Do you believe in magic? Computer games in everyday life

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Do you believe in magic?
Computer games in everyday life[1]

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ABSTRACT   Huizinga's concept of a 'magic circle' has been used to depict computer games and gaming activities as something separate from ordinary life. In this view, games are special (magical) and they only come to life within temporal and spatial borders that are enacted and performed by the participants. This article discusses the concept of a 'magic circle' and finds that it lacks specificity. Attempts to use the concept of a magic circle create a number of anomalies that are problematic. This is not, as has been suggested earlier, primarily a matter of the genre of the game, or a discussion of what an appropriate definition of a 'game' might be. Rather, in this study with hardcore gamers, playing computer games is a routine and mundane activity, making the boundary between play and non-play tenuous to say the least. This article presents an alternative theoretical framework which should be explored further.

KEYWORDS   definitions of games, magic circle, place, play, rhetorics, routine, time

The magic circle

The term 'magic circle' has received quite a lot of attention within computer game studies. Often, it is picked up and used in an unproblematic manner, but perhaps equally problematized. Although the application and applicability of the concept has been discussed elsewhere (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003a), especially in relation to so-called pervasive games (Nieuwdorp, 2005; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003b) and sometimes with a critical edge (Copier, 2005), some main assumptions have remained largely unquestioned. These assumptions take as their point of departure a basic belief in the general usefulness of the ideas of the magic circle to all, many or most (computer) games. We disagree and in this article present the current discussion about the magic circle before we move beyond it to suggest alternative ways of understanding the gaming situation.

ARTICLE

The unproblematic magic circle

Much research on computer games relies on the assumption that games are 'fun' and that there is something 'special' or 'magical' about the gaming situation. These assumptions often rely upon Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's definition of play in his book *Homo Ludens* (1955[1938]). In a well-known and often-cited paragraph he sums up a longer discussion about the formal characteristics of play, by stating that play is:

> [A] free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (Huizinga, 1955[1938]: 13)

This has been taken as a point of departure for many discussions about computer games. Perhaps even more influential is Huizinga's idea about where play happens, i.e. his definition of the playground:

> 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 … 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[1938]: 9–10)

It is not difficult to see why these ideas have been extended to encompass computer games. Playing a classic computer game can be like travelling to a parallel world for the duration of the play session. When playing *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasArts, 1990), one takes on the role of Guybrush Threepwood and explores the Tri-Island Area – a strange and special place where actions are inconsequential to everyday life and the rules are the rules of the real world, seen through a 'funny mirror' in an amusement park.

However, Huizinga's agenda was not to establish a discipline of game studies but rather something much more ambitious: to establish and study how human play is primary and human culture is a product of play. The English subtitle of his book *Homo Ludens* became a study of the play element in culture against Huizinga's will. His intention was for it to be a study of the play element *of* culture because 'it was not my object to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play' (Huizinga, 1955[1938]). We think that Huizinga's book should be seen also as a normative theory of what it means to be human, and specifically as a reaction to other conceptions of humanness, such as the *homo economicus* of much economic and utilitarian writing of the time and the *homo faber* of Marx's writing. This is as relevant today as it was at the time, but needs to be kept in mind when reading his book.

We suggest that Huizinga has become a pop icon in game studies, more because of the superficial applicability of the two quotes above (supplemented by a handful of others) to a variety of situations, rather than as a result of serious attempts to engage critically with his thoughts. A bleaker interpretation would be that an emerging field of computer game studies, sometimes called ludology (Frasca, 1999), needs a prehistory and so has to take what can be taken from an almost 70-year-old book with the irresistible title *Homo Ludens*. It then presents the idea of a magic circle, stating that there is a distinct boundary between games and ordinary life and that this boundary is of utmost importance:

> To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins … The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins … In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players. (Salen and Zimmerman 2003a: 95–6)

To enter the magic circle the player first needs to adopt the lusory attitude, a term that Salen and Zimmerman borrow from Bernard Suits (1978). Without this playful attitude on behalf of the player(s), the game never comes into existence. Once the game has been initiated, each player move gains its meaning through the logic of the magic circle. This is a simplified view of a complicated issue and in this article represents what we call the strong-boundary hypothesis. However, the idea of the magic circle representing a strong boundary between games and ordinary life has also been problematized elsewhere (including Salen and Zimmerman, 2003b). First, we turn to the dissenters.

