The Masquerade of Play: A Reappraisal of the Magic Circle

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ABSTRACT

The Magic Circle has been a subject of continuous debate and criticism, and declared obsolete several times. Despite this, it has endured and reappeared in discussions and comparisons of play and non-play, and the boundaries thereof. It has proven persistent despite all its criticism and yet the reason for its continued existence has not been clarified. Understanding why it has been persistent is crucial to help explain its power as a metaphor. In this paper, we draw on a literature review of the criticisms and defense of the Magic Circle, and argue that it should not be conceptualized as a hard boundary between play and non-play, but rather a social construction that is itself "played with" during play. We argue that the Magic Circle explains the magic (allure, enchantment) of play and thus should be reinterpreted to explain why people play games rather than when they do and do not. This allows us to define how games create a double-nature of seeming like they are frivolous yet are more meaningful, a construct we call "the masquerade of play". It is precisely through socially defining the Magic Circle that players maintain this illusion.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **Computer games**; • **Software and its engineering** → **Interactive games**; • **Human-centered computing** → *HCI theory, concepts and models.*

KEYWORDS

magic circle, play, boundary, literature review, enchantment, social construction

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1 INTRODUCTION

The magic circle has been an enduring term in game scholarship. It was defined to describe the temporary, unique space a game creates inside culture [21] and the meanings generated through play [46], and it continues to be used to describe something prescient about play that many scholars have wanted to describe [2, 12, 36]. However, the magic circle is also a noticeably unpopular term in game studies [2, 6, 11, 40, 45]. Scholars have wanted to destroy it [6], abandon it [45], reword it [9, 35], or claimed it doesn't exist [11], as many have found that a simple boundary between play and not-play does not hold up to scrutiny. Some have argued that the magic circle—if it exists—exists as a social construct [12, 40], something that is formed socially during play yet is always under negotiation. Most of this criticism is not wrong about its problems as a fixed boundary and through these discussions, many valid points has been raised about how the transition between play and non-play works and doesn't work. This paper will not present a defense of the magic circle as a hard boundary of play and will not disagree with the majority of the underlying criticism. However, the term continues to be used [15, 22, 36, 46] and some have defended its value [2, 12, 40] to describe play. We want to utilize this discussion to reconsider how best to use the magic circle as a metaphor going forward.

In this paper, we will perform a re-evaluation of what the magic circle is. By doing a deep literature review of the criticisms of the magic circle, we show how the concept has both been frequently misunderstood and misattributed and that what has been criticized has been a very specific version of the term that not many seem to be a strong proponent for [6, 40, 46]. By analyzing this criticism for arguments against the magic circle, and constrastring those to the few modern endorsements of the term, we show how scholars have largely been in agreement about what the magic circle is. We will then show how the magic circle has great value for understanding the allure and power of play, but not in defining any border between play and not-play. Finally, we define the term "masquerade of play" to explain this exact power, showing how the magic circle is a socially bound phenomenon that allows the freedom to play through its definition.

In trying to erase the magic circle because of its uselessness to define any boundary of games (especially as a "circle"), the power of the metaphor has been missed. As Stenros mentions, it *"seems to be a useful, powerful metaphor, though it has not been clear what it is a metaphor for"* [40]. This paper will try to define this metaphor and claim why it is still a useful one despite its complicated history—and perhaps because of it.

2 THE ORIGIN OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE

It is an accepted truism that the commonly accepted first instance of the magic circle in play studies is to be found in Johan Huizinga's seminal book *"Homo Ludens"* [21] about play and culture [30, 35, 37]. This is true to the extent that the first mention of the term "magic circle" in refence to play appears here. However, that is the end of the similarities between Huizinga's magic circle and the common attribution of it. The following is the quote describing the term "magic circle" from *Homo Ludens*:



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> *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.* [21, p. 12]

As others have noted [6, 40, 45, 46], the "magic circle" is an example among many, not the key argument in Huizinga's statement. Knowing the influence this term has had in game studies at large, it is perhaps surprising how minute its origin is. However, reading the many interpretations and criticisms of the magic circle, the cause for this becomes clear.

