I argue however is that nonexistence is also a logic of main stream network culture that has nothing to do with rebellion or counter-practices.

behind the operations.³ At the same time the hardware is hidden and made almost impossible to access directly by protected modes.⁴ Putting the criticism aside from Kittler's arguments we can derive that a technological device such as computer or here a video game console works in two different layers: the hardware and the software. For example Xbox360's hardware is consisted of among others triple-layer Xenon CPU, Ati Xenos graphical interface with 10MB of eDRAM memory, 512MB of Ram and a network adapter. Following Kittler, for this hardware we do not have a direct access. There is a graphical interface; an operating system called the New Xbox Experience that "offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware".⁵ Parting from Kittler and following Laurie N. Taylor I suggest that platform studies cannot distinguish the hardware and the software so strictly.⁶ Video game console platform is combined by the relationship of interface, software and the hardware and indeed it is this relationship that needs to be researched not only the games made for the platform.

On one hand one can look at the platform from a *technical* point of view. This stance would understand the video game consoles as machines and it would differentiate the consoles through the usages that the machine allows. Technical point of view would look at the video game consoles and what you can do with them e.g. you can buy a game and you can play it with multiple players through a network connection. Thus it relates to Marshall McLuhan's idea of machines as prosthetic extensions of a man. Machines are, to put it bluntly, tools or means to an end. This means a deterministic view of technology and does not take into an account the network of different possibilities the platform has to offer. Another problem for the technical point of view would be that it understands the NXE through a representational pattern. Software is understood as a reflection of the hardware and thus its own powers are reduced.

On the other, and this is our standing point, one can look at the platform from a *technological* view. A common approach, according to Félix Guattari, suggests that machines are a subset of technology and thus thought as dependent to technology. Interesting things appear, however, when this view is inverted, when we think of machines as prerequisite for technology. This, as Guattari proposes, calls a reconstruction of the concept of the machine. The first point that Guattari stresses is that we must not think a machine as a technical machine. Hence even the most compact and material definition of a machine as something that has been made, points to the necessity of expanding the limits of a machine to the assemblage that has lead to its creation (creator, economy, production etc.).⁷ In this sense machines are abstract. Guattari calls them "montages capable of relating all

³ Friedrich Kittler, "There is No Software." CTheory 10/18/1995.

⁴ Friedrich Kittler, "Protected Mode." In Friedrich Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems*. Routledge 1997, (156-168) 159-161.

⁵ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge". Gray Room 18, 2005 (pp 26-51), 43.

⁶ Laurie N. Taylor, "Platform Dependent: Console and Computer Cultures." In Williams J., Patrick Smith et al. (eds.) *Player's Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming*. Jefferson NC: Macfarland & CO 2007 (pp. 223-238) , 235.

⁷ Félix Guattari. *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aestetic paradigm*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, 33-34.

heterogeneous levels that they traverse” from material to semiotic components, information to desire and mental representations etc.⁸ To put it bluntly, machines have the potentiality of becoming. Machines are much more than functional or deterministic elements. They are always able to connect to other machines, other assemblages and thus carry with them the potentiality for deterritorialization and change.⁹

This, the logic of how machines function, is technology in the etymological meaning of the word as the expression of a system, the logic how system works.¹⁰ Thus what is important is not so the technical details that comprises the platform but the logic of technology it establishes. Using a technological viewpoint, two simultaneously working levels of a video game console can be seen. The first level is the technical side (e.g. processors, controllers, network connections), and the second level is the software (or more precise the operating system, games etc.). These two comprise the abstract machine of video game console, which creates connections in heterogeneous networks.

§2 Games as Objects

Ontologically speaking there are two different main lines in the understandings of what a game is: the first view understands games as objects and the second as processes. Basically when games are conceived as objects one is interested in what kind of internments or spaces of enclosure the game forms and what is its essence.¹¹ I will use the widely discussed and abundantly criticized concept of “magic circle” as an example of the object motivated games research.