The problematic magic circle

The idea of a magic circle is alluring, as is the idea of a clear limit between play and non-play. Reality is messier. Problems with using the concept of a magic circle as an analytical tool have been identified repeatedly.

These problems become especially clear when the researcher in question has actual empirical material at hand which they try to understand (without much success) by applying the dominant paradigm of the separateness of play. This is never more clear than when looking at 'problematic' or so-called 'borderline' games (Juul, 2003), i.e. those that become problematic when current definitions of games, such as Juul's (2003) classic game model, are applied. For example, the 'problematic' games are those where it is debatable whether they have quantifiable outcomes, or where it becomes difficult to discern the limits of the game, the 'inside' and 'outside' of the magic circle.

Which are these games? Those that immediately spring to mind are different varieties of role-playing games (RPGs) such as table-top RPGs (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*), live action role-play (LARP) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). More generally, any

kind of game that is ongoing (so-called 'persistent state worlds') becomes problematic, whether it is a 'high-intensity' game (MMORPGs) or more casual 'low-intensity' asynchronous game (Bogost, 2004) such as (football) manager games (Crawford, 2006) or computerized play-by-mail (PBM) games. That so-called 'pervasive games' which use the city as a gameboard become deeply problematic goes without saying, as they directly challenge the idea of a clear boundary defining a game in space and time.

So what do game researchers do when they run up against what has been called 'the conventional wisdom of the dominant group', and when wisdom does not help them to analyse their data? Strategies differ, but generally there are three different ways to handle the situation:

1. avoid the magic circle as an analytical concept. Report on magic circle non-compatible results without explicitly mentioning or challenging the magic circle as an analytical concept;
2. tweak and redefine the magic circle as an analytical concept;
3. challenge the magic circle as an analytical concept.

This article will discuss examples of all three strategies. The conclusions here do not rely solely on the handful of examples below, but we believe that these examples are representative of problems that turn up at the edges and in the interstices between the inside and outside of the magic circle. They point at systematic problems that are seen first on the periphery, but have great implications for the core of the concept.

Avoiding the magic circle

Bogost (2004) coins the term 'asynchronous multiplay', and goes on to describe a type of inherently casual game that might come to match or even overtake the popularity of the more intensive synchronous multiplayer games (e.g. MMORPGs). One of the characteristics of these games is that they are designed for ongoing disrupted gameplay, i.e. for playing now and then, for being interrupted when playing or for playing during several (short) periods in a day:

> Because player obligations outside the game often engenders breaks in game-play, asynchronous play typically orients itself as much to the world outside the game as inside the game. In *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2003) … the game time is synchronized to real time. If the player is playing in the winter at night, the game world will appear dark and snowy. (Bogost 2004: 3)

Players who miss out on playing during a special holiday (Halloween or Christmas) might have to wait for a whole year to get a chance to acquire special objects. Bogost states that: 'Since game time is linked to real time, a player can conceptualize the game as a small (or large) part of his daily life rather than a split out of it' (2004: 11). While Bogost clearly revels in the difficulties of defining the boundaries of the game, he avoids mentioning the magic circle and therefore manages to steer away from the dilemma

of either having to redefine the concept, or using an ill-fitting concept to explain his observations. But things are probably simpler than that; the concept is not used because it is not relevant to him.

Redefining the magic circle

Castronova obviously finds the magic circle problematic in his book about MMORPGs, *Synthetic Worlds* (2005). Castronova does use the concept of the magic circle but in an unorthodox way. Instead of the magic circle referring to a strong boundary between the game or fantasy world and ordinary life, he redefines it and makes it into a porous 'membrane' that acts as a shield but allows people to pass in both directions constantly. To Castronova, synthetic worlds are placed

> inside an almost-magic circle rather than a truly magic one … The porosity of the membrane … means that the rules of play inside and outside influence one another, with unpredictable results for both. (2005: 161)

This position is close to the one presented by Nieuwdorp (2005) in a discussion about pervasive games. Adapting the 'screen' metaphor from Goffman (1961), she claims that rather than viewing the circle as static we should regard it as an 'organic entity which changes, develops and interacts with its surroundings' (Nieuwdorp, 2005). Both Castronova and Nieuwdorp use the metaphor of the membrane to adapt the magic circle to their objects of study (MMORPGs and pervasive games, respectively) and in doing so implicitly question the strong-boundary hypothesis.

