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## Playing with Flickr:

### Casual and pervasive games and creative play

DRAFT PAPER

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#### Introduction and Context

This paper is intended as part of a larger research project about the uses of Flickr.com and other digital practices, tentatively called "Playing with Flickr" taking a Cultural Studies approach in the sense, that it centres on the study of the forms and practices of culture as well as the study of texts and artefacts, in order to arrive at an ecological view of the varied social and cultural practices surrounding online sites like Flickr.

The research methods employed are a combination of 'ethno-semiotic' methodologies (Fiske 1992): Close readings of selected photographs or series of photographs and of the context they are situated in, and methodologies derived from (visual) ethnography and sociology, in order gain a deeper understanding of the purposes, pleasures and meanings that the users or "vernacular artists formerly known as consumers" (Bednar 1999) ascribe to their practices, and how they share "not only common readings but also common interaction practices". I am only at the beginning of the project, busy with gaining an overview and developing a theoretical framework, and part of what I am saying is speculative; later this year I hope to be able to start the empirical, ethnographic parts of the research.

I presume, I do not have to introduce Flickr.com as such, as it has become a household name. In fact, it is considered one of the earliest and fastest growing Web 2.0 applications - Flickr has been used to define Web 2.0 and the notion of user generated content. Launched in 2004, Flickr as of November 2007 holds 2 billion photos uploaded by an estimated number of 6-8 million users, with 300.000 groups (Cox 2007, quoting Sieberg 2007)

In trying to identify a range of different practices of how people organize around and through Flickr, I found that Flickr serves both established and new uses of personal photography, that is, Flickr continues to serve social uses of photography predating the arrival of digital technologies, and also facilitates new practices.

Here is a brief overview: Well established uses of personal photography developed in the course of the last century are (1) the construction of personal and group memory and the construction of identity in creating personal narratives (2) the creation and maintenance of social relationships (3) self-expression and self-presentation. Essentially digital photography continues to serve the same personal and social functions, but online photo sharing in general, and 'playing with Flickr' specifically is changing the shape of these practices to some extent. (Van House 2004, 2007)

Furthermore, Flickr also affords new activities and ways of social interaction through photography, for example (4) learning through participation in an (online) 'community of practice' or 'affinity space'. (5) It also enables new forms of play, for example through the formation of thematic groups and the creation and use of mashup applications, and (6) it facilitates the participation in (visual) discourses on social practices. (7) Flickr also supports vernacular creativity beyond the realm of photography. (8) Finally it also enables to generate knowledge not only through mash-up applications, but also by providing (visual) data for social research and visual ethnography.

In this paper I will focus on Flickr as a game, or more specifically how Flickr turns the use of digital photographs into a game and how it facilitates various forms of creative play. 'Playing with Flickr' is possible in many different ways - in terms of digital games research terminology 'playing with Flickr' can happen in the form of 'casual, non-immersive or coincidental form of play', can take the shape of a massively multiplayer online game, but also the form of a pervasive game (Montola 2005).

Why would anybody want to consider Flickr as a game, rather than just another version of a photo-hosting or a social networking site? In fact, the architecture of Flickr was originally based on a game design. Flickr creators Stewart Butterfield and Catarina Fake and their co-creators at Ludicorp were working on a massively multiplayer online game, 'Game Neverending,' which was in beta from 2002 to early 2004, and then was discarded (Burgess 2007). Elements created for GNE, including features for sharing photography provided the basis of what became Flickr, which was launched in February 2004. With Burgess (2007) I would argue, that Flickr's *playability* is one of the main defining features, which differentiates Flickr from other

photo-hosting services and social network sites and has contributed to its popularity and reputation.

Popular accounts of the origins of extremely successful media phenomena tend to relate some from of 'creation myth' or a kind of 'auteur theory', (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003, see also du Gay et al.1997 in their Story of the Sony Walkman), whereby the creators of a media product and their original vision are celebrated as results of creative genius, and the production story is narrated as something of a 'surprise success story.'

