Jerked Around by the Magic Circle—
Clearing the Air Ten Years Later

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Abstract: Game studies scholars seem obsessed with slaying the mythical Magic Circle Jerk. But does this person really exist? In looking back at the origin and uses of the "magic circle" concept, this paper also looks into the nature of design discourse and interdisciplinary exchange.

Preface: The Magic What?

A broad strokes definition: The magic circle is the idea that a boundary exists between a game and the world outside the game.

Outside the magic circle, you are Jane Smith, a 28 year old gamer; inside, you are the Level 62 GrandMage Hargatha of the Dookoo Clan. Outside the magic circle, this is a leather-bound football; inside, it is a special object that helps me score—and the game of Football has very specific rules about who can touch it, when, where, and in what ways.

Is the magic circle a verifiable phenomenon? A useful fiction? A ridiculous travesty? And who really cares? This essay endeavors to answer these questions by looking at the history, the use, and the misuse of the term. And along the way, I offer some correctives to how we think about the concept, about game design theory, and about the more general study of games.

Shoot Me Now

At game studies conferences, I often find myself browsing through the scheduled program and finding one or more presentations on the magic circle. If you've ever been to an academic game gathering, you know the kind of talk. They are generally given by earnest graduate students, and have titles like "Beyond the Magic Circle," or "The Pitfalls of the Magic Circle." A few years ago, there was an entire conference called "Breaking the Magic Circle."

Invariably, these presentations have a single aim: to devalue, dethrone, or otherwise take down the oppressive regime of the magic circle. They begin by citing either Johannes Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* or *Rules of Play* (the game design textbook I co-authored with Katie Salen), and then elaborate mightily on the dangers of the magic circle approach. They proceed to supplant the narrow magic circle point of view with one of their own—an approach that emphasizes something like social interaction between players, a wider cultural context, or concrete sociopolitical reality. Dragon slain.

I regularly get emails from budding game critics asking me if I think the magic circle "really ultimately truly" does actually exist. It seems to have become a rite of passage for game studies scholars: somewhere between a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's thesis, everyone has to write the paper where the magic circle finally gets what it deserves.

We all know it's fun to take down an authority figure. But what I want to ask here is: what is this oppressive regime that these well-intentioned researchers feel a need to overthrow? Who is this Voldemort that these papers dangerously invoke, in order to stage a final battle of good against evil? Does anyone really hold to the orthodox, narrow view of the magic circle, or is the phenomenon of taking down the magic circle just game studies scholars tilting at windmills?

The Magic Circle Jerk

The problem runs deep. It goes beyond just wide-eyed graduate students. Sometimes, I see it in the work of colleagues for whom I have the utmost respect and whose work I otherwise admire: game studies icons Mia Consolvo, Marinka Copier, and T.L. Taylor all have written about the need to overthrow the oppressive magic circle.

The argument goes something like this: the idea of magic circle is the idea that games are formal structures wholly and completely separate from ordinary life. The magic circle naively champions the preexisting rules of a game, and ignores the fact that games are lived experiences, that games are actually played by human beings in some kind of real social and cultural context.

My question remains: who is this ignoramus that holds these strange and narrow ideas about games? Where are the books and essays that this formalist-structuralist-ludologist has published? Where is this frightfully naïve thinker who is putting game studies at risk by poisoning the minds of impressionable students? Just who is this magic circle jerk? (Note that the word is "jerk" as in *annoying person*—I'm using it as a noun, not a verb.)

I am here to tell you: there is no magic circle jerk. We need to stop chasing this phantasm. I offer this essay as a corrective. It is meant to clarify where this magic circle idea came from, what it was intended to mean, and to stop the energy being wasted by chasing the ghost of the magic circle jerk— a ghost that simply doesn't exist.

Birthing a Straw Man

Perhaps I'm sensitive to the phenomenon of the magic circle jerk because I (or Katie Salen and I) often are identified as the embodiment of the worst of the magic circle. In fact, game designer Frank Lantz and I started using the term in our game design classes years before work on *Rules of Play* began. In 1999, we co-authored an article for Merge Magazine called Rules, Play, Culture: Checkmate that referred to the magic circle as "the artificial context of a game... the shared space of play created by its rules."

However, the term only reached full fruition in *Rules of Play.* It's certainly true that in the nearly 10 years since the book was published, the idea of the magic circle is easily the most popular concept to come out of it. So in many ways I do feel responsible for the magic circle shenanigans that have followed the book's publication.