Challenging the magic circle

Clearly, Copier (2005) is unhappy about the concept of the magic circle as it does not help her to understand fantasy culture and LARPs better. Referring to various discussions on mailing lists and elsewhere about the magic circle being a rusty circle, she does not think this goes far enough. Referring to the original Dutch edition of Huizinga's book, she points out some common misinterpretations of his concept. Her conclusion on the topic is that

> the visualization and metaphorical way of speaking of the magic circle as 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. (Copier, 2005: 8)

She suggests that the metaphor of the magic circle be discarded, since it does not help us to understand the nature of games or the act of playing them.

Of course, one way to 'solve' the problems posed by the various caveats discussed previously would be to tweak the definition of what a game is. Perhaps the concept of the magic circle can be saved if what constitutes a game is defined in such a way that the problematic examples above are deemed not to be 'real' games. In this way one could avoid the messy

problems posed by MMORPGs, pervasive games, LARPs, and so on. Although feasible, this is not a satisfying way of solving the problem, but is rather reminiscent of setting up Ptolemaic circles within circles to save a rusty paradigm. Problems with applying the strong-boundary hypothesis also pop up in seemingly unproblematic games. Problems with the magic circle are not only related to certain kinds of games (as discussed above), but also more generally to the activities of playing games (see below).

Gaming at home, gaming in everyday life

This article is partly the result of an interview study conducted during autumn 2005. The study was not motivated by an urge to examine questions relating to immersion or the magic circle. In fact, the opposite is true as this article springs from frustration in trying to interpret and understand results with the help of that theoretical concept.

The study itself was a study of hardcore gamers who lived in a small Swedish town (35,000 inhabitants). All the participants were second- or third-year students studying computer game design at the local university college. The 14 participants (12 men and two women) were between 19 and 29 years old and were selected primarily because they played computer games frequently: between 20 and 60 hours per week, with an average ranging between 35 and 40 hours. Most played games on both personal computers (PCs) and consoles, and they played a variety of games from several different genres.

All the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. This allowed for perspective on the participants' gaming activities and to experience and query aspects of gaming in everyday life that are lost when the modern researcher, equipped with a tape recorder or mp3 player and in search of the word consequently reduces social life to the one single medium of communication (Stimson, 1986). By being present in the environment that the participants inhabit when they play games, it was possible to look at their gaming set-up and their collections of games (and take photos – see Figure 1) as well as to ask for demonstrations or just to look around us and ask questions. This allowed insights into aspects that otherwise could be lost, such as meaning conveyed through cost of materials, mood, smell, colours, space, history, ambient noise (traffic, trains), and so on.

One example of an observation that otherwise might easily have been missed was the sudden realization, after having visited more than half a dozen participants in their homes, that a large majority of them did not own any books. Since the participants were university students, most had the required course literature but usually nothing else, not even novels. Our first reaction was a stunned realization of how different the participants were to ourselves. Despite the lack of books, many still had bookshelves, but these were usually filled with computer games and movies. This also

helped interpretion of the answers to another question, which tried to discover whether participants displayed and cherished their games as something that could lead to interesting conversations with guests, or whether they were ashamed and 'hid them away' in a corner. In the end that question made little sense, as the participants for the most part are immersed in a culture where it is normal to own and play many games.

The interviews were around one hour each and were followed by an introduction to their gaming set-ups and an opportunity to watch them demonstrate typical games and gaming situations. An interview guide was used which covered several different issues related to gaming in everyday life, and the relatively loose structure allowed jumping between questions as well as posing follow-up questions whenever something especially interesting caught our attention. The parts that were most relevant to the current discussion touched on the material dimensions of gaming (gaming equipment such as consoles, speakers, steering wheels), the temporal dimensions of gaming (use of leisure time, use of other media in the home), but primarily the 'mental' dimensions of gaming (issues of immersion, good gaming sessions and losing a sense of time while playing, distractions and interrupted gaming sessions).