Burgess (2007) in her dissertation points out that Stewart Butterfield and Catarina Fake enjoyed somewhat of a celebrity status as A-list bloggers and "high profile participants in intellectual web culture and enterprise." (Burgess 2007, p.130) So while I would say that the 'creation story' of Flickr needs further validation, I would still like to quote Stewart Butterfield on Game Neverending:

„The secret is, even though it's called Game Neverending, it's not really a game at all. It's a social space designed to facilitate and enable play. The game-elements are there to provide both the constraints and the building blocks of interaction - since the thing you'll notice about the kind of play I'm talking about above is that it is the kind of thing that goes on between people.”<sup>1</sup>

Butterfield in this interview talks about the development process of the Game Neverending, which was supposed to be not so much of a game, but a platform for social interaction „designed to facilitate and enable play“. He distinguishes between game, which presumably is competitive, goal and obstacle driven, and free play elaborating further:

“Ludicorp's mission comes from something a little more encompassing than games: play is a much larger and more fundamental concept. We play all the time, even when there is nothing like a formal game going on - think of great conversations and all the verbal play, of "goofing around," of flirting, of musicians jamming: these are all moments where the creativity is flowing, you feel completely alive, and you are able to fully express yourself at the peak of your ability without even trying. It is the new possibilities for these kinds of states that we are trying to create.”<sup>2</sup>

As has been noted by Cox (2007) the creators of Flickr in published interviews rarely stressed their interest for or importance of photography. Flickr may be seen as site of social interaction built around objects, which almost coincidentally turned photographs into 'objects of sociality' (Engeström 2007). If Flickr is seen as a site for game play, the social objects, which are photographs, take the place of game pieces, tokens or playing cards, each individually created by the players. Thus, Flickr has been described as a 'convergence of social and networking and creative practices' (Burgess 2006).

The architecture of Flickr is made of features, which are not intrinsically new (Cox,

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<sup>1</sup> (Interview with Stewart Butterfield May 05, 2003 <http://www.mindjack.com/feature/gne.html>)

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2007), and are know to users from other social software or networking sites: Among them are

1. the facility to add tags to photos (similar to del.icio.us)
2. space for user commenting with every photo
3. the facility to arrange photos into 'albums'
4. rating systems such as "favourite"
5. a system for keeping contacts and friends, with varying degree of privacy
6. personal profile page
7. facility to set up groups, for an unlimited amount of members for pooling photos, including a separate discussion area and member listings.
8. open API code.

Per se, these functions do not necessarily indicate typical game structures or dictate play behaviour, even though they are used for many kinds of playful interactions. Flickr does also, to my knowledge, not provide specific play instructions. It seems that the involvement of users even before the launch of Flickr, during the 'beta' stages of Game Neverending shaped the way in which Flickr later was perceived and appropriated by users. Many early adopters of Flickr were players of Game Neverending and they most likely transferred play activities to the new site, or invented new activities - one could say 'they got it' immediately. However, the Flickr creators also stated in an interview, that in the early phases after the launch of Flickr they spent a lot of time welcoming and introducing users to the site.<sup>3</sup> One has to consider also the influence of "A-list technology bloggers and Web 2.0 rhetoric in constructing Flickr as a cultural leader in the remediation of personal photography" (Burgess 2007). It would be certainly interesting to study the history of the early development and the respective roles of the creators, users and commentators more closely. This points to older questions of structure and agency - how far is the use of Flickr determined by the structures (and commercial imperatives) dictated by the developers, and how far does it depend on the participation and is shaped by the actual practices of people.

In this paper I would like to tentatively outline how Flickr fulfills Butterfield's promise of designing a space, which facilitates and enables play, and to investigate where the boundaries of Flickr's magic circle can be found. I will provide a description of various game practices I have found centred around Flickr, which may develop into more extended case studies, as the research project develops. This is what I am concerned with at this moment in trying to gain an overview of Flickr - more theorizing will have to come later.

### **Let's play**

I will describe the kinds of play interactions, which I have observed on Flickr, by using analogies to simple and popular children's games, which I presume are known all over the Western world, if not all over the world. 'Flickr games,' on the surface are extremely simple games, just like those children's games, they show nothing of the sophistication in design and the complexity of rules of most digital game worlds.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Caterina Fake. 16.11.2006 <http://www.netmag.co.uk/zine/discover-interview/caterina-fake>

The question is why do thousands of adults seem to enjoy these very simple games, nevertheless?

