

The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece

In a common description, to play a game is to step inside a concrete or metaphorical magic circle where special rules apply. In video game studies, this description has received an inordinate amount of criticism which the paper argues has two primary sources: 1. a misreading of the basic concept of the magic circle and 2. a somewhat rushed application of traditional theoretical concerns onto games. The paper argues that games studies must move beyond conventional criticisms of binary distinctions and rather look at the details of how games are played. Finally, the paper proposes an alternative metaphor for game-playing, the puzzle piece.

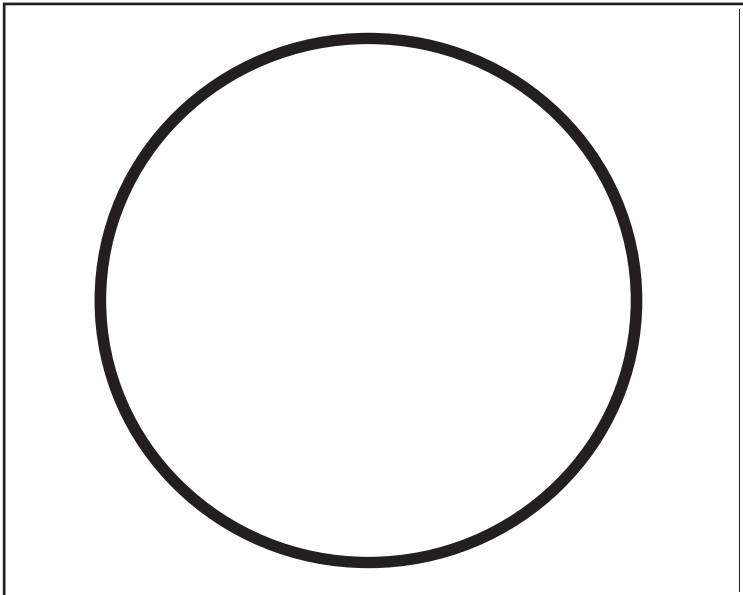


Fig. 1: The Magic Circle – The Game as a Separate Space

To play a game has often been described as entering a *magic circle*, a separate space. The origin of the magic circle metaphor is Johan Huizinga's classic text *Homo Ludens* in which he argues that all *play* takes place in a separate time and space:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. 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 which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (Huizinga 1955:10).

For Huizinga, the space of game-playing is but one type of space governed by special rules, and as with other types of space, the space of game-playing is social in origin. *People* make special spaces, be they court houses, religious spaces, or game spaces. The magic circle was subsequently singled out by Salen and Zimmerman as the primary term to describe the boundary around a game. The emphasis for them is not as much on general social structures as on the concrete act and psychological experience of entering into a game. Like Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman emphasize that the magic circle is created by players:

In a 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. The magic circle of a game might have a physical component, like the board of a board game or the playing field of an athletic contest. But many games have no physical boundaries – arm wrestling, for example,

does not require much in the way of special spaces or material. The game simply begins when one or more players decide to play (Salen/Zimmerman 2004:95-96).

Seen this way, the magic circle is a straightforward phenomenon in which players decide to play and by consent enter into the special social and psychological space of a game.

The magic circle has been a point of contention within video game studies the last few years, with several writers denouncing the magic circle altogether. Consider T.L. Taylor's criticism of the magic circle:

Games are typically thought of as closed systems of play in which formal rules allow players to operate within a "magic circle" outside the cares of everyday life and the world. This rhetoric often evokes a sense that the player steps through a kind of looking glass and enters a pure game space. From Monopoly to Final Fantasy, commercial games in particular are often seen as structures conceived by a designer and then used by players in accordance with given rules and guidelines. Players, however, have a history of pushing against these boundaries (Taylor 2007:113).

Where Huizinga describes the magic circle as a consensual social phenomenon, Taylor sees an oppressive structure; where Salen and Zimmerman see harmony between the game and the player, Taylor sees a conflict; where Huizinga sees games as created by players, Taylor sees games as controlled by an external authority.

Another criticism of the magic circle comes from Marinka Copier's work on role-playing games in the Netherlands, wherein she argues that the magic circle is an imperfect separation:

Furthermore I believe that the way in which the closed magic circle is being represented as a utopian "magical" space is problematic. [...] The visualization and metaphorical way of speaking of

the magic circle as a chalk, or even, rusty circle is misleading. It suggests we can easily separate play and non-play, in which the play space becomes a magical wonderland. However, I argue that the space of play is not a given space but is being constructed in negotiation between player(s) and the producer(s) of the game but also among players themselves (Copier 2005).

Copier's criticism takes a slightly different form than Taylor's. She shares Taylor's association of the magic circle with "Utopian" spaces "outside the cares of everyday life", even though the source texts do not describe the magic circle as Utopian. On the other hand, while Copier agrees with Huizinga, Salen, and Zimmerman that the magic circle is created by players, she intriguingly presents this as being *contrary* to their arguments. This has been a common thread in criticisms of the magic circle: like Copier, several other theorists also claim to counter Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman by stressing the exact social nature of the magic circle that Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman also stress. For example, Malaby (2007) claims that games are "in fact" social artifacts while Pargman and Jakobsson's (2008) criticize a "strong-boundary hypothesis" they assume to be inherent in the concept of the magic circle, but do so by using arguments similar to those of Salen and Zimmerman. Such criticisms also appear to overlook that Huizinga describes the magic circle as one type of *social space* among others.