The study yielded large amounts of rich data but its purpose was not to problematize the magic circle, therefore the primary focus of this article is not to report on the results. However, one of the results of interviewing hardcore gamers in their homes was the apparent lack of 'magical' qualities in most of the everyday gaming situations that they described.

Figure 1   The set-up of a hardcore gamer with a penchant for collecting consoles (note the large number of consoles and peripherals)

The unmagical magic circle

Based on the study, this article presents a challenge to the magic circle which, to a large extent, has not been discussed in the literature on computer games. This concerns the apparent lack of 'magic' in numerous different gaming situations. It then proposes a suggestion, taking both this novel challenge and previous challenges into account.

Doing away with the magic circle?

Thus far, the focus here has been primarily on games themselves and especially on certain kinds of games (belonging to certain 'problematic' genres) that challenge the idea of a magic circle. This section focuses on gaming as an activity and the situated nature of this activity. In short, it does not focus on a particular type of game, rather on the difference between turning off the lights in preparation for an intensive six-hour session, and playing a puzzle game for 12.5 minutes while the pasta is cooking. The position presented here grew out of the interview study and is termed the no-boundary hypothesis.

Computer games as a routine activity

To most of the gamers interviewed, computer games and gaming are a recurring daily activity and consequently was described as a routinized practice firmly integrated into their everyday lives. Considering that the participants played on average for five hours per day, seven days per week, this is not very surprising.

> Oftentimes you're very fucking bored, especially here in Smalltown, and, then you play even though you don't feel much like it, to kill an hour or two. But … it's not necessarily so much fun, you rather do it because, well, there's nothing on the TV for that part either. (Participant A)

Games can be fun, but for the most part playing computer games meant something else, something more prosaic: having something to do when coming home from school, something that takes the mind off homework; a way to keep up with friends online; or something to talk about when meeting friends offline. Some gamers played games whenever they had an hour or two to spare. Many others preferred to play in the evening or at night; by then they had finished all their chores (including coursework) and could play without being disturbed by sunlight, telephone calls or bad conscience over undone tasks.

Computer games as a monotonous activity

Playing computer games (for long hours) can become a routine activity among other everyday routine activities. Some go further and find pleasure in more or less monotonous gaming experiences, akin to reading the same book or watching the same movie over and over again:

> I have sat and played this [game] disturbingly much lately. And this is the kind of game, I don't win that much playing it any longer, there's no story to follow any longer. But I sit and play it anyway, primarily because I have got into my head that you will get something if you manage 100 percent. I think you get the whole *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, a completely brilliant movie. (Participant E)

> Generally, I like everything that is repetitive. To simply repeat over and over and over. Not large, grandiose worlds, or running around and exploring or things like that, I think that's really senselessly boring. But to speedrun in *Quake* or play defrag maps or repeat combos in *Tony Hawk* over and over. I have no idea [why I like it]. It's pretty anal as playing goes because, in the end, when you've done it really good, you just chase thousandths or hundredths of a second to shorten your record (Participant A)

This does not sound like a recipe for fun. Participant A recognized this himself, and had problems explaining why he played games in this particular way. However, there are several characteristics of a flow experience (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) presented here, such as challenges, learning, goals, skills, feedback and control.

Computer games as 'sport death'

Although games can be fun, one cannot expect someone who plays for five hours per day (or more) to be euphoric about them all the time. At times, playing computer games can seem like a partly masochistic practice of pushing the mind until the body protests:

> Most often it's about me playing until four, five in the morning. And then I feel slightly nauseous and feel like now it's time for me to go to bed … tiredness, too much caffeine, too much nicotine. I've played *World of Warcraft* until late at night this month, together with friends, they play until late too. (Participant D)

This could be seen as a mild form of what Sherry Turkle (1984), in relation to extreme hackers, called 'sport death': 'pushing mind and body beyond their limits, punishing the body until it can barely support mind' (1984: 45).

Computer games as an obligation

There are many examples of people playing for other reasons, including strong social reasons such as commitments and responsibilities to others:

> **Interviewer** – Do you feel obliged to stay a little longer and help out [when you play online games]?