Many Flickr users do not 'play' with Flickr, in the sense that they decide to join groups, or participate with explicit games. They are using Flickr for other purposes, such as storage for images used in personal blogs, or for making images visible to a select group of friends and family. Users may be browsing other people's photos, something that has been called 'photolurking' (Khalid 2006), and possibly leaving comments. These users of Flickr, in a sense act similar to children hanging around at the fringes of a playground, until they eventually take the plunge and are drawn into one game or another.

'Playing a game' in Flickr in most cases entails either joining a group or starting a new group. A user can join a group with a few clicks, without uploading an image into the group, and start participating by submitting images into the group at a later point. Joining a group may or may not need permission of the group administrators. On the other hand users sometimes are invited by other users to join a particular group, via a particular image, which has caught their attention. This seems to me similar to playground activities, where some children may actively take initiative to join games, and some are invited to join in by others.

To start a group means to set up the rules for particular activities. This may happen simply by providing a name for the group. Joining a group called 'sunsets' would mean submitting images of sunsets to the pool of images. This activity may be compared to the activity of collecting artefacts (marbles, trading cards, stuffed toys, dolls, matchbox cars) and showing them off to each other, comparing and commenting. An example is the much commented-on group of images 'squared circle', which is pooling images of round objects centred in the square frame of the photograph. (Cox 2007, Davies 2006) On March 30<sup>th</sup> 2008 the group 'squared circle' had over 5600 members containing over 66,000 images. However, often the rules specified by the group administrators are more complex than that, and many are an explicit invitation to play, according to certain rules, which are enforced more or less strictly, with group administrators reserving the right to remove images from the group, which do not pertain to the self-set group standards. There are many variations of similar group rules, which are played within a group or by setting up a new group.

Similarly, on the playground a game usually starts with an invitation to a particular kind of game: "Let's play ..." or "Let's pretend ..." and often includes negotiating the rules. Playing playground games involves not only joining in, but also making up games and game rules. In Flickr just as on the playground some players seem to be more motivated, creative, active, and successful in inventing games or play scenarios – success being measured here by the amount of imagination, ability and the social skills of attracting others to join in the game.

Why would adults want to play a simple game, such as Domino, or add pictures of 'squared circles' to a group? Part of the attraction of real world game play lies not with the game itself, but with the social interactions (and the drink and the smoke), which take place at the margins, conversations and jokes shared with friends and

bystanders, structured by the simple rules, moves and materiality of the games and the ritual-like social conventions surrounding games. The meaning of the game is not so much determined by the game itself but the players, and the social context of the play. However, the attraction of the game does also lie in the design of the game and gaming pieces; the simplicity of a Domino piece, or a squared circle, nevertheless allows for a never-ending number of play patterns to emerge. I conclude from my own experience of playing domino that the play at this level is both a social but also an aesthetic experience. This, of course, has been stated by play theorists before, "Play has the tendency to be beautiful." Huizinga (1955) said.

In the case of the 'squared circle' variations of patterns primarily occur within the game pieces, which are the images created by the users, but some users also construct new spatial or temporal patterns as they are regroup selected images into posters or mosaics, or assemble them into slide-shows. 'Squaring the circle', as we know, has been a riddle, which occupied mathematicians for several thousand years, and points to the mystery and transcendental quality of the number Pi. The squared circle is a magic circle indeed, a finite space, which points to 'infinite possibility'. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004) As metaphor 'squaring the circle' means a hopeless or meaningless undertaking. In this sense 'squaring the circle' is a most fitting play activity in Flickr, as it refers to play as being non-productive, while, nevertheless, producing an astounding number of results.

The activities of the 'squared circle' group can be considered both as *paidia* and *ludus* (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962) – on the one hand there are very stringent rules to be followed (and in the case of 'squared circles' they are also strictly enforced, as can be seen by the list of pictures removed from the group by the administrators, which is published monthly), on the other hand there is a lot of freedom, openness, space for creative imagination and improvisation, possibly even subtle subversion. This supports Burgess' claims that "participation in Flickr affords a less purely technological and more explicitly cultural sense of 'play' – the ability to create, negotiate and encounter cultural richness and diversity. It is in fact possible to view Flickr as an open and configurable, but at the same time deeply structured, game environment." (Burgess 2007:136)