The idea of magic circle was introduced by John Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1950) where he supposed that a game experience happens in a particular spatio-temporal location:

“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 round, hallowed, within special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”¹²

The concept of magic circle was adopted and re-introduced to game studies by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in 2004. Basically these authors use the concept of magic circle to frame or delimit the playing experience. “In a

⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁹ Jussi Parikka, “Ethologies of Software Art: What Can a Digital Body of Code Do?”. In Simon O’Sullivan & Stephen Zepke (eds.). *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Forthcoming 2009/2010.

¹⁰ Technology in the Online Etymology Dictionary. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=technology>

¹¹ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”. October 59, Winter 1992 (pp. 3-7), 4.

¹² John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. New York: Routledge 1998, 10.

very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins.”¹³

In Salen & Zimmerman’s reading of Huizinga the idea of magic circle is used “to emphasize the importance of a distinct boundary between games and ordinary life”.¹⁴ The magic circle sets up a frame for the game and cuts it off from the surrounding world: the game creates a new world or reality which is “defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by players”.¹⁵ Every time a player wants to play a game she transforms from the ordinary world to a game world. Through the idea of magic circle one can think games as independent magical worlds which are not connected to surrounding world.¹⁶ Thus the game is understood as an object; an entity which covers a separate spatial location.

Now, as recognized by a number of game researchers, this position is problematic. Especially Marinka Copier has targeted her criticism against the whole concept of magic circle and its usefulness in game research because the idea of magic circle is based on the dichotomy of real world/game world and it seems evident that these two interlap and interact.¹⁷ This was also noticed by Huizinga, who realized that playing the game was paradoxal by nature: on the one hand playing happens in a strictly limited spatio-temporal location and on the other it affects our daily lives e.g. in the form of relaxation or compliment.

Let’s get back briefly and consider the usefulness of the idea of magic circle in our case. Could it be used to define and conceptualize the new console experience? Let me start with an example. One basic assumption in regard to video game consoles has been that using the game console to play a game is relatively easy. “Anyone can use a game console with less than few minutes of setting up and a few more minutes of getting used to the controller (for many games at least). There’s no technical expertise required it’s as easy as plug and play!”¹⁸ The player just inserts the game disc into the machine and enters the world of magic circle. Is this assumption, however, valid in relation to next generation video game consoles?

To start with, where does the game begin? There are various actual and virtual services which are or could be conducted before the game itself starts. Before playing a game the player must use the operating system to access

¹³ Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Massachusetts: MIT Press 2003, 95.

¹⁴ Olli Sotamaa, *Player’s Game*. Tampere: Tampere University Press 2009, 42.

¹⁵ Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Massachusetts: MIT Press 2003, 96.

¹⁶ To avoid building a straw man here, one must notice that Salen and Zimmerman are well aware that the magic circle is not necessarily a closed system. However, this notion leads them to building a complicated model where games are understood through a 3 layer system which takes into account rules, play and culture as different kinds of systems with different kinds logics of openness and closeness.

¹⁷ Marinka Copier, *Beyond the Magic Circle*. Utrecht: Utrecht University 2007, 32.; Marinka Copier “Connecting Worlds: Fantasy Role-Playing Games, Ritual Acts and the Magic Circle.” *Digra* 2005.

¹⁸ Karn Spydar Lee Bianco, “Console Games Vs. Computer Games.” http://videogames.lovetoknow.com/wiki/Console_Games_Vs._Computer_Games. (Accessed May 28, 2009.)

the game. The player may need to update the OS before she can start playing. Moreover, when the game disc is inserted to a console, a service checks if there are new updates for the game available and the user must download them before she can start playing. The game itself is not necessarily enclosed by the rules or the structure of the game. The player might use some add-ons or modifications generated by, not only the producers of the game, but also other players of the game. These are established by the use of a hard drive and network connection and digitally distributed e.g. in a market place created by the manufacturer.