> **Participant C:** It depends on how much they have helped me. If it's someone who has helped me a lot, it feels like, 'I'll stay a little longer compared to what I would really like to.' Like during the weekend, I had a sense of total liberty, I was up to, well I said, 'No, maximum three, I have to leave at three' – in the morning, I mean. And then, like, oops, half past three – ok,

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perhaps it's time to disconnect, and then I stayed until a quarter to four: 'No, I really have to leave now.' It happens – you stay longer than intended and you feel like, 'Gosh, I have to help out some.'

As a corollary, Lin et al. (2003) describe the strong social pressures at play in Taiwanese online games. At the time, as much as 10 percent or more of the total population in Taiwan played one of the two leading online games. Because of how these games were designed, the need to join a 'clan' (in-game group) was high. However, 'joining a clan and cooperating with fellow clan members can be costly and risky. Members are held to certain obligations, and helping or chatting with other member can be very time-consuming' (2003: 293).

Simultaneous consumption of media

Several of the participants had their PCs or consoles turned on all the time, and playing a game was no more than 10 seconds away every time they moved around in their (often one-room) apartments. To them, games are a pastime – as non-immersive as having the TV turned on in the background when doing something else in the home. In other words, computer games have become so successful in 'colonizing' the sphere of everyday activities that playing them becomes transformed into a mundane act, comparable to watching television (to kill time) or cooking (to fill one's belly):

> When I lived at home the TV and the computer were placed so that I could see both at the same time. So I always watched TV programmes at the same time as I played computer games. It went well [doing both at the same time]. *Football Manager* is a turn-based game, so there is much downtime. And strategy games also have a lot of downtime. Or you could watch something you knew well enough already. (Participant G)

One participant liked to have some background noise around him and had the TV on as a 'substitute for having a friend over'. Another participant often ate dinner and played computer games at the same time.

Computer game experts

The fact that the 'magic' of games gradually disappears or seems harder to hold on to is something that is probably true for all gamers as they get older. Even if a twentysomething long-time gamer plays for 'only' 10 or 20 hours per week (the participants played between 20 and 60 hours per week), they might amass easily 10,000 hours or more of playing computer games throughout their lifetime. The effects of this probably correlate with an experience (perhaps) that once was 'magical' becoming 'normal'.

> [My girlfriend] is so damn cute too. You know what you are like after a couple of years when you sort of see the game mechanics after a few minutes and you understand what sort of genre of games [this is] and you just grasp everything. And she just sits like this and everything is new, I think it's totally cool to watch [her play]. (Participant E)

As all the participants studied computer game development, games to them might not even be 'normal'. Having had the chance to peek behind the curtains, games become perceived as rather 'mechanical' or 'constructed' artefacts:

> I'm jealous when I watch my girlfriend sit and play nowadays, to see her total ignorance about the art behind the game, but she rather plays, it's just experiences. Pure experience for her, pure feelings [but] somewhere I will always think, 'How did they do that?' and then the whole illusion breaks down. (Participant E)

> After you spend more and more time developing games, maybe you become less interested in really playing games that much, you only think about how everything is done, but that can be fun too, for that matter … It is sometimes hard to concentrate on the game itself when you know too much. You see all the small details, how they have animated it, over there they have made a small error, that texture did not look so good. (Participant F)

Several participants commented that they saw 'through' the game, the underlying building blocks, and that they could seldom suspend their disbelief any longer: 'They've done like that here with this effect, that's cool, ok, I can implement that in my own game' (Participant D).

Computer games as magical

The participants did describe truly magical gaming situations, but usually when asked about their best gaming experiences ever, or when asked in abstract terms what the fun of gaming is:

> I can say why I think it is fun [to play computer games] and that is, well, the whole thing about getting to know about another world or getting to know about another character, another role, a way to get away from everyday life. I guess that's what is fascinating, that it's another world, so to speak. (Participant B)

Despite the fact that most everyday gaming situations are not magical, there were some situations that could be described aptly in terms of a magic circle at play. However, establishing such a circle does not come for free and creating it is rather a matter of expectation, preparation and hard work:

> **Interviewer:** What was the situation like when you played *Silent Hill 2*?

> **Participant E:** The situation was that we knew we played a horror game, we turned off the lights in the whole damn apartment, it was pitch dark, raised the volume on the TV and then we sat really close [to the screen] and we shat our pants.