### **Memory and other Flickr Toys**

The use of Flickr is also open as it encourages the development of Mashup applications via the open API code, thus taking the 'play' with Flickr images to other sites and back. Users write code for applications, which allow the manipulation of Flickr images by placing them into a new context. These applications are also called Flickr Toys and can be used, for example, to create particular frames, mosaics, puzzles, movie posters, trading cards, or to 'wahrholize' an image. These Flickr Toys offer casual game play as a play with meaning: the image may keep the personal and private meaning for the user, but becomes situated in the context of a wider discourse, when turned into an imitation of an Andy Warhol screenprint, altered with a lomography effect, or seemingly displayed on the wall of an art museum. ([www.dumpr.net/](http://www.dumpr.net/)) Mashup applications are also created for adding new twists to older games, such as Memory, which may be played online with a selection of photos of choice, Sudoku, jigsaw and other puzzles and games. Part of the fun of

'playing with Flickr' seems to lie in the writing of code. A part of children's play is the ability to imagine new games and invent new rules; here this ability to create games and toys relies on the ability to write code as new literacy.

### **The winner is ...**

So what about *agens* - the competitive aspect of games? Flickr groups as games, while built on clear rules, with some exceptions, do not indicate specific goals or set up conflict; at first glance most of them do not present intrinsic ways to 'win' or an indication of how to quantify success. Some groups pose specific challenges, such as 'Photoshop Tennis,' where photos are digitally altered by several users taking play turns, the game ending at an unspecified point, whenever the picture seems 'finished'. Playing 'Domino' with Flickr only ends, when players run out of steam. Some groups do set up specific goals, time frames and announce winners – such as in 'picture of the week' or 'month' and 'hit or miss' contests. To be invited to join a certain group via submitting a particular picture can be seen as an award in itself. At the time of writing over 1700 groups are dedicated to giving 'awards': award groups such as 'Heart Awards', 'Excellent Photographer Awards', 'Ruby Awards,' 'Superb Masterpiece,' 'Fab!' and many more groups dedicated to giving awards for specific photo styles or techniques. Users then turn the comment function for each image into a place for giving awards – cutting and pasting the 'award code' into the comment area, for displaying small graphics, which are given as badges or trophies. While most photographs will never receive any awards like this at all, some do receive quite a few.

Of course, awarding prizes in Flickr in itself may be seen as form of game – an ironic comment on and play with 'real world' competitions and prizes, as anybody can set themselves up to be an award winning body, and may give as many prizes as they please by posting nothing more than a short statement, a signature or piece of HTML code in the comment area of any given image. Awarding prizes in Flickr can be seen as playing with a specific kind of social ritual and performance, and as a particular way of communicating through paying compliments and respect. While these awards are purely 'virtual', and not of any material or 'value' in an established kind of sense, they do mark a distinct type of response a particular image may provoke, and indicate some form of increase in social or cultural capital, and this, nevertheless, may say something about the quality of an image.

While possibly not obvious at a first glance, success and achievement in Flickr can be defined in a wide range of terms: the level of success may be measured in various terms on 'quantity' - of photos uploaded, of photos favourited, of groups joined, of visitors, comments, praise and criticism received – and much more difficult to ascertain, in terms of 'quality' – the quality of social contacts established and maintained, of 'awards' obtained, and also in terms of the technical and aesthetic quality of the photographs itself, or of albums assembled.

The degree of success may be described in terms of popularity, but again, popularity is hard to quantify – being considered as 'good photographer' among a group of friends or family may be sufficient for one, while achieving reputation or fame in online communities with hundreds or thousands of members may be relevant for others. Critical observers may note that success in terms of popularity

depends not only on the quality of work presented, but also on the readings of the audience, and on the photographer's ability for self-promotion, however, this also applies to real world creative enterprises. There is also some element of fate (*alea*), which comes into play, the chance of a picture being prominently featured by the Flickr administrators on the Flickr start page in the 'interesting' or 'explore' category, commented upon by an independent A-list blogger or by being chosen by a commercial publisher, all of which may dramatically increase the viewer traffic and visibility of a given image, and possibly even provide some financial gain.

