

Abandoning the Magic Circle

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Abstract

As a concept, the magic circle is in reality just 4 years old. Whilst often accredited to Johan Huizinga (1955), the modern usage of term in truth belongs to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. It became prominent in academia following the publication of “Rules of Play” in 2003. Because of the terminology used, it carries with it unhelpful preconceptions that the game world, or play-space, excludes reality. In this paper, I argue that Salen and Zimmerman (2003) have taken a term used as an example, and applied a meaning to it that was never intended, based primarily upon definitions given by other authors, namely Apter (1991) and Sniderman (n.d.). I further argue that the definition itself contains a logical fallacy, which has prevented the full understanding of the definition in later work.

Through a study of the literature in Game Theory, and examples of possible issues which could arise in contemporary games, I suggest that the emotions of the play experience continue beyond the play space, and that emotions from the “real world” enter it with the participants. I consider a reprise of the Stanley Milgram Obedience Experiment (2006), and what that tells us about human emotions and the effect that events taking place in a virtual environment can have upon them. I evaluate the opinion espoused by some authors of there being different magic circles for different players, and assert that this is not a useful approach to take when studying games, because it prevents the analysis of a game as a single entity.

Furthermore I consider the reasons given by other authors for the existence of the Magic Circle, and I assert that the term “Magic Circle” should be discarded, that it has no relevance to contemporary games, and indeed it acts as a hindrance to the design and study of games. I conclude that the play space which it claims to protect from the courts and other governmental authorities would be better served by the existing concepts of intent, consent, and commonly accepted principles associated with international travel.

The “Magic Circle”

The term “magic circle” was first coined by Johan Huizinga in his work “Homo Ludens”. The quote attributed to Huizinga as the origin of the term magic circle is thus, as part of his definition of play:

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course... 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 (1955, p. 10)

Whilst commonly credited to Huizinga when utilized subsequently, the modern usage of term in truth belongs to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. It became prominent in academia following the publication of “Rules of Play” in 2003.

Salen and Zimmerman (2003) attempt to build upon Huizinga’s use of the term magic circle by using it as a short-hand for a separate space in which play takes place. They take their definition from those given by Sniderman in “Unwritten Rules” and Apter in “A Structural Phenomenology of Play”, and then apply Huizinga’s term “magic circle” as shorthand for these definitions. I will return to examine these definitions in greater detail later in this paper.

As part of Salen and Zimmerman’s (2003) discussion of the magic circle concept, they try to explain that there is, in certain types of games, a relationship between the game and its context (the rest of the world):

As a system, a game can be considered to have an **open** or **closed** relationship to its context. Considered as **RULES**, a game is closed. Considered as **PLAY**, a game is both open and closed. Considered as **CULTURE**, a game is open. (p. 96)

Salen and Zimmerman define a closed game with rules in the above sense as “closed systems” (p. 96). Further, they say this means considering them as “systems of rules prior to the actual involvement of players” (p. 96). Taking the quote above, this would imply that games with rules lead to a closed circle, and virtually all digital games would have to be included within this as the rules of these are coded prior to any player entering the environment in which the game is played. It would thus seem a logical extension that these digital games are assumed to have a closed circle, where the “the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world” (p. 95).

This leads to the first problem I see with the Magic Circle concept as presented by Salen and Zimmerman (2003), which is the name, and the preconceptions that it carries with it. They talk about how a circle can have an “open or closed relationship to its context” (p. 96), thus implying in the former case that there is a flow of information and people between the outside and inside. The problem arises because there is, in a geometrical sense, no such thing as an open circle. If it’s open, it’s just a line on the ground that happens to have curvature. This creates a major conceptual problem, namely that subsequent work considers this as a circle, the chalk drawing shown prior to the chapter in “Rules of Play”, a binary one or zero, in or out.

As discussed earlier, the definitions that Salen and Zimmerman (2003) take and apply to the term “magic circle” are those of Sniderman (n.d.) and Apter (1991), both of whom refer to the game-space as a frame. Sniderman defines the frame by saying “... a human being is constantly noticing if the conditions for playing the game are still being met, continuously monitoring the ‘frame’...” He continues, asserting that humans are “continuously monitoring the ‘frame... to determine that the game is still in progress, always aware (if only unconsciously) that the other participants are acting as if the game is ‘on’.” Apter meanwhile describes it as a “protective frame which stands between you and the ‘real’ world and its problems, creating an enchanted zone in which, in the end, you are confident that no harm can come” (p. 15). He continues to say that this frame may be represented by a physical boundary, but it would be equally valid for it to be an abstract representation.

