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THE MAGIC CIRCLE



play frame

open system

closed system

lusory attitude

*This is the problem of the way we get into and out of the play or game . . . what are the codes which govern these entries and exits?—**Brian Sutton-Smith**, *Child's Play**

What does it mean to enter the system of a game? How is it that play begins and ends? What makes up the boundary of a game? As we near the end of our first Unit, we need to address one last set of key concepts. These concepts are embedded in the question raised by Sutton-Smith: “How do we

get into and out of the play or game?” At stake is an understanding of the artificiality of games, the way that they create their own time and space separate from ordinary life. The idea that the conflict in games is an *artificial* conflict is part of our very definition of games.

Steve Sniderman, in his excellent essay “The Life of Games,” notes that the codes governing entry into a game lack explicit representation. “Players and fans and officials of any game or sport develop an acute awareness of the game’s ‘frame’ or context, but we would be hard pressed to explain in writing, even after careful thought, exactly what the signs are. After all, even an umpire’s yelling of ‘Play Ball’ is not the exact moment the game starts.”¹ He goes on to explain that players (and fans) must rely on intuition and their experience with a particular culture to recognize when a game has begun. During a game, he writes, “a human being is constantly noticing if the conditions for playing the game are still being met, continuously monitoring the ‘frame,’ the circumstances surrounding play, to determine that the game is still in progress, always aware (if only unconsciously) that the other participants are acting as if the game is ‘on.’”²

The “frame” to which Sniderman alludes has several functions, which we will cover in later chapters. For now, it is sufficient to note that the frame of a game is what communicates that those contained within it are “playing” and that the space of play is separate in some way from that of the real world. Psychologist Michael Apter echoes this idea when he writes,

In the play-state you experience a *protective frame* which stands between you and the “real” world and its problems, creating an enchanted zone in which, in the end, you are confident that no harm can come. Although this frame is psychological, interestingly it often has a perceptible physical representation: the proscenium arch of the theater, the railings around the park, the boundary line on the cricket pitch, and so on. But such a frame may also be abstract, such as the rules governing the game being played.³

In other words, the frame is a concept connected to the question of the “reality” of a game, of the relationship between the artificial world of the game and the “real life” contexts that it intersects. The frame of a game creates the feeling of *safety* that is part of Chris Crawford’s definition of a game explored in *Defining Games*. It is responsible not only for the unusual relationship between a game and the outside world, but also for many of the internal mechanisms and experiences of a game in play. We call this frame the *magic circle*, a concept inspired by Johann Huizinga’s work on play.

Boundaries

What does it mean to say that games take place within set boundaries established by the act of play? Is this really true? Is there really such a distinct boundary? In fact there is. Compare, for example, the informal play of a toy with the more formal play of a game. A child approaching a doll, for example, can slowly and gradually enter into a play relationship with the doll. The child might look at the doll from across the room and shoot it a playful glance. Later, the child might pick it up and hold it, then put it down and leave it for a time. The child might carelessly drag the doll around the room, sometimes talking to it and acknowledging it, at other times forgetting it is there.

The boundary between the act of playing with the doll and not playing with the doll is fuzzy and permeable. Within this scenario, we can identify concrete play behaviors, such as making the doll move like a puppet. But there are just as many ambiguous behaviors, which might or not be play, such as idly kneading its head while watching TV. There may be a frame between playing and not playing, but its boundaries are indistinct.

Now compare that kind of informal play with the play of a game—two children playing Tic-Tac-Toe. In order to play, the children must gather the proper materials, draw the four lines that make up the grid of the board, and follow the proper rules each turn as they progress through the game. With a toy, it may be difficult to say exactly when the play begins and ends. But with a game, the activity is richly formalized. The game has a beginning, a middle, and a quantifiable outcome at the end. The game takes place in a precisely defined physical and temporal space of play. Either the children are playing Tic-Tac-Toe or they are not. There is no ambiguity concerning their action: they are clearly playing a game.

