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There is No Magic Circle

Mia Consalvo¹



Abstract

Games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on player acts. However, to understand gameplay, we must also investigate contexts, justifications, and limitations. Cheating can be an excellent path into studying the gameplay situation, because it lays bare player's frustrations and limitations. It points to ludic hopes and activities, and it causes us to question our values, our ethics. In comparison, the concept of the magic circle seems static and overly formalist. Structures may be necessary to begin gameplay, but we cannot stop at structures as a way of understanding the gameplay experience. Because of that, we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes.

Keywords

magic circle, video games, game studies, game theory, real-money trade

One evening in the central city of Jeuno, in the world of Vana'diel, individuals of various races, ages, and genders were gathered by the auction house to buy and sell items of great and little value. It was a normal evening, filled with the usual chatter related to battles, monsters, and socializing, barring one exception. An individual was being taken to task by many others, who slapped, poked, and shouted at him, complaining that he (Kofgood) was ruining the economy of the world with his (and his associate's) activities. No one defended him, and Kofgood himself said nothing, calmly completed his transactions, and then left. Yet, talk about Kofgood and his ilk continued and certainly did not end when he or other individuals left Jeuno.

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What I have left out of that account is the violations occurred in what some theorists refer to as the magic circle of play. Individuals were not shouting at Kofgood because he controlled the market in ice staves or was overfishing for moat carp. They were upset because he allegedly was a gil (gold) seller and was engaged to some extent in Real Money Trade (RMT). Kofgood, to upset individuals, had violated the rules of the fantasy world as set forth by Square Enix for *Final Fantasy XI Online*, and they felt he was not sufficiently punished for that. However, how can we adequately take a measure of the complexity of their situation? In addition, can we simply suggest that within the bounds of the massively multiplayer online (MMO; and Vana'diel), the everyday rules of life did not apply?

Huizinga wrote in the 1930s about a magic circle for play, which bounded a space and set it apart from normal life. Inside the magic circle, different rules apply, and it is a space where we can experience things not normally sanctioned or allowed in regular space or life.

Game studies scholars have seized on the magic circle as a concept for games to help explain the role of games in our lives. We have discussed the boundaries and how those are the rules or whether they might include other things. In my own work, I have been interested in the role of cheating in relation to games and have thought about it in relation to the magic circle as well (2007). One view is to see the cheater as actually most invested in the rules as the bounds of the circle (moving a chess piece while her opponent is distracted)—because the cheater hopes everyone else is following the rules—otherwise the cheater gains no real advantage.

By contrast, the spoilsport (Huizinga, 1950) rejects the rules entirely (e.g., sweeping the chess pieces onto the ground) and thus destroys the magic circle. The cheater wants you to think you are both playing the same game but in actuality you are not. The spoilsport simply wants to destroy the play/game experience.

However, this conceptualization of the magic circle was developed in the 1930s, long before the advent of digital games, by a theorist with particular views of what did and did not constitute play. In building of that disjuncture between notions of play and game, Malaby asks game studies scholars to decouple our unquestioned linkages between the concepts “game” and “play.” He argues that in doing so, we move beyond simplistic ideas of games as about fun and enjoyment and can instead better study the processes involved in games that can be quite serious for their players (2007). Other game studies scholars are beginning to question the masculinist bias of games studies (Ludica, 2007), and Huizinga’s (1950) work is certainly ripe for critique in that area. Here, though, I want to question the easy transfer of the concept of the magic circle to game studies and use cheating as a lens for interrogation.

In doing research for my book on cheating (2007), I went into the study with some basic ideas of what constituted cheating, but I ultimately let my informants define for me what they saw as cheating practices. That was a lucky move. I quickly found out that they did not agree on how to define the term nor did they agree on when it was acceptable or unacceptable to cheat in a game, whether single or multiplayer, online or off-line.

Players often seemed hampered by the term “cheating” itself, in attempting to explain their play activities. Because of the near automatically associated negative valence of that term, individuals often justified certain actions when talking with me—Sue would say that she used cheat codes only “after already having played through a game once on her own” or Paul would say that he cheated in a multiplayer game only because “everyone else was cheating and we all knew it.”

For such players, cheating was an action in need of justification. Of course there were some players who unabashedly cheated (and still do), but for most players, some accounting for a particular behavior was necessary, at least in recounting the act to others. In addition, for some, it was needed even for themselves individually. Why?

Echoing some of the gamers that Taylor (2006) talked with in relation to *EverQuest*, my players stressed earning achievement through gameplay. They wanted to play the game and advance successfully through the game based on their own skill and effort. Akin to power gamers, yet perhaps not (all) as dedicated, players talked of earned achievement, a sense of accomplishment only their own efforts could bring to a game, even if cheating was technically possible. Although cheating might occasionally be necessary, or simply fun, it often robbed them of that sense of accomplishment, either through giving them answers they felt they should have worked harder for or through depriving other players of achievements they had also earned.