Where does it come from? Frank and I first read the phrase "magic circle" in Huizinga's Homo Ludens, where it appears a scant handful of times—once each on pages 10, 11, 20, 77, 210, and 212 (of the 1972 Beacon Edition). Its most prominent and oft-cited mention is in this paragraph on page 10:

> 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.

Here "magic circle" appears in a list of phenomena that includes game spaces (card table, tennis court), spaces for art and entertainment (stage, screen), and even "real-world" spaces (temple, court of justice). The magic circle is yet another example of a ritual space that creates for Huizinga a "temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."

The "magic circle" is not a particularly prominent phrase in Homo Ludens, and although Huizinga certainly advocates the idea that games can be understood as separate from everyday life, he never takes the full-blown magic circle jerk point of view that games are ultimately separate from everything else in life or that rules are the sole fundamental unit of games. In fact, Huizinga's thesis is much more ambivalent on these issues and he actually closes his seminal book with a passionate argument against a strict separation between life and games.

The magic circle is not something that comes wholly from Huizinga. To be perfectly honest, Katie and I more or less invented the concept, inheriting its use from my work with Frank, cobbling together ideas from Huizinga and Caillois, clarifying key elements that were important for our book, and reframing it in terms of semiotics and design—two disciplines that certainly lie outside the realm of Huizinga's own scholarly work. But that is what scholarship often is—sampling and remixing ideas in order to come to a new synthesis.

Game Studies eminence Espen Aarseth made a similar point about the origin of the magic circle in a discussion after his presentation Ludus Revisited: The Ideology of Pure Play in Contemporary Video

Game Research at the most recent DiGRA conference. According to Espen, after trying and failing to locate the idea inside Homo Ludens, he had decided Katie and I should be blamed for the concept, and everyone should just let Huizinga off the hook.

The Importance of a Viewpoint
The brilliant designer and renowned MMO scholar Richard Bartle made a stink at a game conference several years ago by interrogating many of the presenters (most of whom were not game creators) about their research. After their talks, one by one, he asked them: "But how will your research help me make a better game?"

Now I, more than anyone, enjoy cantankerous outbursts, but Richard's repeated question was ultimately misplaced. You can't expect every research paper to address everyone else's disciplinary needs. In the end, it should be up to Richard to figure out if and how someone's research might help him make a better game, just as it was up to the historians, psychologists, and other researchers at the conference to decide if and how the design presentations from Richard (and myself) helped them with their work.

Rules of Play is a book about game design, and it was written to help game designers better understand what it means to create board and card games, social and physical games, and—of course—video games. In considering and critiquing ideas from the book, it is important to remember the disciplinary point of view from which it was written.

For example, if you read *Rules of Play* as a sociologist, the book is never going to possess a sociological standpoint as subtle and nuanced as an actual work of sociology. *Rules of Play* is not filled with research and footnotes from the history of sociological work, and its concepts do not build carefully on those from the well-heeled discipline of sociology.

The same is true when I read something through my own disciplinary lens as a game designer. I don't expect sociologists, or media studies scholars, or economists to have ingested and assimilated the whole of game design theory before they begin their work. I certainly can critique their research, but I would do so with an understanding of how their own disciplinary point of view differs from mine.

Just to clarify: I am not saying that one can't speak to issues and individuals outside of a home discipline. On the contrary, I so often find myself inspired by scholarly work outside of game design, just as I am constantly inspired by art, entertainment, and media that doesn't take the form of games. But as a practicing game designer I know that I myself must bridge the gap between these works and my own interests and goals.

Concepts and ideas should be understood within the framework of their originating discipline. This seems like an incredibly straightforward point, but critiques of the magic circle often point out how *Homo Ludens* or *Rules of Play* fails to present a concept as it should be understood within the discipline of the author. For example, just the aroma of the idea that game rules might be considered as divorced from a social reality has been enough to send many a game studies social scientist into a magic circle frenzy.

This is all complicated by the fact that game studies scholars are working in a radically interdisciplinary space, where ideas and fields mix freely. This only increases our need to be cognizant of our differences. Often, for example, we share and exchange concepts, but our methodologies and the aims of our research are wildly divergent. These differences are productive, but can be the source for misunderstandings. The phenomenon of the magic circle jerk is a case in point.