The same analysis can occur within the context of digital media. Compare, for example, a user's casual interaction with a toy-like screensaver program to their interaction with a computer game such as Tetris. The screensaver allows the user to wiggle the mouse and make patterns on the screen, an activity that we can casually enter into and then discontinue. The entry and exit of the user is informal and unbound by rules that define a beginning, middle, and end. A game of Tetris, on the other hand, provides a formalized boundary regarding play: the game is either in play or it is not. Players of Tetris do not "casually interact" with it; rather, they are playing a game. It is true that a Tetris player could pause a game in progress and resume it later—just as two Tennis players might pause for a drink of water. But in both cases, the players are stepping out of the game space, formally suspending the game before stepping back in to resume play.

As a player steps in and out of a game, he or she is crossing that boundary—or frame—that defines the game in time and space. As noted above, we call the boundary of a game the *magic circle*, a term borrowed from the following passage in Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens*:

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.⁴

Although the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga’s list of “play-grounds,” the term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game. The fact that the magic circle is just that—a circle—is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility.

Enter In

In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. The magic circle of a game might have a physical component, like the board of a board game or the playing field of an athletic contest. But many games have no physical boundaries—arm wrestling, for example, doesn’t require much in the way of special spaces or material. The game simply begins when one or more players decide to play.

The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins. A fancy Backgammon set sitting all alone might be a pretty decoration on the coffee table. If this is the function that the game is serving—decoration—it doesn’t really matter how the game pieces are arranged, if some of them are out of place, or even missing. However, once you sit down with a friend to play a game of Backgammon, the arrangement of the pieces suddenly becomes extremely important. The Backgammon board becomes a special space that facilitates the play of the game. The players’ attention is intensely

focused on the game, which mediates their interaction through play. While the game is in progress, the players do not casually arrange and rearrange the pieces, but move them according to very particular rules.

Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players. Before a game of Chutes and Ladders starts, it's just a board, some plastic pieces, and a die. But once the game begins, everything changes. Suddenly, the materials represent something quite specific. This plastic token is *you*. These rules tell you how to roll the die and move. Suddenly, it matters very much which plastic token reaches the end first.

Consider a group of kids in a suburban front yard, casually talking and hanging out. They decide to play a game of Hide-and-Seek. One of the kids takes a rock and plants it in the middle of yard to represent home base. The group huddles around it, playing “eenie-meenie-miney-moe” to pick the first person to be “It”; then they scatter and hide as “It” covers his eyes and starts to count to twenty. All at once, the relationships among the players have taken on special meanings. Who is “It” and who is not? Who is hidden and who can be seen? Who is captured and who is free? Who will win the game?

What is going on in these examples of Backgammon, Chutes and Ladders, and Hide-and-Seek? As Huizinga eloquently states, within the space of a game “special rules obtain.” The magic circle of a game is the boundary of the game space and within this boundary the rules of the game play out and have authority.

Temporary Worlds

What lies at the border of the game? Just how permeable is the boundary between the real world and the artificial world of the game that is circumscribed and delimited by the magic circle? Huizinga calls play-worlds “temporary worlds within the ordinary world.” But what does that mean? Does the magic circle enframe a reality completely separated from the real world? Is a game somehow an extension of regular life? Or is a game just a special case of ordinary reality?

Let us return to the concept of a system. We have already established that games are systems. As systems, games can be understood as being either open or closed. In his definition of systems, Littlejohn informs us that “a *closed system* has no interchange with its environment. An *open system* receives matter and energy from its environment and passes matter and energy to its environment.”⁵

So what does this have to do with the magic circle? The question at hand has to do with the boundary between the magic circle of a game and the world outside the game. One way of approaching that question is to consider whether that boundary is closed, framing a completely self-contained world inside; or whether it is open, permitting interchange between the game and the world beyond its frame. As Bernard DeKoven notes in *The Well-Played Game*, “Boundaries help separate the game from life. They have a critical function in maintaining the fiction of the game so that the aspects of reality with which we do not choose to play can be left safely outside.”⁶ Moreover, the answer to the question of whether games are closed or open systems depends on which schema is used to understand them: whether games are framed as **RULES**, as **PLAY**, or as **CULTURE**.

RULES: Games considered as **RULES** are closed systems. Considering games as formal systems means considering them as systems of rules prior to the actual involvement of players.