I largely agree with Sniderman’s (n.d.) definition of a frame. Whatever we mean by game, digital or analogue, an entry and exit point is required, at some point you start playing, and then eventually you end, at least for a given session of play. Sniderman of course makes no mention of a circle, but it is worth noting that a circle is, by definition, devoid of entry and exit points. I would however contest both Sniderman’s assertion that players are always “aware... that the other participants are acting as if the game is on” and Apter’s (1991) idea of the “protective frame”. They both seem to indicate that players’ emotions are constrained within the environment of the game, implying that your emotional state in one environment does not cross into the other. This would seem to me to be illogical, as it is very rare that a human is able to completely separate one experience from another, there would always seem to be some crossover in emotions and psychological state between one experience and the next.

Huizinga (1955) acknowledged this himself in saying “But the feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game” (p. 12). This indicates a clear crossover between the two, that a player’s real world life is impacted by their virtual world behaviour, and that of others. I would also argue that this shows that Salen and Zimmerman are far from Huizinga’s intentions in their use of the term.

The first real criticism in academia of the “magic circle” concept arose with Edward Castronova’s “Synthetic Worlds” in 2005. In it, he acknowledges that there is a relationship between the real world and the synthetic world (p. 147). He breaks down the problems with the concept, and comes to the conclusion that it is in fact a membrane; explaining that “it cannot be sealed completely; people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioural assumptions and attitudes with them” (p. 147). He refuses however to abandon the concept, instead super-imposing his idea of a membrane on top of the magic circle, calling this an “almost-magic circle” (p. 147).

Castronova (2005) goes on to state that it is not possible to make a distinction between the real and the synthetic world, questioning whether it is worthwhile to separate “synthetic world” interactions from other interactions between the same people. This I think is a compelling argument, as the effect of a statement, discussion or action is likely to be the same regardless of the means of the communication. All that the game is doing is providing a conveyance for the communication to take place.

In 2006, a study was carried out repeating the famous Stanley Milgram Obedience Experiment¹ in an Immersive virtual environment. The original study investigated the willingness of, and emotional effects on, a participant who was administering electric shocks of increasing voltage to another person who was, unknown to the participant, acting. Slater et al. (2006) repeated the experiment by placing a virtual representation of a female on the screen, and in some cases having them communicate with the participant by voice, and in other cases with text. They administered word association tests to a virtual female, and “when she gave an incorrect answer... [they] were instructed to administer an ‘electric shock’ to her, increasing the voltage each time. She responded with increasing discomfort and protests...” (p. 1) They discovered that “in spite of the fact that all participants knew for sure that neither the stranger nor the shocks were real, the participants who saw and heard her tended to respond to the situation at the subjective, behavioural and physiological levels as if it were real” (p. 1).

This study is something that all gamers can probably relate to at a fundamental level. If you have had a bad day, it often seems a good way to exert emotional energy to log on to your favourite FPS or MMO, and kill the weakest characters to take out your frustration. In a MMO, this could well be considered grieving, and may be completely different to your usual play style. At the same time, if you are wandering through your favourite virtual environment, and whilst en-route to your next quest, are needlessly killed by a character 20 levels higher, it will negatively affect your real-world mood, and thus impact on real-life interactions that happen subsequently.

Although not mentioned in either of the definitions quoted in “Rules of Play”, Bartle (2004) has commented on professional gamers, and their application to the magic circle, saying some players “for whatever reason have a different magic circle to the majority” (p. 16). I think it is worth touching on here, as it presents a specific problem with the magic circle concept. Bartle and Huizinga (1955, p. 197) are both quick to dismiss these as unimportant, but I would argue that they are now a significant part of the gaming market, and in virtual worlds, an even more significant part in how the world acts, because of their influence on the economy. Bartle implies (p. 16) that those who are in the world merely to earn money are not genuine players, and states that those who “will pay to enhance their playing experience” have a different magic circle to others, and that their use of commodification to improve their character will lead to other players becoming “very disenchanting over time” (p. 16).

Huizinga (1955) goes further, saying “We see this very clearly in the official distinction between amateurs and professionals [in sport]. It means that the play-group marks out those for whom playing is no longer play, ranking them inferior to the true players in standing, but superior in quality. The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness. This affects the amateur too, who begins to suffer from an insecurity complex” (p. 197).