The Magic Circle as a Concept for Game Design
Rules of Play is a book about game design. Every concept between its covers was conceived as something useful for designers struggling with the process of creating games—useful for generating concepts, for constructing games, for analyzing designs. *Rules of Play* emphasizes how games create meaning, by being or becoming contexts in which meaning gets made.

Within this larger set of ideas, the magic circle is a fairly simple concept. It is a term that reminds us how meaning happens. Imagine, if you will, coming to visit me in my Brooklyn apartment. The two of

us chat over coffee, as a Chess set sits nearby. Consider the web of relations between you and I and the Chess set as we sit and talk. Perhaps the figurines on the Chess board serve as a conversation starter, or perhaps as a social marker that I am a game player, or maybe they are just part of the aesthetic décor of my living room. Or—most likely—all of these and many more.

Once we start playing a game of Chess, many of these relationships shift and change. For example, in a casual conversation, we might fiddle with the Chess pieces on the board, knocking them about. But after we begin to play, suddenly it really matters whether a piece is in the middle of a square or not, and which of us can move it, and when, and how. Each of our kings acquires a special significance, and our social interaction shifts—perhaps it becomes more adversarial, or more conversational, or simply more quiet. Time and space, and identity, and social relations acquire new meanings while the game is going on. This is how playing a game is "entering a magic circle"—there are meanings which emerge as cause and effect of the game as it is played.

For me this idea—that games are a context from which meaning can emerge—is so simple as to be almost banal. Hardly a cause for debate! And note that this general understanding of the magic circle does not imply the impossibly brittle, heavy-handed caricature that is so often criticized—the ideas held by the imaginary magic circle jerk.

For example, are the meanings that emerge from the Chess game in my example completely divorced from ordinary life? Absolutely not! They are inexorably intertwined. A preexisting friendship, for example, will certainly impact the social interaction between players in a game. Are the meanings ultimately derived from the rules and formal structures of the game? Hardly! Meaning is everywhere and infinitely subtle, appearing wherever one wishes to look. Certainly there are game-meanings that are tied to the rules of the game, but there's no reason to assume that those elements always dominate over others.

In fact, there's no need to think about the magic circle (a context for meaning creation) as something exclusive to games. Could one think of almost any physical or social space as a magic circle in this way? Probably—if that's your cup of tea, go for it. Certainly Huizinga makes a similar gesture when he places courts of law and religious temples in the same "play-ground" category as card tables and tennis courts.

Critiques of the magic circle often hinge on identifying in *Rules of Play* a subtle emphasis on the designed elements of games, rather than on more purely sociocultural phenomena. Critiquers, I have good news for you: you are correct. *Rules of Play* does tend to emphasize the meanings that are tied to the elements that designers actually create. Why? Because it is a book written by and for designers.

As a book about game design it has a special interest in the *actual construction* of games—the rules and materials, the systems and code that game designers create, and the way that those elements impact player experience. But the book certainly also spends an extensive amount of time detailing the contextual aspects of games—for example, one of the four sections of the book is entirely dedicated to thinking about the cultural contexts of games.

Rules of Play was written by designers. Understanding our disciplinary point of view can help explain why we might be interested in the meanings that are formed in part from the decisions of designers. However, there is a world of difference between a subtle emphasis on design and the ham-fisted hyper-structuralism of the mythical magic circle jerk.

Thinking Many Ways at Once

I recently visited a game studies class. Throughout the discussion after my talk, the professor peppered me with questions about the magic circle: *Can we REALLY look at rules in and of themselves? Is it truly possible to separate rules from the rest of games? And why would we even want to?* He addressed me as if I was the very embodiment of the magic circle jerk, manifesting right there in his classroom. Before I could convince him (and the class) that nobody really held any of the ideas he wanted to question, I first had to convince him that I wasn't really the enemy that he thought I was. It was certainly an out-of-body kind of experience.

One of the most basic ideas in *Rules of Play* is that we can look at games from multiple and contradictory points of view. And furthermore: that this is the right and proper thing to do with such a complex phenomena as games. As Katie and I write in *Rules of Play*, most of the chapters represent a "schema"—a particular lens that can be used to focus on certain aspects of games.