There are also many in-game features that do not seem to fit into the closed set of a magic circle. Player might be connected into a network of players by using a multiplayer feature. In multiplayer mode players are able to communicate with each other and the discussions may or may not relate to game events. Through progression the player collects Achievements, points or trophies which indicate the progression in the game and also the skill level of the player. Achievements connect players' gaming experience in a larger context and enable players to compare their gaming skills. In a way they build a game outside singular game based on Achievements. To sum it up, these features are just a scratch of a surface of a new console experience. There seems to be many features that are included in the game but are not fitted into a frame of magic circle as distinct game world detached from the external world.¹⁹ "Gameplay", as Seth Giddings puts it, "is a vivid example of the generation of new relationships and distributions of effect, affect and feedback in everyday digital culture".²⁰

§3 Connections

When playing a game is understood in the means of magic circle the video game console is an intermediary, something, according to Bruno Latour, "what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs. For all practical purposes, an intermediary can be taken not only as a black box, but also as a black box counting for one, even if it is internally made of many parts."²¹ The console is simplified as a single black box and the experience understood as action itself (playing a game) and the presumed author of that action (the player). In this kind of view the meaning of the platform (Xbox360) is downsized, as critiqued by Taylor, but also the concept of a machine is understood too narrowly, as Guattari warns us not to do. After all, the game as an event is constituted by many actors as Seth Giddings puts it:

¹⁹ My criticism is pointed on the common notion of the magic circle developed by Salen & Zimmerman. This, however, does not mean that the concept itself is useless. For example Jesper Juul has argued that the magic circle should be understood as an imperfect boundary between the real world and the game world which is constantly negotiated. In fact Juul's conceptualization approaches the understanding of games as processes which will be developed in the following chapters. Jesper Juul, "The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece".*Digarec* 2008:01, 62.

²⁰ Seth Giddings, "Events and Collusions: A Glossary for the Microethnography of Video Game Play." *Games and Culture* 2009 (vol.4 no. 2, pp. 144-157), 150.

²¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 39; N.B. A video game console, such as Xbox360, may look like a black box but only from the outside as I am trying to show.

“To play a digital game is to plug oneself into a cybernetic circuit. Any particular game-event is realized through feedback between computer components, human perception, imagination and motor skills, and software elements from virtual environments to intelligent agents.”²²

Thus we should not think of the Xbox360 and its technology as an intermediary but in Latour’s terms as a mediator. Mediators “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements” it is supposed to carry.²³ The insistence of both, Guattari to think of machines beyond technical and of Latour to open up intermediaries and show how they actually are mediators, implies on the importance of materiality in game studies.

Now this is the point of return to the non-existence of the internet in Xbox360. As mentioned before Xbox360 does not have an Internet browser but the Internet however permeates the video game console and also changes the game experience. Microsoft calls the Internet in the Xbox360 as Xbox LIVE;

Xbox LIVE is evolving entertainment, in the way we watch, the way we play, the way we come together for fun. Find the perfect game with a free trial of hundreds of titles from the largest library available. Extend the fun of your favorites with Game Add-ons like new songs, levels and characters then invite friends all over the world to connect, cheer and play along. Plus, with thousands of HD movies and TV episodes to watch instantly from Netflix, movie night flickers to life at the press of a button. Connect your Xbox 360 to Xbox LIVE today, it’s free.²⁴

Now it is the Internet, the non-human actor that makes the Xbox live. It is the relation of the Internet and the Xbox360 that works as an example of both the new video game console experience and forces us to find a method of study that does not conceive games as objects.

Of course what should be noted is that you can play games with the Xbox360 without a connection to the Internet. Thus the internet is not obligatory or necessary connection point for playing but it is present in the playing experience. Following Ned Rossiter's demand for radical empirism the Xbox360 and the new console experience could be considered in terms of “*movement* between that which has emerged and the conditions of possibility”.²⁵ Keeping this in mind the new console experience draws upon two different categories: digital distribution and social networks.

Digital distribution allows content to be distributed through Internet. There are hundreds of games and game demos that you can download with Xbox360. The database is accessed only with the video game console and it is made a part of the console’s operating system. It is made so ubiquitous that the user does not necessarily know

²² Seth Giddings, “Playing with Non-Humans: Digital Games as Techno-Cultural Form.” *Digra* 2005.