### **I spy with my little eye**

I would like to go back to the analogy of simple children's games, and now focus on guessing games and hidden object games, which at a basic level are concerned with visual and spatial perception, and with the understanding or learning of certain concepts. One of the earliest games adults play with small children, in fact babies, are what in English are called peek-a-boo games (Guck-guck in German). While these games may, in the eyes of psychologists, "demonstrate an infant's inability to understand object permanence"<sup>4</sup> they also demonstrate the simple pleasures, which lie in surprising others and in being surprised. Uploading and viewing images which include an element of surprise, may trigger similar feelings when seeing objects or people in an arrangement, which was not expected or anticipated.

A more elaborate and complex version of a children's game which plays with perception is "I spy with my little eye" ("Ich seh', ich seh', was Du nicht siehst" in German), which encourages the exploration of the visual field, whether static or moving (as when played travelling in a car). The game is often used to teach colours or shapes, and at the stages of early literacy to teach the letters of the alphabet. In this sense many Flickr groups can be understood as games of "I spy" – 'squared circles', letters, numbers, doors, windows, chairs, shoes, locks or anything else. This collecting of certain images may seem strange, even obsessive to the observer. (Leo Reynolds, the most prolific 'squared circle' member has posted more than 13.000 images of squared circles, three more around 6000 each at the time of writing) There are also groups devoted to guessing games as in "Guess where this photo was taken?", for example, a group, where people upload photos taken in Vienna, and other users are asked to name the specific location.

Taking up the challenge of finding and taking images of certain locations, objects, shapes or concepts will certainly sharpen ones perception of everyday surroundings, as an extended activity it can transform the mundane into the extraordinary, and something trivial into something special.

### **Hide and seek**

Both taking pictures and looking at pictures may alter our perception, and teach us how things can look if we were to examine them more closely. For example there are many groups devoted to exploring and discovering hidden aspects of the urban landscape.

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<sup>4</sup> "Peekaboo (also spelled Peek-a-boo) is a game similar to hide and seek, but played with babies. In the game, one (child, teenager, or adult) hides their face, pops back into the baby's view, and says — to the baby's amusement — Peekaboo! I see you!" From Wikipedia. (1.4.2008)



Amateur photography is often concerned with the 'beautiful,' or 'pretty' or 'nice' producing pictures of landscapes, flowers, animals or children, with critics considering the "non-threatening, non-critical and non-controversial" quality of the images as a typical hallmark of amateur pictorialism (Cox, 2007). On the contrary some Flickr groups encourage, for example, exploring the city landscape as a fascinating world of the exotic, surreal, banal or downright ugly. Groups dedicated to street photography, in the vein of earlier artistic attacks against notions of good taste (dada, pop art, punk and others) establish their own aesthetic rules, such as in the group 'lovely ugly vienna', celebrate subcultures such as graffiti, capture the fleeting and ephemeral, in passing. The activities of these street photographers may be seen as active attempts to reclaim public spaces.

One could say that some of these group games compare less to games of "I spy" but are more like "Hide and Seek", as they mean a hunt as an active exploration of space, an attempt in seeking negative spaces, not as hiding places, but as things which are hidden. They literally draw attention to that, which is visible to everybody, and yet ignored, overlooked or marginalized; they draw out to the open, that which is normally rendered invisible. They provide a counter narrative to the dominant flow of images of advertising and media. Their subculture aesthetics, of course, eventually are appropriated and absorbed into commercial cultures, but that is another story.

Henry Jenkins in his essay on *Game Design as Narrative Architecture* states that "the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map and master contested spaces", and that such games "fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives." (Jenkins 2002) In this sense Flickr is a typical digital game, rich of personal and collective stories, as people record their own journeys, quests and life trajectories, as they conquer spaces, meet friends and strangers and obtain (photographic) trophies. Visitors may read these narratives in diverse and multiple ways as they navigate their own paths through the site, some of them as it seems, deeply and emotionally engaged in their experience of 'photolurking'. (Khalid & Dix, 2006).

### **Playing Tag**

The word "tag" applies to many things, it may refer to the children's catching games which involving running, chasing and touching; it stands for the signature used by graffiti artists, as well as for the label or keyword and metadata added to online information. Flickr's tagging system, even if technically not new, was perceived as important, as it made a large body of private photos searchable for the public. Flickr tags can also be used to play games of 'Tag'. In fact there is also a large group called 'Let's Play Tag.' While playground tagging games involve variations of hunting and being hunted, with both roles typically reversed many times experiencing the 'thrill of the chase'. Flickr tagging games serve to some extent a related purpose, and therefore many groups specify tagging rules. Adding tags to images increases the chances of being found - 'hunted down' or 'drawn out from hiding' - and this increases the value of images and groups alike, firmly establishing the player's social place within the magic circle.