> **Interviewer:** We?

> **Participant E:** We were a gang playing it, do you think I play that shit alone? Are you insane? Oh my god! There were four of us. It's one of those things that are sort of funny. I'm quite careful in trying to make the experience as

good as possible. In particular in horror games. I can't take horror games because I'm such a fucking cheerleader when I start to scream. But I'm like that, I'm almost self-destructive when I play horror games as apart from how many others do it. Turn off the lights, lock up, on with the headphones, turn up the volume, turn down the intensity of the gamma. And then I sit, it ends with me . . . I still have Clive Barker's *Undying* down on my bookshelf, which I think is the best horror game ever. But I haven't dared to play it through, I will never do that – I shit my pants when I hear the intro theme [music] on the menu. It can't be done.

We also saw this preparation for working hard in order to 'charge' the circle with magic when some of the participants talked worshipfully about The Game for which they had been waiting for a year or longer. At the time, and for some participants, this game was *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, released March 2006 in Sweden).

Computer games expanding in the four dimensions

As is clear, the participants habitually play games in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons without entering into anything even remotely corresponding to a magic circle. This 'colonizing move' is the opposite of what has been claimed for pervasive games, which are said to expand into everyday life. Nieuwdorp (2005) explains that pervasive games are supposed to expand the semiotic domain of the game into the domain of everyday life. To make this shift (in which the ordinary becomes part of what is magical), first the player needs to enter a 'paratelic state' (Nieuwdorp, 2005). The moment one enters that state is

> the instance in which a 'normal' person, participating in a lifeworld domain, decides to reject the practices and conventions within that particular semiotic domain to enter another, more playful one. (Nieuwdorp, 2005)

However, we think that in many situations it is more correct to say that everyday life comes to encompass game play rather than the other way around. It is clear that the participants often played games without adopting a lusory attitude or entering a paratelic state. They shifted their attention between a messaging service, the stove and the game, and for them this did not mean that the everyday activities took on magical qualities, rather the opposite.

Another thing that was made clear by the participants was that as games were such a large part of what they and their friends identified themselves with, there were numerous different reasons to play them. One reason was that one just had to play games to keep up with the gaming scene. Another was that one had to practise skills to keep up with other people one played with, either online or offline. While not having much to do with the 'magic' of games, these kinds of incentives and pressures were a large part of what games and gaming meant to the participants.

Homo Ludens (Huizinga, 1950[1938]) was written almost 70 years ago

and the games it refers to are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old.

Several were part of ritual acts which marked special times in the lives of communities and individuals. Huizinga's games were often extraordinary in a literal sense, but games today have become ubiquitous and ordinary. Games have expanded in the four dimensions, are suddenly all around us and at all times: in living rooms, homes, TV quiz shows, cellphones, public events and kick-offs. Although the material here has been collected only from hardcore gamers, we think that this is an advantage and that the results presented make certain issues easier to see which are present for other groups of gamers (average, casual gamers) and in many other situations where gaming happens (Aarsand, 2007; Johansson, 2000).

Galloway (2006) writes about the simple act of pressing the pause button when playing a game. Despite the simplicity of the act, it is difficult to explain by invoking the magic circle. However, rare moments of 'magic' seemed to be in the lives of the participants, and it would be useful to have a way of conceptualizing gaming which can handle both 'magic' and 'non-magic' gaming situations. What is needed is a theory that allows for fluid transitions between the inside and the outside of the circle, much like Castronova and Nieuwdorp's ideas about the magic circle as a 'membrane'. This article moves on to this subject, introducing the concept of the weak-boundary hypothesis.

Framing the magic circle

Presenting the weak-boundary hypothesis draws heavily on the work of sociologist Gary Alan Fine in his book *Shared Fantasy* (1983). Fine, in turn, drew on the work of the eminent sociologist Erving Goffman, especially his book *Frame Analysis* (1974). A short introduction to these thoughts will be given here.

Basically, all the (seemingly) problematic examples above run up against the strong boundary between the inside and the outside of the magic circle. That boundary is described as binary, as on/off, a dichotomy separating magical game situations from non-game, ordinary life situations. Several of the examples seem to 'short circuit' the inside and the outside of the magic circle, but where exactly does that leave it?

