

Liminality, Embodiment and Metamorphosis: Applying The Transformative Power of Ceremonial Magic to Mixed Reality Games Design

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ABSTRACT

In this extended abstract we borrow components of ceremonial magic design, with centuries of empirical practice of altering normality, consciousness, and sense of self, momentarily or with more lingering effects, with the aim to explore how they can be used to design meaningful, immersive game experiences.

Keywords

ceremonial magic, mixed reality games, mixed reality, embodiment, meaning making, liminality, design method

INTRODUCTION

Dion Fortune paraphrased the famous Crowley statement, defining magic as 'the art of causing changes to take place in consciousness in accordance with will' (Fortune, 1934), and it could easily be seen as a piece of advice for any games design neophyte. Magical practices, as manifested through occult ceremonies, have since ancient times connected the real world with the 'other', a new state of existence to which one arrives through the transformative ceremonial experience, a metamorphosis. Video games often offer players a similar experience bringing players from the real world into the virtual gameworld, where narrative and gameplay engage the players in meaning making, eventually helping them to form new understandings. In magical practices this state is referred to as an alternate state of consciousness, 'a change in the individual's pattern of mental functioning' (Tart, 1972). Altering participants' state of emotion, mind and reality according to their will, is a common goal to the magician and the experience designer.

Ceremonial magic practices require, among other things, embodied understandings through interaction, to create an immersive, meaningful experience for the ritual participants (Lycourinos, 2017; Mohyuddin, 2015). Embodied interaction is also a

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strong property of the experience of playing Mixed Reality games (MR), games that use a range of MR technologies in the MR continuum as described by (Milgram and Kishino, 1994), such as mobile augmented reality (AR), AR/VR headsets and smart glasses, and Augmented Virtuality setups. Within this unfolding design space that aims for ‘immersion’ and embodied ‘presence’ (Schuemie et al. 2004), the body, the players’ motivations and actions, representation, and the emotional and cognitive processes at play become an important challenge for a smooth and fun player experience that bridges the real with the virtual. If we consider magical practices as communication practices between the practitioner and their entities of choice, or their own subconscious, can they provide a useful bridge between the physical and the digital experience, connecting the ancient knowledge with the state of the art immersive experience?

In (Dima and Saridaki, forthcoming) we sketched a theoretical framework for applying ceremonial magic design to MR experience design drawing on components of ceremonial magic design, and by interviewing occultists and MR designers. In this work in progress we aim to extend the framework to MR game design. In our initial framework we highlight important components of this process such as the use of dramaturgy, settings and ceremonial masks, real or virtual, appropriate use of the myth as narrative, enabling performative enaction, synchronicities, ‘coincidence of events that appear meaningfully related but do not seem to be causally connected’ (Jung, 1973), and permanent or impermanent state of metamorphosis. The framework’s pillars are (Dima and Saridaki, forthcoming):

Orientation happens at the preparatory stage, before the game begins. This crucial stage initiates the player in what follows and helps them embed themselves in the game environment which consists of the device, the space, the story, and themselves as protagonists. On and off boarding methods, the design terms used to denote the start and end of the acquaintance with the experience, are important to establish the context, and setting, such as the role of the device and the player’s in the story, clear objectives and directives, and appropriate conclusion at the end.

Transitions involve design questions with respect to how the player proceeds. Transition from state to state, however this is defined in the game, creates liminal spaces and being in these ephemeral spaces should not stop meaning making. How can the design cater for this?

Enaction is about meaning making through acting, sensing, and playing. The body and the senses take central roles in the game, and meaning making becomes embodied, players arrive at metamorphosis through their embodied interaction with the game. The body exists in a physical, virtual or hybrid space and becomes the interface to the game system. What opportunities does this open for gameplay? How best can designers tap into embodied cognition and synchronicity to enable smooth and meaningful embodied, perhaps participatory, interactions?

Meaning Making, metamorphosis, subsumes all considerations, and is realised through them. As (van de Goor et al., 2020) state, “Although there is no clear consensus on the conceptualization of meaning, four dimensions are predominant across various perspectives: coherence, purpose, significance, and self-transcendence” (van de Goor et al., 2020, p. 2).

The questions that drive our theoretical exploration are asked from the perspective of game design methods and are meant to offer a new approach to concept creation for MR games. The main research questions we ask are: what kind of MR games are we creating if we base their design on principles of ceremonial magic design? Given the

characteristics and affordances of the so-called immersive technologies, what type of mechanics do they inspire, and how do we include the body, space and narrative in order to invite meaning making? How do we harness the transformative power of ceremonial magic to achieve the potential of meaning making?

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