PLAY: Considered as **PLAY**, games can be either *closed systems* or *open systems*. Framed as the experience of play, it is possible to restrict our focus and look at just those play behaviors that are intrinsic to the game, ignoring all others. At the same time, players bring a great deal in from the outside world: their expectations, their likes and dislikes, social relationships, and so on. In this sense, it is impossible to ignore the fact that games are open, a reflection of the players who play them.

CULTURE: Considered as **CULTURE**, games are extremely open systems. In this case, the internal functioning of the game is not emphasized; instead, as a cultural system the focus is on the way that the game exchanges meaning with culture at large. In considering the cultural aspects of professional Football—political debates over Native American team mascots, for example—the system of the game is opened up to expose the way that it interfaces with society as a whole.

Is it a contradiction to say that games can be open and closed systems at the same time? Not really. As with many complex phenomena, the qualities of the object under study depend on the methodology of the study itself. The answer to the question of whether games are closed or open systems, whether they are truly artificial or not, depends on the schema used to analyze them. We return to this important question many times over the course of this book.

The Lusory Attitude

So far in the discussion of the magic circle we have outlined the ways that the interior space of a game relates to the real world spaces outside it, how the magic circle frames a distinct space of meaning that is separate from, but still references, the real world. What we have not yet considered

is what the magic circle represents from the player's point of view. Because a game demands formalized interaction, it is often a real commitment to decide to play a game. If a player chooses to sit down and play Monopoly, for example, he cannot simply quit playing in the middle without disrupting the game and upsetting the other players. On the other hand, if he ignores this impulse and remains in the game to the bitter end, he might end up a sore loser. Yet, these kinds of obstacles obviously don't keep most people from playing games. What does it mean to decide to play a game? If the magic circle creates an alternate reality, what psychological attitude is required of a player entering into the play of a game?

In *Defining Games* we looked at the definition of games Bernard Suits gives in his book *Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. One of the unique components of Suits' definition is that he sees games as inherently inefficient. He uses the example of a boxer to explain this concept. If the goal of a boxing match is to make the other fighter stay down for a count of 10, the easiest way to accomplish this goal would be to take a gun and shoot the other boxer in the head. This, of course, is not the way that the game of Boxing is played. Instead, as Suits points out, boxers put on padded gloves and only strike their opponents in very limited and stylized ways. Similarly, Suits discusses the game of Golf:

Suppose I make it my purpose to get a small round object into a hole in the ground as efficiently as possible. Placing it in the hole with my hand would be a natural means to adopt. But surely I would not take a stick with a piece of metal on one end of it, walk three or four hundred yards away from the hole, and then attempt to propel the ball into the hole with the stick. That would not be technically intelligent. But such an undertaking is an extremely popular game, and the foregoing way of describing it evidently shows how games differ from technical activities.⁷

What the boxer and the golfer have in common, according to Suits, is a shared attitude toward the act of game-playing, an openness to the possibility of taking such indirect means to accomplish a goal. "In anything but a game the gratuitous introduction of unnecessary obstacles to the achievement of an end is regarded as a decidedly irrational thing to do, whereas in games it appears to be an absolutely essential thing to do."⁸ Suits calls this state of mind the *lusory attitude*, a term we introduced under his definition of a game. The lusory attitude allows players to "adopt rules which require one to employ worse rather than better means for reaching an end."⁹ Trying to propel a miniature ball with a metal stick into a tiny hole across great distances certainly requires something by way of attitude!

The word “ludo” means *play* in Latin, and the root of “lusory” is the same root as “ludens” in “Homo Ludens.” The lusory attitude is an extremely useful concept as it describes the attitude that is required of game players for them to enter into a game. To play a game is in many ways an act of “faith” that invests the game with its special meaning—without willing players, the game is a formal system waiting to be inhabited, like a piece of sheet music waiting to be played. This notion can be extended to say that a game is a kind of social contract. To decide to play a game is to create—out of thin air—an arbitrary authority that serves to guide and direct the play of the game. The moment of that decision can be quite magical. Picture a cluster of boys meeting on the street to show each other their marble collections. There is joking, some eye rolling, and then a challenge rings out. One of the boys chalks a circle on the sidewalk and each one of them puts a marble inside. They are suddenly playing a game, a game that guides and directs their actions, that serves as the arbiter of what they can and cannot do. The boys take the game very seriously, as they are playing for keeps.