## **Multiple Selves**

Another type of play, which is facilitated and supported by Flickr, concerns *mimikry*, aspects of performance, role play and play with toys. As a first example I would like to talk about groups, where people pose partially hiding behind record album covers, groups such as 'LP portraits,' 'I am a record cover' and 'sleeveface,' which is also supported by a dedicated weblog of the same name. These pictures take us back to the baby game of peek-a-book, as players hide the face behind an object, in order to pretend to be invisible and to surprise the viewer. However, these games with albums cover heads are also more sophisticated: a play with identities, which are partially constructed through the kinds of music we consume, the stars, which we hate or adore - a new take on pretend play. They are also play with visual tricks, properties of two-dimensional images versus three-dimensional space and the affordances of a camera lens, a play with foreground and background and depth of field. The creation of these images indicate an awareness of being part of a wider media and consumer culture and may be fed by the experience of playing with online identities and avatars. They also play with a certain kind of nostalgia, record albums and their covers being a fetish of the past.

Play with identity is also evident in many groups dedicated to 'multiple selves' or 'clones' usually created in Photoshop: Multiple shots of one person with the same background are assembled within one frame, thus creating a puzzling play with various representations of self, or others. These examples serves as indication to the practice of posing and performing for photographs, a social practice, which has become a natural part of most of our lives, and a fixed part of certain rituals, such as weddings, family gatherings and anniversaries and certain life periods such as travels and raising small children.

These photo-taking rituals may be consciously reenacted or playfully expanded, as, for example, in various groups dedicated to 'jumps' such as 'Jumping Project' and 'Just Jump'. 'O Jumps' is dedicated to self-portrait only, which are created using the timer function of the camera, again a game against the clock and play with ideas of self-representation at the same time. This practice takes us back to the simple joy of childhood play, which sometimes lies in nothing more than jumping, exploring the basic affordances of the body, movement in space, and experiencing the nature of gravity. 'Monument Jump' features images of people in front of famous monuments or sceneries, thus playing with the ritual of posing for photography in front of tourist sites, evoking pre-existing associations and taking them into a new direction.

## **The Secret Life of Toys**

But there is also another kind of enactment, or dramatic play very visible in Flickr, the practice of taking and posting of images of play scenarios. These may be screenshots of digital games, or staged scenarios with toys and dolls. Many groups are purely dedicated to toys, such as 'The Secret Life of Toys,' 'Constructed Narratives Using Toys' or 'Dolls & Toys On Film - Cinematic Photography'. The pictures posted may range from snapshots of toys in ordinary or unusual settings, to the elaborate mise-en-scene of scenes composed with action toys, Lego or Playmobile figures, different kinds of commercial dolls, handmade dolls and stuffed animals. Sometimes they are a play with popular media narratives, which may be considered as fan fiction (Star Wars being an all time favourite), often featuring the

'cute', and sometimes the 'uncanny' as in 'Decapitated Dolls.' These doll-playing practices captured on photography may be an indication of extensive collecting, of new subcultures dedicated to toys and dolls as art, but also of role play, whereby the dolls take the place of human actors.

### **Magic Circle**

So where do we find the magic circle with Flickr? The playing field on one hand is clearly limited to the computer interface, where users can see and interact with images and with each other. Jenkins (2002) wrote that game designers do not tell stories but "they design worlds and sculpt spaces". The creators of Flickr as game designers created a compelling online space. Imagining it without any pictures in all its whiteness the Flickr space reminds me of the Beatles' Nowhere Land as illustrated in the animation feature Yellow Submarine, inhabited by Nowhere Man, who „just sees what he wants to see," and the Sea of Holes with an infinite number of portholes, or manholes, leading to an unknown number of worlds. The Flickr creators deliberately blurred the boundaries of the playing field as they encouraged users to expand Flickr activities to other sites, for example to sites, which host mashup-up applications, or weblogs.