We organize them into three general types—*formal* schema focused on rules (i.e., games as systems of uncertainty or as cybernetic feedback loops), *experiential* schema focused on play (games as social play or as the play of desire), and *cultural* schema focused on context (games as cultural rhetoric or as ideological resistance). This is the same thing as saying that literature can be understood as the rhythms of style, or as the representation of gender and class, or as the history of the printing press—or as any number of things.

When we use one schema to understand, analyze, or design games, other schemas may need to be ignored or repressed. There are, for example, key mathematical aspects of games that are crucial for learning the craft of game design, such as calculating basic probability or understanding game theory functions. Focusing on the math in making a game (such using a spreadsheet to juggle the relative experience point level-up curves of different classes in an RPG) might mean temporarily suspending a critical awareness of (for example) the sociocultural identity of the player base.

However, eventually the RPG designer would need to connect the pure math to the game's play and to its culture. A level-up experience point curve implies a certain tempo of play advancement relative to a reward/frustration pattern of desire. And the shape of this play is certainly something that should be designed relative to an understanding of a particular kind of player's expectations and assumptions—aspects of player attitudes that are closely tied to sociocultural identity. In other words, the math bone is connected to the culture bone. All of the schemas in *Rules of Play* really are ultimately intertwined, even if sometimes we have to separate them to see one aspect of games more clearly.

Applying different cognitive frames to knowledge at different moments is part of any intellectual or creative pursuit. A violinist in the midst of performing a Rochmananov cadenza is not going to simultaneously ponder the biography of the composer of the piece she is playing at that very moment. However, during her rehearsal period, that kind of research is certainly something that may have informed her musical practice.

I have always thought that the multiple-schema approach of *Rules of Play* offers an *antidote* to a narrow, rules-centric approach—the approach of the magic circle jerk. The aggravating irony is that this is exactly the brush we get tarred with! Jesper Juul captures this bizarro-world logic in his essay The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece*:* "...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." Let's stop the insanity.

Design Isn't Science
As a designer, I am an avowed relativist. For me, the value of a concept is not its scientific, objective truth. The value of a concept is its utility to solve problems as they are encountered in the design process. The concepts in *Rules of Play* are not meant to explain or define games once and for all. They are tools that can be used to understand, construct, and modify games. As MIT pioneer Marvin Minsky put it, a concept is a "thing to thing with"—not a law that points towards a truth.

This is why designers must embrace the deliciousness of contradiction. For example, to solve the feedback loop problems in your game's victory conditions, you might need to take off your media studies hat for a moment. Or to understand why all of your playtesters despise your game's main character, you might need to cease your formalist system-tweaking and consider instead the narrative politics of gender representation at work in your game.

One concept-tool might be completely useless for solving one particular problem, but crucial for something else. Thinking of games in all of their complexity as math, aesthetics, desire, social experience, gender, story, identity, etc.—this is what game design is all about. Interpretive schema can violently contradict each other! But that's absolutely the way it should be.

Many approaches to the study of games operate under a more scientific model—the idea that there are truths about games, and it is important to discover these truths and establish an accurate picture of what games actually are and how they really operate. I welcome others who want to hanker after scientificity, but such concerns do not motivate my own thinking about games. Just to restate: in my opinion, for a designer the value of a concept is its utility, not its ultimate truth. And concepts like the magic circle that come out of *Rules of Play* reflect this non-scientific designer's approach.

I believe this is why I often see presentations or read papers asking whether the magic circle really-ultimately-finally does or doesn't exist. The answer, as far as I am concerned, is *yes and no*. It just depends on what you are trying to understand about games, and why you are making use of the concept. If you want to look at games as a pure mathematician, or a strict ludologist, it makes perfect sense that you might adopt a more closed idea of games-as-rules. If you are a social anthropologist, then such a closed view wouldn't have much use in solving your research questions.

There is nothing wrong with temporarily adopting a limited point of view, as long as you're aware of the limitations of the blinders you are putting on. In fact, this is what research in an interdisciplinary field is all about! Understanding the limitations in our own points of view can help us in our understanding of each other.

Now you may be thinking... Aha! Articulating limitations—that's the problem! Those darn magic circle jerks don't do enough to describe the blinders they are putting on. They don't sufficiently make the limitations of their limited perspective known! I want to remind you that *there is no magic circle jerk*. This naïve character—the ultimate hardcore formalist—is a phantasm. Nobody in game studies, as far I know, is taking that point of view seriously. The entire purpose of my essay is to point out that this magic circle jerk is a fiction that people project onto *Homo Ludens* and *Rules of Play*.