This idea of a different magic circle, or having no play element at all, is not useful either when designing or studying games. We must examine the game as an entity, not throw out entire groups of players because they do not fit within our model image of what a player should be, of what a game should be. They exist within the space demarcated for play, thus their participation and contribution must be considered as valid as those who do fit an ideal. After all, even in the extreme case of industrial style gold farming in sweat-shop style conditions, there are still possible interactions with players who are not part of this operation.

¹ A study which investigated the willingness of, and emotional effects on, a participant to administer apparently painful electric shocks of increasing voltage to a “learner” as an aid to learning.

What do we actually need?

There have been several arguments put forth in defence of the magic circle concept. Perhaps, before looking to replace or discard it, we should look at what it was intended to achieve. Fairfield (2007) discussed these in some detail, but the most common reasons that have been expressed are:

- A need to protect play. It seems obvious that there shouldn't be a murder (or indeed any) charge if I were to kill your character in a virtual world with 'permadeath'², but would it be obvious to non-gamers? Would it seem obvious to a judge that I shouldn't be charged for stealing your sword if a game permits it? Would it seem obvious to the taxman that I shouldn't be charged taxes on in-game property, even if others have created an exchange which assigns that currency, and therefore those items, real-world value?
- A way of protecting narrative. Sexual acts and murder are a common aspect in game play, and may be an essential element of the narrative of a game. Whilst narrative in books is protected, that is merely a description of an act, whilst in games; we often act out the activity, thus perhaps creating a different impression were it ever to be challenged.

The commodification of virtual worlds, and the increased understanding of how activities in virtual worlds can impact upon people's emotions and psychology in the real world has illustrated the lack of separation between the real and virtual worlds, it has destroyed the hypothetical magic circle. There is no separation between the two, what happens in one has a direct relation on what is happening in the other. What matters, I would argue, are both intent and consent – encompassing both the negotiation between customers and producers that Copier (2005) references in her paper, and the "socially created artifacts" that Malaby (2007) refers to.

It seems that the question that must be answered when evaluating the legality of actions is whether there is intent to commit a crime, to which a player has not, implicitly or explicitly, given their consent. If a player enters a world where robbery is part of the game, I would argue that he has given implicit consent to be robbed. It is simply a question of customs, and this is nothing new. Forced marriages are a custom of cultures in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, yet they are illegal in many western countries, including the United Kingdom. It has long been recognized, since the inception of international travel, that one needs to be aware of the customs and laws of the nations they are entering, and there is no reason that this should be any less accepted with virtual worlds. If a crime is remunerable; that is it is possible to assign a cash value to it, a claim through the civil courts would seem to be an acceptable solution. I do not believe that a criminal charge should be forthcoming, though this is likely to be an issue of contention.

In "The State of Play", Richard Bartle (2006) argues (p. 44-50) that the magic circle is needed to protect the game conceit from the courts. I wonder however, whether a judge in a courtroom would have any understanding of the concept. Would it not be just as easy to explain the norms of the environment, as it would be to try and explain the 'Magic Circle'? Indeed, I would argue that it would be far easier to understand if you were to explain the reason why the culture of the game should be respected as the customs, or 'law of the land' than it would be to get into a theoretical discussion of the 'magic circle' concept.

² Permanent Death: A feature found in some early MUD's, whereby if your character was killed it was effectively erased, and you had to begin again

Conclusion:

I have reached the conclusion that the magic circle is not relevant when studying contemporary games. This is for two primary reasons. Firstly, because of the conceptualisation and inherent limitations of the magic circle concept, it leads to a study of games that ignores many of the factors which are relevant to games that are currently on the market. The interaction between the real and the virtual which exists in contemporary games has gradually eroded, and I would argue now destroyed, the magic circle concept.

Secondly, I cannot find arguments to support the existence of the concept as it exists today. The majority of the reasons given by current authors on the topic for its existence are made on the basis of protection of the game conceit from external bodies, and it seems to me that these can be more satisfied by the legal traditions of custom and intent.

Edward Castronova (2005) called it an “Almost Magic Circle” (p. 147). That’s like saying Tottenham almost qualified for the Champions League last year. They didn’t, and it’s not. Apter’s (1991) frame, to which the magic circle definition refers, was not permeable, it had no degrees, it was a boundary, a separation, and that is not what we are looking at with modern games, especially virtual worlds. In their economies, in the behaviour of their participants, and at the very fundamental level, in their rules, there is influence from outside of the play-space, from the real world.

It is vital that as theorists, as designers, as economists, and whoever else enters into this field we call ludology, that we are not constrained by the limitations of the theoretical magic circle, that we look outside, at the interaction between real and virtual allowed by the customs of the games we are investigating.

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