As stated by Moore [31], Stenros [40] and others [6, 23], the more common understanding of the magic circle in game studies comes from Salen and Zimmerman's interpretation of Huizinga from their 2004 book *Rules of Play* [37]. They directly cite Huizinga for this term but have a rather different definition for it than his. Salen and Zimmerman took the image of a magic circle and used it as a metaphor to describe the separability of play systems [40]. This boundary is fragile and prone to breaking, but distinct: There are moments of play and moments of non-play [37]. As highlighted by Calleja, note this quote from Rules of Play: *"Huizinga used magic circle as one of his examples. we're going to use it as a shorthand for the special place and time created by a game."* [37]. As Calleja [6] further points out, this kind of separation does not suit Huizinga's overall claims with *Homo Ludens*. He discussed play in culture, how it reverberates through politics and war and religion, how life can be viewed as play. From reading Salen and Zimmerman's definition, you get a rather different view, that of a distinct, complete boundary between play and "life". Copier [13, 14], a dutch academic who reread Huizinga, showed how this mistranslation of Huizinga prevails throughout English game studies. Her primary point of contention is how Salen and Zimmerman bring up an example of a literal chalk circle on the ground to exemplify the magic circle, which is a quite literal interpretation of a circle defining the boundary of play, To Copier, this is a much too rigid understanding of Huizinga's points. Huizinga, rather, described an inherent contradiction that play is both separated from "ordinary" life but simultaneously is an important part of daily life. Its role as an "interlude" in daily routine is an integral part of life in general [13]. Huizinga's magic circle is a "sacred space", entirely metaphor, and it becomes too literal in Salen and Zimmerman's descriptions, according to her.

It is primarily this interpretation of the magic circle that has been criticized throughout game studies. As Stenros lucidly says: *"much of the criticism of Salen and Zimmerman seems to stem from their ill-worded explanation behind the choice of the term"* [40]. Importantly, even Zimmerman corrected and addressed these concerns in a later paper in 2012 [46], admitted that their use of the term is not a direct use of Huizinga's but an invention of their own, and yet even this interpretation in turn had been misinterpreted into the hard-line view of a magic circle most people critique, which was not what they meant either. As he says in the updated article, the magic circle is, at its core, a very banal concept: *"When a game is being played, new meanings are generated."* [46] It was, to him, a design tool rather than a scientific accuracy.

This "hard-boundary" view of the magic circle is what has been historically criticized [40]. The idea of a hard, concrete boundary between play and not-play, like a chalk circle on the ground, has many counterarguments. However, as is hopefully already clear now, neither Huizinga, nor Salen and Zimmerman who (inadvertently) popularized it, should be blamed for this understanding of the magic circle.

3 THE MYRIAD CRITICISMS OF THE HARD BOUNDARY

There is no shortage of examples of people criticizing the hard-boundary magic circle. Table **??** shows the major academic criticisms of the "magic circle", their core reasoning or critique and their proposed replacement.

As Stenros says, *"It is hard to find a scholar who insists on a strict border between play and non-play"* [40]. These criticisms are all valid, and many of them have similar arguments. Play and "real-life" blends in many ways that the magic circle does not include when seen as a sacrosanct, complete division, and it is porous and incomplete. Yet, it is important to remember that what they are criticising is an opinion no one has articulated intentionally [6, 46]. We are not sharing these criticisms because they are wrong, but because they can give us great insight into the nature of the magic circle and its misunderstandings.

Firstly, the number of references is a point in itself. The magic circle is nothing if not pervasive in game studies. In 2009, Consalvo announced that "there is no magic circle", and then 3 years later, Calleja, in "Erasing the Magic Circle", tried to erase that which had already been eradicated. Regardless, it has persisted, even after all this discourse. The timeline shows that academic discourse on the topic has waned but it still appears modernly, as in Creane [15], Aupers [2], and Ringland [36]. It is a common refrain to explain the power of games and how they work [46] and it is still a commonly understood term in other fields such as HCI [1, 22, 25] or outside academia when describing games. Despite its problems, *something* about the magic circle seems to resonate.

The majority of these works discuss a hard-boundary version of the magic circle, even if they uncritically ascribe it to Huizinga, either exclusively or as well as Salen and Zimmerman. Some, such as Copier and Lauteren do engage with Huizinga's original version, and only Lauteren here is directly critical of that one (Copier in fact uses Huizinga's to create her modification). Some, like Juul, Calleja, and Stenros, are explicitly aware of the distinction between the two versions of the magic circle, and predominantly criticize the popularized one and omit Huizinga's. Thus, when we discuss these criticisms in the following sections, we will focus on those discussing a hard-boundary magic circle, regardless of their attribution.

Table 1: Table showing critiques against the hard-boundary magic circle.