Play On

I have made a harsh caricature of the magic circle jerk—as a silly super-structuralist that dogmatically believes in the truth of a hard-edged magic circle. Perhaps I have replaced the myth of the magic circle with a myth of my own—the impossibly idiotic magic circle jerk. But is it possible that the ghost of the jerk remains somewhere, as a tendency, as a predilection, as a potential that can still poison game studies?

In his excellent essay The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece (from which I quoted earlier)*,* Jesper Juul echoes many of the ideas I have put forth here: that there has been a wave of criticisms against the magic circle, and that they stem from a misunderstanding about the concept as presented in Homo Ludens and Rules of Play.

One of Jesper's ideas is that the criticism of the magic circle is a symptom of "binary thinking"—an intellectual sensibility that seeks to identify and then overthrow theoretical dualities. The magic circle, according to Jesper, represents a particularly ripe binarism to tear down, because it (or rather, its misunderstood caricature) is the idea of a hard binary separation between what is inside and what is outside a game.

I agree with Jesper. My own feeling is that the impulse to overthrow such binarisms is a residue of the critical sensibility that dominated the '90s—the era of deconstruction and poststructuralsim in which many game studies scholars came of age. The instinct to exaggerate the dangers of the magic circle so that it can be valienty deconstructed is linked to the notion that ideas are most authentic when they tear down an authority—even if the authority is no more than a highly confected, imaginary effigy. Or, let me put it in another, less diplomatic way: propping up invented straw men just so you can knock them over is a lazy way to do research.

A final thought. You are probably reading this essay because you love games. Perhaps you love to play them, to study them, to create them—or some combination of all three. It is amazing that we can cross radical disciplinary boundaries, accept our differences across concepts, methods, and aims, yet still be united in our polyamorous and unabashed love for games. This love that embraces contradiction is beautiful. It has many names, but I like to call it *play*.

Let's play together. And put to bed this magic circle jerk once and for all.

Summary: Myths of the Magic Circle Debunked

1. Nobody actually holds the orthodox view of the magic circle. There is no circle jerk behind the curtain.

2. While it was based on a passing term Frank Lantz and I noticed in Homo Ludens, Katie Salen and I more or less introduced the concept of the magic circle as it is used today. Blame us for all the trouble, not Huizinga.

3. Keep in mind the discipline from which a work or idea originated. Don't dismiss concepts in one field of knowledge because it doesn't fit your own discipline. The onus is on each of us to translate ideas from the outside into our own areas.

4. The magic circle, as put forward in *Rules of Play*, is the relatively simple idea that when a game is being played, new meanings are generated. These meanings mix elements intrinsic to the game and elements outside the game.

5. In my opinion, design concepts (such as the magic circle as described in *Rules of Play*) derive their value from their utility to solve problems. Their value is not derived from their scientific accuracy or proximity to truth.

6. Looking at a complex phenomena like games from many points of view, it is important to embrace contradiction. The magic circle can be thought of as open or closed, depending on why you are making use of the concept.

7. The magic circle jerk *doesn't exist.* Nobody really takes the hard line that everyone wants to criticize. I'm sick of the magic circle jerk. Let's bury the bastard.

Notes

Because I didn't want to make this an angry and defensive finger-pointing rant, you may have noticed that I never actually cited any evidence for the magic circle jerk. There are no embarrassing quotes from papers or presentations attacking the magic circle. Although this lack of footnotes certainly relegates this essay to mere pseudo-scholarship, I am assuming that the phenomenon I describe is so pervasive that actual references just aren't necessary. (If you must dig deeper, a good place to start is Jesper's essay The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece.)

Regarding Espen Aarseth's comments about letting Huizinga off the hook, he later told me his comments had been infuenced by Gordon Calleja's essay Erasing the Magic Circle—to be published in an upcoming issue of *The Philosophy of Computer Games*.

This essay was written solely from my own point of view, and does not represent the ideas of Katie Salen, my amazing Rules of Play co-author. I sometimes included her name to make sure that she was credited with the core ideas and concepts we wrote together. But she may well have a very different perspective on this magic circle business than I do. Vive la différence! And same goes for my game design hero Frank Lantz, with whom I originally encountered the work of Huizinga.

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PS: I love you, Richard Bartle! Promise you'll never stop being you.