Yet, cheating still happened—either because of necessity or because of the lure of the ludic. Yet, what does that have to do with spaces apart, with bounded areas for play? When Huizinga (1950) wrote about the magic circle, our sense of space and place was radically different from what it is now. In suggesting a place “set apart” from everyday life, that space could be envisioned as geographic space fairly easily—the playground, the boxing ring, the hopscotch outline.

Of course Huizinga (1950) could also have been referring to mental spaces in addition to geographic spaces. Turner’s (1969) conception of liminal spaces, the interstitial boundaries between the sacred and the profane, are also spaces “set apart” from the everyday—they are changes in mind or attitude which occur while we inhabit the same geographic places. Likewise, with events such as carnival, we are in the same location (a town) yet attitudes and behaviors, as well as ornamentation, change, for a particular time period.

Yet, for all of those examples, there is still a sense of boundedness that seems more encompassing than play (especially in digital games) now has in contemporary society. Apart was an absolute, even if only for minutes at a time.

In contrast, Barry Atkins (2007) has argued that we now approach the playing of even new digital games with a feeling of nostalgia. We have already seen the screenshots of the action, we have read about the special gameplay mechanics built into the game, which is also likely a sequel, or in a series, or part of a licensed franchise with which we are already quite familiar.

Such paratexts (Consalvo, 2007) surround contemporary digital games, shaping them, limiting them, giving them form, and encouraging (as well as discouraging) particular forms of play and sensemaking. Who could go into a *Final Fantasy* or

Halo game having no idea of what might happen relative to the story or the style of gameplay expected of us? Would we really expect to play an MMO without knowing the types of jobs we could use or the races of our soon-to-be-created avatars?

Given such information, which we now expect and which the game industry so willingly supplies, the concept of a space “apart from” everyday life, whether geographic or conceptual, becomes harder to maintain. We have always already played the game, yet we still play to confirm whatever we hope or fear to be true.

Yet, what about the act of gameplay itself? Is that still a bounded space, where normal rules do not apply? Theorists such as Castronova (2007) would argue such places are of paramount importance, that we need such fantasy spaces, especially in a world where there is already too much horror, violence, and death. Yet, even as he might wish for such spaces, such worlds must inevitably leave the hands of their creators and are then taken up (and altered, bent, modified, extended) by players or users—indicating that the inviolability of the game space is a fiction, as is the magic circle, as pertaining to digital games. Indeed, Steinkuehler posits a “mangle of play” that considers two sets of agencies—that of the designers who create game worlds and that of the player communities that inhabit them (2006). She rightly believes that each group vies for control and meaning-making within the game world, but it is only through that coexistence that actual games emerge.

So, is the concept of the magic circle useful? Arguably, it upholds structuralist definitions or conceptualizations of games. It emphasizes form at the cost of function, without attention to the context of actual gameplay. With contemporary games, and multiplayer games and MMOs in particular, context is key, as many scholars (Consalvo, 2007; Malaby, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2006; Taylor, 2006) have found.

For example, my own work on cheating stresses the importance of understanding the many definitions of cheating that players offer and their own negotiations in choosing when and how to cheat or not. Taylor (2006) has also found that game players often do not mention fun as a reason for playing—particularly the power gamers that see grind and hard work as integral parts of MMO gameplay. Her early work in this area was one of the initial challenges to structuralist accounts of games, with her study of actual gamers bringing to the fore the need to understand how players understand, contextualize, and challenge MMO games. Likewise, the work of Malaby, Steinkuehler, and others does argue for understanding multiple viewpoints, and multiple contexts, for understanding games. Thus, several writers stand with me in positing a way of understanding games that goes beyond structures or boxed content. Yet, so far, the concept of the magic circle has been left largely untouched.

Taking another view, formalist constructions of games (Juul, 2005) either deny that context or place its importance as secondary to the structural elements of games, in seeking to understand them. What if, rather than relying on structuralist definitions of what is a game, we view a game as a contextual, dynamic activity, which players must engage with for meaning to be made. Furthermore, it is only through that engagement that the game is made to mean.

We see that happening when we look at players cheating in games. An example will help to make my point. Let us consider *World of Warcraft* (WoW) generally and the WoW glider in particular. Developed by Michael Donnelly and MDY Industries, the glider is a small program or mod for WoW that lets the user program one of her avatars to travel along a preset path, killing whatever is found, skinning, looting, and gaining experience points from the looped activity. The makers of the program/mod stress on their Web site that the mod is designed to eliminate the tedious aspects associated with leveling a character (the grind), especially for players who may have already done so with several other characters—in other words, this is for alts or very experienced players to “fast-forward” through undesirable parts of the game.