The suggestion here is to adopt the much more flexible idea of frames-within-frames when thinking about the gaming situation. The ordinary life frame (also called primary framework) is the baseline for any and all activities. However, in many cases, we establish, enter and maintain sub-frames that redefine the situation at hand. In a typical day, for example, the first author typically switches between the roles of university lecturer, adviser to a student writing their thesis, a customer waiting for service in a shop, a husband and father. In all of these roles, one tries to fulfil the expectations of their 'audience' as best they can (Goffman, 1959). Another important role is that of a gamer adopting the lusory attitude (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003a), adhering to the rules and accepting the limitations of the game one is playing.

There is nothing magical about switching between these roles. It is something we do all the time and can be done literally at the blink of an eye. It is analogous to 'code-switching', i.e. the way that a bilingual person can switch between languages unproblematically if the situation so demands it (Ellis, 1994). Thus a player, Alan, can be deeply involved in a discussion about game-related issues ('I need to understand how spawn points work') and then say that he 'needs to go to the bathroom' without confusion breaking out among the other players. They all understand that Alan switched frame and that the comment about the spawn point was uttered by Alan-the-player while the comment about the bathroom was uttered by Alan-the-person. On top of this, Alan juggles yet another frame, that of Lohar-the-mighty-warrior (played by Alan-the-player). Lohar has yet other needs ('I need to bash in the magician's head before he transforms me into a toad').

'Weak', as in weak-boundary hypothesis, does not mean that different frames (person–player–character) are unclear or float together and mix. At every specific point in time and for every utterance or action, only one frame is active. Misunderstandings about which frame is being invoked can generate mirth but people are surprisingly adept at grasping where we are in frame-space at any specific moment (as implied by the title of a Swedish PhD thesis about computer games: 'Time to Eat! Okay, I'll Just Die First'; Johansson, 2000). The active frame is the frame that answers the implicit question 'what is going on here?' (Goffman, 1974: 8). What is going on here? I had to go to the kitchen to find something to eat. What is going on here? I want you to explain how spawn points work in this game. What is going on here? I suspect he is trying to turn me into a toad and anyway I'd like to have his crystal. What 'weak' refers to here is that the boundaries between the different frames are permeable and it is possible (but not necessary) to move between them effortlessly. The next utterance can refer to any frame. The fact that it is easy to switch back and forth between being a person in the ordinary-life frame and a player in the game frame as the need arises makes the weak-boundary hypothesis very different from the magic circle and the strong-boundary hypothesis.

What is a player doing when they are cheating in a game? Consalvo (2005) states that 'many players "cheat" in games when they get stuck'. But where am I in relation to the magic circle when I begin to feel increasingly frustrated over being stuck in a game? And what exactly am I doing when I search on the internet for how to defeat the seemingly unassailable boss and, after having found the answer, turn back to the game? Am I connecting the inside of the circle to the outside? Short circuiting the circle? How much magic is there left in this specific circle? Or is the magic gradually slipping away as my level of frustration increases? What are the use and explanatory value of magic circles if they cannot explain perfectly ordinary gaming situations? Our answer as to what is happening is that

I switch from the character frame ('I can't kill the boss') to the player/game frame ('I have to find a game walkthrough') to the person/ordinary-life frame ('I have to open up my web browser') and then back again after having found the answer.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has attempted to do a number of things. The first was to dethrone the term 'magic circle' (also referred to here as the strong-boundary hypothesis) by showing how anomalies in defining and using the concept have piled up in a variety of studies of 'problematic' games. When so much empirical dirt has been swept under the theoretical carpet that one trips on it, it is time to rethink the theoretical framework. The second was to show how this study of actual gamers further refuted the strong-boundary hypothesis. The study showed that for the most part, playing computer games is, for these heavy gamers, a routine and mundane activity that often contains little or no magic at all (referred to here as the no-boundary hypothesis), making the boundary between play and non-play tenuous to say the least. The third was to present an alternative theoretical framework (based on Fine, 1983) which can account for all the examples presented here, and more. We think that this framework (referred to here as the weak-boundary hypothesis) holds much promise and should be explored further. In this discussion we wish to draw attention to Sutton-Smith's (1997) rhetorics of play.