Flickr play activities also extend to the real world, where the photographer takes the pictures, and thus the magic circle encompasses everything which can be captured with a camera lens, which means, at least in common sense terms, that it is pretty unlimited, and potential play world and real world converge. However, this does not mean necessarily, that the real world and the play world are identical. If entering the magic circle means a different sense of awareness, this would mean that the player experiences a heightened sense of visual awareness in particular, and higher alertness to the potentials of space and time, whenever he chooses to enter into play mode, on a hunt for images or by deliberately staging scenes. He may also be drawn into the play mode accidentally, or thrust into the magic circle involuntarily, whenever and wherever he stumbles upon a sight, which causes him to deliberate the possibility of taking a picture.

Most play theorists have defined the spatial and temporal as essential dimensions of the magic circle. How does this relate to the practice of photography? Similar to game play taking photographs implies decision-making. Taking pictures not only means to choose a place, a subject and to frame the right angle, but also means to capture the right moment. Berger (1972) explained this eloquently in his essay on *Understanding Photography*: „The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time. One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting ... a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing x and y: but between photographing at x moment or at y moment." Thus, photographers just like players may experience states of flow.

Therefore 'playing with Flickr' may be considered a rather casual, occasional or coincidental past-time, but it can be also totally pervasive, at least for some. Potentially the magic circle, in the spatial and the temporal sense, is expanded without limit (practically limited to when and where a camera is at hand), but I would argue, the magic circle still exists, as a time and space of heightened

awareness, and thus different from ordinary life.

The magic circle as a social circle encompasses different people playing one or many different roles. It includes all people actively engaged in running and participating in Flickr groups, people creating and using Flickr Toys and potentially anybody who makes pictures public in Flickr, as he or she may receive 'Flickr awards' from other users, or may be invited to add a particular photo to a pool. Users who leave comments, give awards and favourite pictures of others, even if they do not produce images themselves, may be considered as spectators, but still partake and influence the game through their support (see also Montola 2005), as award giving in itself can be considered as a game. People, who agree to pose in pictures act as voluntary performers. However, the social dimension of the magic circle may be broken, when outsiders as photographic subjects are drawn into the game, without knowledge or consent. But then again, there are forms of play, which only exist without prior agreement, and they are called pranks. Candid camera shots are taken without knowledge or consent, and with those it is some times difficult to draw the line between a breach of privacy and a 'prank.' I presume, consent has to be obtained not necessarily always before taking a picture, but should be required before posting it online.

### **Concept of Mastery**

Viewing interactions around and with digital photography as 'play' suggests a new kind of concept of mastery regarding photographic practices. Usually discourses around photography make clear distinctions between 'professional,' and 'artistic' practices on one hand, which are seen to aim at high levels of aesthetic and technical mastery, and are discussed in terms of their intrinsic qualities and cultural value, and amateur photography on the other hand, which may entail both domestic photography, personal snapshots, records of family, friends and travels, 'hobby' photography and the work of the serious amateur, sometimes organized and supported by 'photo clubs', but also camera magazines, books, manuals and courses (Castel & Schnapper 1991, Cox 2007).

Thus photography is regarded either as specialized technique or 'art' or as practice without particular aesthetic or cultural merit, beyond the personal use. Photography as art or professional practice is 'serious' while snapshot or amateur photography is considered 'trivial'. Mastery of the technique or art of photography is acquired by increasing participation in a community of practice and professionalism (with commercial distribution of photographs in journalism, advertising, fashion, art galleries, or coffee table books as a marker of distinction). 'Snapshot' photography as vernacular practice is usually learned in informal settings, and even when technically and aesthetically sophisticated does not reach beyond a small and usually private audience. Domestic photography is not situated in a discourse concerning 'quality' or 'aesthetics'. Research on the uses of Flickr so far has mainly focussed on the on the notion of amateur photography as serious leisure pursuit (Cox 2007, Cox. et. al 2008) or 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess 2007).

Considering the practices of taking and sharing photography around Flickr as game play introduces a different kind of perspective on the notions of quality or mastery, related to sport and games. The skills of a player may be still subject to critique in

terms of technique and creativity, but the values and meanings attached to these criteria of distinction are subject of the rules of the play.