Fast-forwarding is a common reason people will cheat in a game (Consalvo, 2007), although in multiplayer games such as WoW, the developers usually consider such activities as in violation of the game’s terms of service (ToS). It is thus illegal, and the creators of the glider are currently being sued by Blizzard for their creation (Markee, 2007).

We can consider the potential activities associated with the WoW glider in several ways. Some individuals might use the glider to level avatars that they intend to sell to other players for (real) currency and thus profit off the fast-forwarding mod. Some players may wish to level their second, third, or fourth avatar through either some or all of the grind in the game, to achieve higher levels, but keep those avatars as part of their account to play with in the future. Some players (admittedly few) may find the WoW glider before even beginning the game and use it to level their avatar to get to the content they assume is most valuable—such as end game raiding.

Although the developers have deemed all those activities as cheating and violations of the ToS, they obviously have different meanings for the players involved. Likewise, they have different meanings and outcomes for players who do not use the WoW glider but who are nonetheless affected by its presence as a mod. Nonglider-using players may consider the opportunity to purchase such a leveled avatar as a bargain, rather than leveling an avatar on their own. Nonglider-using players may feel that avatars running automatically on preset paths in certain areas are unfairly hogging resources in game, which they may need and feel more legitimate claim to, being in actual control of their avatar. Finally, nonglider using players may feel fiscal ramifications of glider-using players, if glider users also gather large amounts of consumable resources to sell via auction houses and either flood markets (driving prices down) or control the sale of certain items (driving prices up).

From a formalist, structuralist perspective, the bounds or rules of the magic circle (the game of WoW) have definitely been breached through some players’ use of the WoW glider, but beyond that, how useful is knowing of the presence of the WoW glider? It is simply present/absent and a violation/not violation of the rules of the game.

If instead we see such activities as contextual, richer understandings of the glider can emerge. Some players are seeking monetary profit from use of the WoW glider, while others are hoping for a jump past content they have perhaps already witnessed countless times before (if they have multiple characters). Some players see every

level and activity in a game as worthwhile and valuable in some way (although perhaps not fun or entertaining), while others derive value from particular parts and seek to avoid or minimize other game elements.

Nonglider users may react singly or in groups by killing (or ganking) glider users once or repeatedly. In doing so, they may reify for themselves and others what they deem acceptable and unacceptable forms of gameplay. Nonglider users may also then help to build communities of like-minded players, even in the face of an undesirable activity. Nonglider users may perhaps even appreciate the activities of glider users, if the user clears an area of dangerous mobs (to the nonglider user) and thus lets the nonuser focus on other activities such as gathering natural resources to craft. All these reactions make the game mean particular things, which we do not see if we merely look to violations of the rules and circle.

Additionally, players also bring into the game assumptions, knowledge, and information about the act of MMO gameplay itself. Most players of MMOs understand the large time investments required of the genre, if they wish to be active players. With the “normal” MMO player averaging more than 20 hr a week of gameplay time, MMOs are difficult for casual gamers to do well in. Thus, most players know that to advance or achieve much in the game, time—a lot of it—is required of them.

Players of WoW also know that the creation of alternate characters on a person’s account is very common because (as opposed to other types of MMOs such as *Final Fantasy XI*) avatars are limited to one job choice, and thus if players wish to try other types of jobs or create avatars with alternate specialties, they must do so by making alts. Thus, alts are a common element of MMO gameplay.

Given that, alts can serve different functions. Some players wish to experience as much game content as they can and so desire to see different abilities, story lines, locations, and the like. Other players create alts that have complementary crafting or money-making abilities from their “main” avatar, to maximize their in-game cash flow. Still other players may create alts to level with friends who are of a different level than they are (usually less advanced) and still give both players an equal challenge. So, alts may serve different purposes, across players, across alts, and over time.

The glider is designed to let players develop their own leveling strategy, independent of the carefully structured paths laid out by Blizzard’s developers. Yet, players’ use of the alts that result from such activities takes a variety of different forms. If we consider the game from a structural or formalist perspective, we can see only a violation of the rules, and thus the magic circle. Yet, if we consider the game as a contextual, meaning-making *process*, another picture emerges entirely.

Beyond Circles: Keys and Frames

Rather than restrict games to a bounded circle, another way of understanding the processes of gameplay could be through application of another framework—the

frames and keys of Erving Goffman, modified in Gary Alan Fine's work with role-playing gamers in the 1980s (Fine, 1983; Goffman, 1974). In his attempts to understand the organization of experience in daily life, Goffman described daily living as a series of frames that we encounter, frames that organize our activity and structure our experiences.