Proof of the Existence of a Magic Circle

Taken at face value, these discussions are almost non sequiturs. Let us therefore look at an example: if at a family dinner, person A sees person B reaching for the salt, it is extremely rude for A to snatch that salt away or in any way to block B from accessing the salt. However, if A and B are to play a game of PARCHEESI or LUDO later in the evening, and A has the option of capturing B's final piece, this is

socially acceptable. In other words, during dinner it is socially problematic to prevent someone from reaching their personal goal, but it is socially acceptable when playing a game. Apparently, playing a game not only means following or observing the rules of that game, but there are also special social conventions about how one can act towards other people when playing games. The concept of the magic circle is useful to describe the boundary at which these rules and norms of game-playing are activated.

The magic circle is a description of the salient *differences* between a game and its surrounding context. It does not imply that a game is completely distinguished from the context in which it is played. Richard Garfield has argued for the existence of *metagames*, which includes what players bring to a game and what players take away from a game. The metagame is “how a game interfaces with life” (Garfield 2000:14). To expand on the example above, playing a game does imply a license to try to win the game at the expense of other players, but there are several complications to this:

1. For multiplayer games, Jonas Heide Smith has documented how players that are ahead in a game will often self-handicap in order to maintain some uncertainty about the outcome of a game (Smith 2006:217-227).
2. Furthermore, winning and losing may have social consequences, and players may play accordingly. The most obvious example is playing against a boss or playing against a child, in which case the player may decide that it is preferable to lose the game.

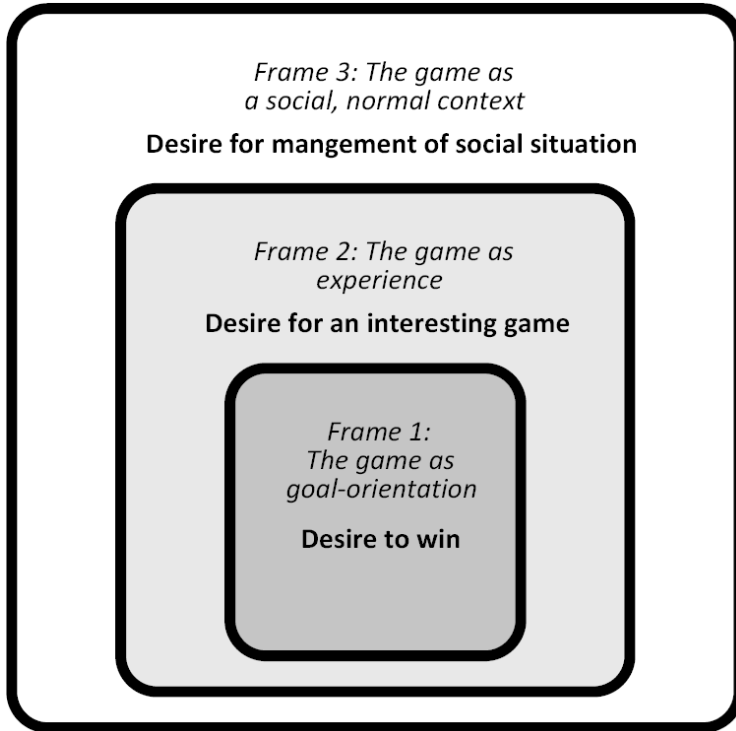


Fig. 2: Three Frames for Every Game Action (Jul 2009)

The figure illustrates how every game action can therefore be evaluated according to three different considerations, with the desire to win being only one of three considerations. We cannot generalize about the relative weight of these considerations as players have individual understandings of how important it is to win vs. how important it is to keep the game interesting vs. how important it is to manage the social situation. Some players believe that friends should help friends in a game, and some players believe otherwise. Does this disprove the existence of a magic circle? No, but it shows us what the magic circle is. It is clearly not a perfect separation of a game

from the rest of the world, but an imperfect separation that players negotiate and uphold. It is meaningless to make an ahead-of-time call about whether games are either supremely dissociated from or integrated with the context in which they are played. That question is *in itself* subject to continued negotiation between players. I have elsewhere argued that games are not exactly harmless, but have *negotiable consequences* (Juul 2005:41-43). Negotiations are an important aspect of game-playing: *The magic circle is the boundary that players negotiate*.

To deny the magic circle is to deny that players negotiate this boundary. Game scholarship should be about analyzing the conventions of this boundary, and how and when this boundary is created and negotiated.