Engaging with photographic practices through Flickr breaks down boundaries, not only because traditional boundaries between private and public use and display of photography are blurred, but because 'playing with Flickr' introduces 'mastery' in a new context. The striving for achievement and mastery in a game environment may offer a wide range of degrees between casual and serious involvement. As game theorists have noted game play is usually considered 'fun' in opposition to serious 'work' – but a player engaged in play performance and in game competition may still take his activities very serious. This also applies to the photographer 'playing with Flickr'. A 'play photographer' does not have to answer to the question whether he considers himself as professional, artist or amateur; the 'play photographer' may seriously strive for achievement, mastery and perfection, and also some form of recognition, which goes beyond purely private appreciation, while still considering his activities as fun, as 'not serious'. By considering photographic practices as play, the players step into the magic circle, where different social rules apply and real world social rank and distinctions are suspended. The players - whether professional, artist, amateur or snapshot photographers - meet on a level playing field, where these distinctions are irrelevant. Thus the photographer as player may bypass the long and controversial discourse of vernacular or hobby vs. professional or artistic photography. In play similar, but at the same time very different criteria of artistic and technical mastery apply.

With a focus on Flickr as a site for 'play' controversial discussions about the scope and quality of learning through Flickr may be seen in a different light. While Davies (2006) and Burgess (2007) have described Flickr an ideal site for informal learning in a supportive environment Cox dismisses these more optimistic claims, as Flickr in his view lacks "the structures and culture to support a critical learning career" in photography, though he admits that „there is more possibility for creative interaction than for the camera magazine reader." (Cox. 2007: 20) Thus, while some construct Flickr's learning culture as 'affinity space' (Gee, 2004, Davies 2006) or 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991, Burgess 2007) Cox argues that Flickr does not provide a satisfactory learning environment, but may be seen as „complementary to the hobby institutions of clubs and courses" while the „serious amateur" may be "better supported in institutionalised learning" (Cox. 2007:11,19).

In 'Playing with Flickr' just as with other forms of play, learning usually does take place, and whether to a greater or lesser extent is up to the player. Learning through play usually means the availability of a supportive environment for learning, where it is safe to take risks. However, learning and the improvement of one's performance are not the primary reason for play. As Sutton-Smith (1997) pointed out, in the history of discourses about play repeatedly authors have tried to subordinate play under the rhetoric of 'progress.' Play has been, since long, seen as site for learning, and this sometimes has been overstressed in order to save play from its status of being trivial. I would suggest that Flickr does provide space for varying degrees of informal and formal learning, and may be used as site for learning by some, yet learning, in many cases, if not most, should be understood here as subordinated to play.

Thus learning in Flickr means, learning to play, and this entails learning to understand the affordances of Flickr and the rules of the specific game, and learning to take and digitally manipulate photographs appropriate for the purpose. This is evident as group administrators not only post instructions for the game play, but sometimes tutorials can be found within groups, which teach the use of a certain technique. So, for example in the 'square circle' group, one can find elaborate instructions as how to crop and resize a photograph so it will meet the group standards, including suggestions for finding free software. Another group features tutorials of how to fake a 'lomography' effect in Photoshop. While these tutorials may be useful for anybody, they are especially relevant for those who want to play. In Flickr as with other forms of games and play, players improve their skills at playing the game repeatedly, and by seeking out new challenges, which demand new skills of the player. They may learn about photography, or using Photoshop etc. in order to be able to play, or take up Flickr challenges because they like to learn more about photographic practices. But whether learning to play or playing to learn is more relevant, remains to be seen; it is a question, which cannot be answered easily, possible not even by the Flickr users themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Considering social and creative activities centred around Flickr as forms of play, has been useful in helping to understand the diverse practices people are engaged with while using Flickr as a platform. Applying the notion of the magic circle, even if problematic, provides some insights into the nature of people's engagement and experiences with photography as individual and collective practices, which can not be reached though established theories of photography.

I am not arguing that all forms of participation and engagement with Flickr should be considered as game play or play in a strict sense. I propose to use the notions of game and play, and associated concepts derived from game theory such as the magic circle as analytical tools and critical lenses in order to investigate cultural phenomena and aspects of new media practices, which otherwise may be overlooked, or misunderstood.

The Story of the Walkman referred to earlier, (Du Gay et al. 1997) showed how a new media product adopted by users in diverse ways, irreversibly altered the ways of how people use music, in providing a personal soundtrack to life trajectories. Similarly, with Burgess (2007) I would argue that 'Playing with Flickr' along with other creative digital practices re-defines and alters what people do with photographs today.

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