Yet, for Goffman, frames alone do not explain the rich complexities of our everyday interactions. Daily activities could also be given additional meanings or keyings (1974, pp. 43-44). Such keyings are systematic, openly acknowledged, bounded in time if not in space, and perform "a crucial role in determining what we think is really going on" (p. 45). Goffman's examples of forms of keyings included make believe, play, rehearsals, simulations, practicing, and other such states. Thus, we might have a primary frame that would indicate getting married, but a keying of that frame that looks like someone getting married, but is instead a rehearsal for a marriage ceremony, and we could all recognize the difference between those two actions.

Keys are important for understanding reality for Goffman (1974), yet for him they indicate a deviation from the real or what is "actually or literally occurring" (p. 47). He suggests in several places that there is an original frame (for reality) and a copy of that frame—the primary framework and the keyed version. His insistence on a real version is not echoed in Fine's (1983) work, and I would question the distinction that one version of a frame is a copy or faked version of another—to make such a claim would be to create another structuralist account of what happens in MMOs, this time swapping various keys and frames for what is inside and outside a magic circle.

Fine takes us in a more helpful direction, arguing that first, for fantasy gaming, three distinct frames are operative—"the world of commonsense knowledge grounded in one's primary framework, the world of game rules grounded in the game structure, and the knowledge of the fantasy world (itself a hypothetical primary framework)" (1983, p. 194). Fine believes we can have multiple frames, and we can switch among them fairly rapidly. Particularly in situations where frames are voluntary—such as those involving games—frames are "more likely to be rapidly keyed than are mandatory frames" (p. 196) because "the 'real world' will always intrude, for the gaming structure is not impermeable to its outside events" (p. 197). Without calling it by name, Fine would appear to be questioning the viability of the magic circle.

Likewise, Fine (1983) seems to reconfigure Goffman's (1974) notion of keys, which become transitions between different frames rather than an alternate version of a particular frame. Thus, rather than a player up-keying from daily life to a simulation, the player up-keys from daily life to the world of game rules and game structure, which is simply another frame (and the player might then very quickly down-key back to daily life if her mobile phone rings). Fine argues for the rapidity and pleasure that players can take from up-keying and down-keying in their actions while playing—and here, we can see the use of the concept for better understanding MMOs.

As Fine (1983) suggests, the “real world” will always intrude on game playing, in multiple ways, and players respond to those intrusions dynamically, negotiating a reality that “is continually in dynamic tension” (p. 200) as players up-key and down-key to make sense of various situations. Players can also use the activities of up-keying and down-keying to enhance their gameplay or social interactions, for example, bringing knowledge from the “real” world into the game world or creating jokes in game from real-life events. In addition, they do so rapidly, with ease, and as a collective. It is part of the activity of group or community building in games, I would argue, and thus an essential part of not only the fantasy gamer groups of Fine’s study but also the contemporary MMOs.

Players exist or understand “reality” through recourse to various frames (their daily life, the game world, their characters’ alleged knowledge and past) and move between those frames with fluidity and grace. So, rather than seeing a boundary break or simply being “inside” or “outside” a magic circle, by conceptualizing gamer activity as movements between frames, we can better capture and study the complexities of MMO gameplay.

Conclusions

As stated previously, players never play a new game or fail to bring outside knowledge about games and gameplay into their gaming situations. The event is “tainted” perhaps by prior knowledge. There is no innocent gaming. Players of WoW are well aware of the ToS restrictions as well as the vibrant player community that constantly challenges Blizzard on multiple levels relative to gameplay design, play restrictions, and what are and are not acceptable changes to the core of gameplay.

Players also have real lives, with real commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires. That is also brought into the game world, here Azeroth. We can neither ignore such realities nor retreat to structuralist definitions of what makes or defines a game. Games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on acts by players. Those acts are always, already, contextual and dynamic. As we have seen through use or nonuse of the WoW glider, there can be multiple meanings derived from one particular action. We cannot understand gameplay by limiting ourselves to only seeing actions and not investigating reasons, contexts, justifications, limitations, and the like. That is where the game occurs and where we must find its meaning.

Cheating can be an excellent path into studying the gameplay situation, because it lays bare player’s frustrations and limitations. It points to some of their ludic hopes and activities, and it causes us to question our values, our ethics. With such rich, evocative, potential experiences, the concept of the magic circle seems static and overly formalist by comparison. Structures may be necessary to begin gameplay, but we cannot stop at structures as a way of understanding the gameplay experience.

Because of that, we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes. Cheating (or any other violation) may be a defiant act, or an act to save someone's game from grinding to a halt, but we need the context of the act to understand it, or we fail to do justice to the complexity and richness of MMOs and digital games.

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The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Bios

Mia Consalvo is an associate professor in the School of Media Arts & Studies at the Ohio University. She is the author of *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* and has

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