Given that the magic circle is an imperfect boundary, it would be convenient to have a list of things that can potentially cross the boundary. What aspects of “life,” as Garfield put it, of the game-playing context, are potentially relevant to the playing of a game, and thereby relevant to the negotiation of the magic circle? In a paper on context-aware computing, Anind K. Dey has concluded that it is impossible to settle on such lists because “[w]e cannot enumerate which aspects of all situations are important, as these will change from situation to situation” (Dey 2001:5). This is a little disappointing. For example, surely it cannot matter whether the player smokes cigarettes? It can:

SOE’s Needham suggested that the Internet café-dominant MMO play setting in Asia must be solo friendly. Simple “point & click” design is also essential in the café environment, because players often hold a drink or cigarette in one hand (Dillon 2005).

Everything is potentially relevant to the playing of a game and therefore subject to the negotiation of the magic circle. This in no way means that we must stop talking about the boundary between a

game and what is outside the game. Rather, it shows how many conventions and how much negotiation is part of playing a game, and that we need to put all the more effort into examining this boundary.

From Magic Circle to Puzzle Piece?

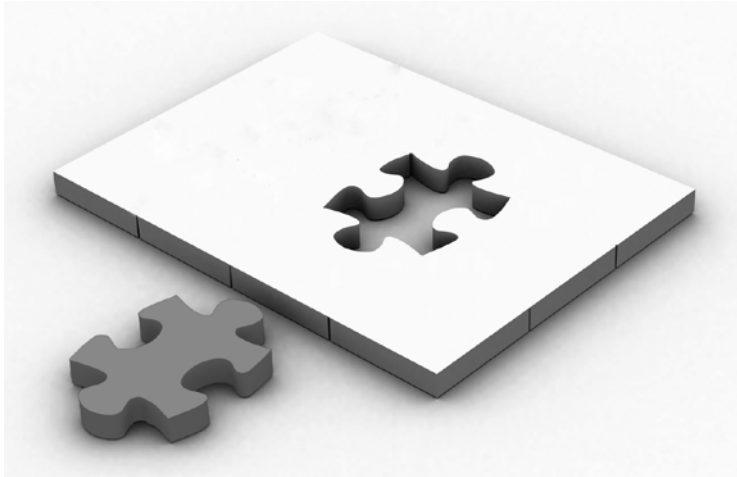


Fig. 3: A Game as a Puzzle Piece that Fits in a Context (Fotolia.com)

Perhaps the problem with the magic circle as a *metaphor* is that it suggests a uniform interface between the game and that which is around the game. We could alternatively describe a game as a puzzle piece. This makes it easier to talk about some of details surrounding games: a puzzle piece has different interfaces on its sides. Seen as a puzzle piece, a game may or may not fit in a given context. It may only run on a platform that the player does not own; it may build on game conventions that the player does not know; it may require time that the player does not have; it may require more players than are present in a given situation. We can then analyze *how* a game fits into a context, no longer arguing *whether* games are separate or not.

Gordon Calleja has argued that the magic circle is a “binary myth” of a distinction between what is in the game and what is outside the game (Calleja 2008). I hope to have shown here that, first of all, this is not how the magic circle has historically been described, and that, secondly, the magic circle is best understood as *the boundary that players negotiate*. I would argue that there are two other binary myths that pose a barrier for a better understanding of games:

1. The first myth is that the magic circle implies a perfect separation between the game and that which is outside the game. I have argued that this is not the case.
2. The second myth is that the job of a researcher is to seek – and destroy – binary dichotomies. While there may be political benefits to be had from this in some situations, in the case of games it simply leads to a loss of detail. We are many decades removed from the specific historical situation that spawned the hunt for binarisms. It is a remnant of a battle fought long ago, so perhaps it is time for game studies to move on.

One interesting aspect of studying video games is the extent to which they continue to upset existing theories. Early discussions about the relation between games and narratives challenged uncritical use of narrative theory (Juil 2005:156-159). Games also provided a surprise because they embody the kind of formal structures that had been rejected after the narratology of the 1960s. In games, the formal structures are not the constructions of a theorist, but are created and upheld by players (in the case of non-digital games) or computers (in the case of video games). The discussion of the magic circle is yet another upset: it is a straightforward theoretical move to deny boundaries, but in games we find players happily creating and negotiating the magic circle, the boundary around the games they play.

While it is unlikely that the magic circle metaphor will go away,

I have offered here the alternative metaphor of the puzzle piece, a metaphor that makes it easier to identify how a game fits a context, and how players enter and leave a game. The puzzle piece shows the simple contradiction of all games: a game must be integrated into a context in order to be experienced as separate from that context.

Acknowledgments

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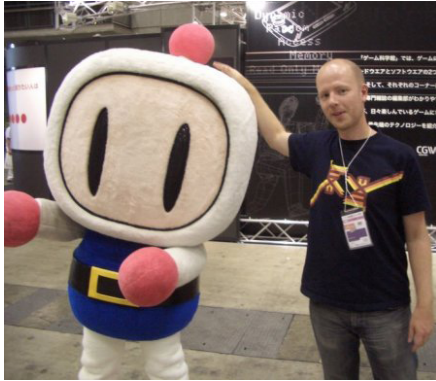
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