²³ *Ibid*, 39.

²⁴ <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/live/joinlive.htm>

²⁵ Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers 2006, 178.

when she is using the virtual database and when accessing the hard drive of her own console. In addition to games movies and tv-series can be downloaded from the Xbox LIVE and watched with the Xbox360.

Digital distribution has also generated a whole new culture that concentrates around player production and distributing user created content. There are different kinds of game add-ons like characters, levels and music that is produced by players themselves and downloadable by other players. Player production refers to multiple interesting concepts from post-fordist labour to commodities and player identities.²⁶ On the level of game design it means a shift from a fixed concept of a game to a much flexible and open concept of a game. Game is altered and modified. Player's can change almost everything from graphics to sound effects.²⁷ At the same time game characters are brought to other games and the boundaries between games are mixed. I would argue that player production and its increase as a part of game culture relates to advances in technology but also to the new logic of what technology introduces to games and the game culture. Heterogeneous networks are not receptive but also productive. This alters the games and affirms them as processes, products in the state of constant becoming.

Other category closely linked to digital distribution and the internet is the emergence of social networks in relation to games and video game consoles. The stereotype of young nerd male playing a game alone in his chamber and loosing social connections to friends and family seems to be more and more out of date. For example in a research of multiplayer games Jansz and Martens found out that the social aspect of multiplayer game was considered as the most important reason for playing.²⁸ Playing a game is not, however, the only form of social around video games. There are new social organizations evolving around video games and player production. Content is being distributed through these networks and they also seem to have social capital that can be gained only from being involved with the games and game culture.

These are already actualized modes of the new console experience. Virtually there are developments going on in the social side to bring social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter into console environment. Digital distribution on the other seems to be developing towards a more centralized model of gaming such as Xbox Live Primetime which offers a possibility to participate on centrally managed quiz shows.

§4 Games as processes

As shown above games are becoming involved in heterogeneous networks. Digital distribution and social networks are two modes that are changing the way how we understand games. Games are moving from closed systems or molds towards modulations. They seem to change even after being released. The boundaries of the

²⁶ Olli Sotamaa, *The Player's Game*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2009. Passim.

²⁷ Halo 3 for Xbox360 works as an example.

²⁸ Jeroen Jansz & Lonneke Martens, "Gaming at a LAN Event: the Social Context of Playing Video Games". *New Media Society* 2005; 7 (pp. 333-355), 335, 348-349. For sociality in single person games see James Newman, *Videogames*. London & New York: Routledge 2007, 145-162.

game and its exterior are blurring. Theories that consider games as objects have difficulties to grasp this change. Thus we need to change our focus. This means not to ask what games are but how they work. We need to move from essence to events or accidents. That is to the process of a game in becoming-a-game.

In his editorial for the first issue of *Game Studies* journal Espen Aarseth gives a definition for games as both object and process. Process in relation to games for Aarseth means that games cannot be read or listened but they must be played.²⁹ I agree with Aarseth that the second ontological take on games would understand them as processes. However, I suggest that games are processes whether they are played or not.

The claim that a game is both an object and a process deals the nature of an object and how it is being researched.³⁰ The idea of magic circle approach to game studies is one of abstraction. The game is defined by abstracting it from the outside. There is an assumption that through abstraction the real essence of the game can be revealed. However and this basically is the critique for empirism posed by Louis Althusser, when an essence is “revealed” through an abstraction a constitutive outside is neglected.³¹ This means that the object in this model is understood abstracted from e.g. social-political, historical or technological conditions that have affected into its formation. If we want to understand the object in a way that also the constitutive outside is taken as a part of the object, a more machinic approach in a guattarian sense is needed.