Their goal is to win the game and take marbles from their opponents. If that is all they wanted to do, they could just grab each other’s marble collections and run. Instead, they play a game. Through a long and dramatic process, they end up either losing their marbles or winning some from others. If all that the boys wanted to do was increase the number of marbles in their collection, the game might seem absurd. But the lusory attitude implies more than a mere acceptance of the limitations prescribed by the rules of the game—it also means accepting the rules because the play of the game is an end in itself. In effect, the lusory attitude ensures that the player accepts the game rules “just so that the activity made possible by such an acceptance can occur.”¹⁰ Our marble players would take their game seriously even if they weren’t playing for keeps.

There is a pleasure in this inefficiency. When you fire a missile in *Missile Command*, it doesn’t simply zap to the spot underneath the crosshairs. Instead, it slowly climbs up from the bottom of the screen. To knock down a set of bowling pins, you don’t carry the bowling ball down the lane; instead you stand a good distance away and let it roll. From somewhere in the gap between action and outcome, in the friction between frustrated desire and the seductive goal of a game, bubbles up the unique enjoyment of game play. Players take on the lusory attitude for the pleasure of play itself.

The magic circle can define a powerful space, investing its authority in the actions of players and creating new and complex meanings that are only possible in the space of play. But it is also

remarkably fragile as well, requiring constant maintenance to keep it intact. Over the course of the following chapters we explore the design structures that serve to create and support the magic circle, as well as qualities of a game's design that affect the lusory attitude and the possibility of meaningful play.

Having now passed through definitions of design, systems, interactivity, and games, the way has been paved for our entrance into the magic circle. Passing through its open and closed boundaries, we find ourselves in its center. What we find there, at the very heart of games, is **RULES**, the space of games framed as formal systems.

Further Reading

Grasshopper: Games, Life, Utopia, by Bernard Suits

A retelling of Aesop's fable of the Grasshopper and the Ants, *Grasshopper* is an engaging and insightful book that addresses some of the philosophical paradoxes raised by games. Cheating, rule-following, and the reality of games versus the real world are among the topics Suits addresses. It is from this book that we derive our concept of the lusory attitude, an important game design concept.

Recommended:

Chapter 3: Construction of a Definition

Chapter 4: Triflers, Cheats, and Spoilsports

Homo Ludens, by Johann Huizinga

Perhaps the most influential theoretical work on play in the twentieth century, in *Homo Ludens* (Man the Player), Dutch philosopher and historian Huizinga explores the relationship between games, play, and culture. His point of view is certainly not that of design; however, Huizinga's work directly influenced many of the other authors we reference here, such as Roger Caillois and Brian Sutton-Smith. In the chapter recommended below, Huizinga establishes his essential definition of play.

Recommended:

[Chapter 1](#): Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon

Notes

1. Steven Sniderman, "The Life of Games" p. 2. <www.gamepuzzles.com/tlog/tlog2.htm>.
2. Ibid. p. 2.
3. Michael J. Apter, "A Structural-Phenomenology of Play," in *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach*, edited by J. H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1991), p. 15.

4. Johann, Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 10.
5. Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 3rd edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), p. 41.
6. Bernard DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 38.
7. Bernard Suits, *Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1990), p. 23.
8. Ibid. p. 38–9.
9. Ibid. p. 38–9.
10. Ibid. p. 40.

The Magic Circle

SUMMARY

- Every game exists within a **frame**: a specially demarcated time and space. The frame communicates to players, consciously or unconsciously, that a game is being played.
- The **magic circle** of a game is the space within which a game takes place. Whereas more informal forms of play do not have a distinct boundary, the formalized nature of games makes the magic circle explicit.
- Within the magic circle, the game's rules create a special set of **meanings** for the players of a game. These meanings guide the play of the game.
- As a system, a game can be considered to have an **open** or **closed** relationship to its context. Considered as **RULES**, a game is closed. Considered as **PLAY**, a game is both open and closed. Considered as **CULTURE**, a game is open.
- The **lusory attitude** is the state of mind required to enter into the play of a game. To play a game, a group of players accepts the limitations of the rules because of the pleasure a game can afford.