There is a tendency in game studies to look at the gaming situation in isolation, as a singular event, and that this tendency leads to a focus on things such as magic circles, immersion and flow. This focus actually has much in common with so-called 'effects research', which tends to look at the act of playing in isolation and goes on to search for the effects that this act has on the player. Of course, the difference is that effects research tends to focus on negative effects, whereas research on (for example) the magic circle tends to focus on positive effects. There is nothing wrong with this focus in itself, but it needs to be accompanied by a perspective that relates games and gaming to processes that span longer periods of time and situate games in the everyday life of the gamers. A similar transformation has taken place in the audience research of other media, a transformation which has had to do with both the difficulties of previous research paradigms and the changing nature of the object of study (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

Why has there been a need to embrace Huizinga's magic circle in game studies? Why the emphasis on 'fun', 'specialness' and 'other-worldliness', when games clearly play many different roles and fill many other functions? This article has discussed the need to create a (pre)history of game studies and suggested that there is something that many present-day game scholars share with Huizinga: namely, a wish to frame games and

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gaming in a positive light and to raise the status of (computer) games and their study. Thus, at play here are two of the seven 'rhetorics of play' that Sutton-Smith (1997) has described. The first rhetoric is the rhetoric of play as the imaginary, which 'idealizes the imagination, flexibility, and creativity of the animal and human play worlds' (1997: 11). The second rhetoric is the rhetoric of the self, which refers to 'forms of play in which play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players – their fun, their relaxation, their escape – and the intrinsic of the aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances' (1997: 11). In justifying their gaming activities, we have seen these two positions being stated and elaborated upon repeatedly by the participants in this study.

These two rhetorics fit into an idealized and idealizing picture of computer games and games in general. It is easy to believe that Huizinga held such a view and it is perhaps not surprising that people who are professional game designers (such as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman) feel especially drawn to such a magic model and these strongly positive rhetorics of games. In his book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (2005), game designer Raph Koster (2005) starts the book off by telling the reader: 'my grandfather wanted to know whether I felt proud of what I do'. After having thought it through, he told his grandfather: 'yes, this is something worthwhile. I connect people, and I teach people'. We are happy on Koster's behalf but cannot fail to note that his answer is suitable not only for game designers but also for the formal speeches of university teachers, philosophers and religious leaders.

By adopting the frame metaphor instead of the 'magic circle', it is possible to avoid the idealizing connotations of a concept that is deeply tied to different rhetorics of play. To 'play' not only means watching, listening and sensing the world, but also implies a certain way of perceiving and acting; it is more a description of a state of mind than anything else. The early attempts at distinguishing game studies from other fields of media studies led Pearce, among others, to assume that: 'The first and most important thing to know about games is that they center on PLAY. Unlike literature and film, which center on story, in games, everything revolves around *play* and the player *experience*' (2002: 144; emphasis added). Like us, later writers on games and gaming have recognized a need to get away from this. Galloway's (2006) use of 'operator' instead of 'player' is motivated by 'the machinic, almost industrial, and certainly cybernetic aspect of much human–computer interaction' (2006: 127), and he states that 'play' does not go far enough in order to understand computer games as a historical and material medium. Malaby's (2007) processual definition of games also recognizes the limiting effect of equating computer gaming with playing. Thinking in terms of frames takes away the problem with the unwanted connotations of the 'magic circle', and steers away from the play rhetoric. This allows us to approach gaming in a (more) unprejudiced way. Further, it indicates that games are being transformed into a new medium that can

be used for many different purposes, only some of which have to do with play. Nowadays there are other conceptions of games, such as serious or pervasive games that do not necessarily aim at being playful.[2]

   To conclude, we would like to say that perhaps too much research on games begins as well as ends with the assumption that games are fun. However, when games become part of everyday life, it is obvious that they are something other than just vehicles for fun. This should be recognized more often in research on games.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this article was presented at the conference 'Proceedings of Mediaterra: Gaming realities', Athens, Greece, 4–8 October, 2006.
2. Is it, for example, possible to 'play' *September 12th* (Powerful Robot Games, 2003), *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* (Ledonne, 2005) or *Darfur is Dying* (USC for mtvU, 2006)?

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