Guattari’s understanding of a machine suggests that a fixed identity cannot be given to an object. An object is always connected to heterogeneous levels and these levels effect on the formation of the object. Hence Deleuze and Guattari propose that instead of being we should be interested in becoming: “the replacement of static conceptions of things through the creation of dynamic conceptions of processes in continual transition.”³²

When we adapt the deleuzean and guattarian approach to Espen Aarseth’s notion that games are both objects and process, it starts to make sense in a new way. A game is an object but an object is a process which is formed through contingencies and forces in certain situation. A classic example of what it means to understand an object as a process comes from Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1907). Bergson asks what actually happens when sugar and water is mixed in a glass. For Bergson these three actors form a new collective in which the nature of each part changes: in a period of time the sugar melts into the water. Important here is the fact that the melting is a process and it has duration. Now what science tends to do is to isolate these processes and understand them as closed systems but in fact, according to Bergson, these abstractions are never real but mostly used for the

²⁹ Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One”. *Game Studies* 2001 vol.1 no.1.

³⁰ Cf. Jesper Juul, “The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece”. *Digarec* 2008:01, 60-62.

³¹ Cf. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*. London: Verso, 1979 35-38.

³² Elizabeth Grosz, “Deleuze, Bergson and Becoming”. 2004. <http://www.uq.edu.au/~uqmlacaz/ElizabethGrosz%27stalk16.3.05.htm>

convenience of study. In the event, matter does not have an end and isolation is never complete. For Bergson the matter only has a tendency to form collectives that seem to be closed systems. The isolation is not absolute.³³

Based on this we can say that a process not only has a duration (when conceived as an isolated closed system) but that it also is in a duration (when understood as a part of an ever changing whole). This dual nature of temporality can be said to be the base of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze who has rephrased and developed it through the concepts of actual and virtual and their relation. According to Deleuze, every object has two sides: actual and virtual.³⁴ Brian Massumi has deciphered virtual as “the future-past of present: a thing's destiny and its condition to exist” whereas actual is the thing's being as a dynamic process.³⁵ The virtual is as real as the actual. It is a part of the thing and consists of “the differential elements and relations along with the singular points which correspond to them”.³⁶ Thus for Deleuze the virtual is an ontological concept denoting “*potentiality*; the manifold directions in which a given, actual, situation *might* develop”.³⁷

The virtual is a structure from where the actual formations emerge and they emerge through two different determinations: *differentiation* and *differenciation*. *Differentiation* is understood as the virtual content of an idea and the actualization of this idea into species and parts is called *differenciation*. Every actualization into parts or species happens as a solution to a differentiated problem or the conditions of that problem.³⁸ Thus to become a game means that there is a certain virtual idea what a game is or consists of and through *differenciation* an actualization of this idea is emerged and individuated into a specific game product. However it must be stressed that the actualized and individuated game is not complete or closed system. On the contrary, due its dual nature it is constantly folded back into virtual; *differentiated* as a part of future actualizations bending towards what new it might become.

Game is a process because it can actualize virtualities. It has a potentiality to become something else. A good example, to put this in specific terms, is the culture of modding around games. Basically every game can be modified because it is based on code. The graphics, sound effects and the soundtrack can be changed. These modifications are distributed through the internet and the players can choose modifications they want and thus affirm different virtual possibilities the game could become.

§5 Conclusion

³³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Elecbook 1907, 9-10, 327.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. New York & London: Continuum 2004, 260.

³⁵ Brian Massumi, *A Users Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Massachusetts: MIT Press 1992, 36-37.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* New York & London: Continuum 2004, 209.

³⁷ Nick Dyer-Witheford & Greig de Peuter “Empire@Play: Virtual Games and Global Capitalism”. CTheory.net 5/13/2009.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* New York & London: Continuum 2004, 258.

A singular game is a part of a wider network surrounding it. Popular phenomena such as modding, digital downloads and gaming communities expand the limits of a video game towards a game event. To understand this change we need to reconsider the focus and methodology of game studies. Games are processes. They connect into different actor-networks. Through these connections their nature is not stable but it constantly modulates – becomes other. By understanding games as processes of actual and virtual we can start thinking (1) what potentials they hold, and (2) how they work inside the logic of societies of control.