

# Performing Within the Threshold: Girlhood Themed Games as Transformative Spaces

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2003, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman coined the phrase “possibility spaces” for digital games. They perceived a successful design to be one that fosters a player’s agency to explore and enact numerous possibilities. The medium’s interactive nature has continued to inspire several theorisations of the game space concerning the impacts of its exploratory and agentic affordances upon the player’s personal reality. Among these, game spaces have been understood as a “rehearsal process” (Nitsche, 2008); an “arena” for the “practice of tension and relief” (Jørgensen and Mortensen, 2020); as “existential simulators” (de Miranda, 2018); or even as “life simulators” (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020).

Taking place within these conceptions of game space is a paradoxical application of Johan Huizinga’s “magic circle” ([1938] 1980); a conception that distinguishes play from the ‘real world.’ The paradox lies with the theorization of games as both a safe ground for inconsequential experimentation – for it is presumed separate from reality – while at the same time impacting the player’s real-life convictions, empathy, or sense of self. To be sure, the magic circle’s legitimacy has been disputed (Consalvo, 2009; Crawford, 2015; Jakobsson & Pargman, 2008). Yet I embrace its paradoxical application in order to comprehend the formative potential of game space within a gendered context.

This paper proposes an approach for understanding the potential functions of girlhood themed games upon girl players. By ‘girlhood themed,’ I refer to content that features adolescent girl protagonists coupled with coming-of-age themes, primarily the negotiation of social and identity trials. These apply to numerous styles of play, although I limit my discussion to single-player, offline games as they are more suitable for private self-reflection. In questioning how videogame interactivity alters how we make sense of girlhood representations, I find girlhood game spaces to offer navigable sites for potential transformation. These spaces enable girl players to perform, rehearse, try on, and experiment with identity within their unreal settings. In this way, I am drawing upon those conceptions of game spaces as arenas, simulators or ‘magic circles.’ A more specified theoretical framework, however, is necessitated when dealing with this particular set of thematically connected games.

To determine the transformative potential of girlhood games, I turn to Victor Turner’s (1969) use of the term ‘liminality’ to describe a life stage composed of trials and

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initiation; frequently likened (but by no means exclusive) to adolescence. For Turner, those passing through this life stage enter into a suspended threshold space that operates between the structured and rule-bound ‘preliminal’ and ‘postliminal’ establishments (such as childhood and adult societies). This in-between, transitory space therefore affords a degree of freedom that gives way to playful thoughts, feelings and actions (Turner, 1969, vii). The concept of liminal space therefore resembles the separate space of the magic circle, yet offers a more specified framework when considering coming-of-age themes. The concept further invites feminist adaptation, as the freedoms of the less regulated liminal stage empower girls to challenge the limits of the status-quo (Bellás, 2017). (Consider the common refrain, “It’s just a phase” to excuse girls’ actions that are otherwise socially unacceptable as children or adults).

While narratively invoking liminal themes of adolescence, I propose that girlhood games may also be read as liminal spaces themselves. They hold the potential for productive transformation as their fictional worlds resemble the threshold’s own freedoms for experimental subversion. This is particularly the case when considering texts that feature teen heroines undermining the status-quo, like *Ikenfell* (Happy Ray Games, 2020), *Jenny LeClue: Detectivü* (Mografi 2019), *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), and *Oxenfree* (Night School Studios, 2016). Within such spaces, girl players may actively participate in their on-screen avatar’s resourcefulness, improvisation and transgression. They are hence liable to approach their own realities with critical subversion when emerging from the text.

It is crucial to emphasise that girls are not to be positioned as passive consumers of girlhood games. While many videogames certainly endeavor to construct gendered identities (Chess 2017), players are not wholly susceptible to their influence. This paper rather perceives the interconnection between girl players and girlhood games as an active process (see Bellás, 2017), wherein girls actively engage with the text as a source for crafting their own multidimensional identities.

## BIO

Stephanie Harkin is PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. Her research is interested in interactive designs of girlhood and coming-of-age themes in videogames.

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