Copier, 2005 [13]	Salen and Zimmerman mistranslated Huizinga's magic circle, which was never entirely separated from ordinary life.	Turner's liminal spaces. Play is a collection of performances or "ritual acts", that are socially constructed.
Nieuwdorp, 2005 [33]	The magic circle is insufficient for pervasive games[1], where reality is part of the game.	Turner. Liminal interface. "Paratelic & paraludic interfaces."
Montola, 2005 [30]	The magic circle is frequently expanded in pervasive games, but this is also present in historical examples, such as hide-and-seek.	Keeps the magic circle, but it requires expansion.
Castronova, 2006 [9]	The circle does not include how information from the game affects the real life and world of the player.	"Membrane"
Malaby, 2007 [29]	There is no division between play and life at all, through ethnographic studies of Greek gambling games.	Wants to shift games to not be a subset of play, but see them as social artifacts.
Copier, 2007 [14]	The magic circle hides the ambiguity, variability, and complexity of actual games and play.	Goffman's Frame analysis. Actor-Network theory.
Lauteren, 2007 [28]	Contemporary play is different from Huizinga's time, and we should not compare the two. We need to remember the structural similarities between work and play, which have been set in opposition with each other.	Play is a result of shifting spatial, temporal, and social boundaries that affect what is and is not viewed as play, culturally.
Lammes, 2008 [26]	The magic circle is a simplification of the relationship between the game and the world.	"Magic node"
Juul, 2008 [23]	The magic circle is a mistranslated and rushed binary explanation of a more complex phenomenon.	"Puzzle piece."
Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008 [34]	Through interview studies of "hardcore gamers" they show how gameplay is viewed as decidedly ordinary and non-magical in many situations.	Goffman's Frame analysis. A "no-boundary" hypothesis, describing situations in which everyday life comes to encompass game play
Woodford, 2008 [45]	The emotions and experience of play continues outside the game and is influenced by the outside, the term is not describing any real boundary.	Existing concepts of intent and consent already suit the need for a boundary between play and not-play.
Taylor, 2009 [42]	Questions the strict division between play and life, through ethnographic studies of MMOs. It is a more fluid distinction.	Calls for investigations of players intervening or participating in the game.
Consalvo, 2009 [11]	The magic circle doesn't exist: It is an overly formal and structuralist way of thinking. Cheating serves as her primary example.	Goffman's Frame analysis (through Fine [17]).
Pearce, 2009 [35]	Through her ethnographic study of the Uru Diaspora, she finds how, in the real world, the theoretical sacrosanct circle does not apply.	"A porous circle", or a series of nested, overlapping circles.
Moore, 2011 [31]	Considers the mobility of play, how people move in and out of play, and how experienced players perceive no magic circle.	Goffman's Frame analysis. Baudelaire and Benjamin's "flâneur".
Calleja, 2012 [6]	The magic circle is a misinterpreted, problem-laden metaphor that game studies should move away from.	Call for a move towards "more nuanced and analytically productive concepts" for digital games.
Creane, 2021 [15]	Looks at LARPs. Elements from games can "bleed out" into the real world or the real world can "bleed in" to the game.	A bleeding circle.

3.1 The Criticisms from MMOs and Pervasive Games

The first major similarity between many of the criticisms is how many come from MMOs (Pearce [35], Taylor [42], Castronova [9]), or pervasive games (Nieuwdorp [33], Montola [30]), as they were clear examples of these boundaries breaking down. In MMOs, we see a clear example of a type of game that cannot be described using strict binaries of play and not-play. We often see "play" as work or as a chore, through grinding or farming [32, 42], or as social obligation, such as raids you are expected to show up to, or that require dedicated preparation in order to participate in. As Calleja [6] points out, it does not make sense to label all activity in a virtual world as "ludic". Digital games are more than just played activities. Play can be decidedly non-magical [34]. Many MMO players play for social reasons, and do menial, ritual activities with others to experience social connections and bonds or they can "play" the game while not inside it[2]. "Playing" the game thus means more than the act of doing the played activities prescribed by the game [8, 27]. The category of "pervasive games" shows how the real world enters and influences the game. As explained by Nieuwdorp and Montola, pervasive games are frequently breaking or expanding the notion of what a "game" is and when a person is playing them, and thus "expanded" the magic circle [30]. They might even be playing a game without realizing it, breaking the idea that play is always a voluntary, active state [39].

3.2 The Other Metaphors

Many of these papers are not only critical though, and offer solutions for or reinterpretations of the magic circle that matches their findings. This, for many, is through rephrasing the metaphor away from a "circle" to something else. Pearce explained how it was rather a porous circle that seeps information in and out [35], similar to Castronova's idea of a "membrane" that allows transmitting information from the outside into the game [9]. Juul rather proposes the "puzzle piece" as a complete re-imagining of the idea [23]—a game is something that fits in certain contexts and not in others. Other metaphors have also been suggested, such as "soap bubble", "thin line" [33], or "magic node" [26]. These kinds of criticisms tend to want to keep some semblance of a boundary, but agree that the concept of a "circle", with the images of a hard, unbreakable line, is not useful.

Several, too, want to move away from the boundary all together, and instead offer other ways of understanding the relationship between games and play and ordinary life. This often uses other sociological concepts. One of those is Goffman's frame and keys theory [19], referenced by Copier [13], Pargman & Jakobsson [34], Consalvo [11], and Moore [31] (and several of these also lean on Gary Alan [17]'s interpretation of Goffman for games), which in short is a way to understand how we organize and structure the world (frames), and how these are "keyed', given additional, acknowledged meaning in space and time. Goffman defines "play" as an example of such a keying [19]. Another reccurrence is Turner's liminal spaces [43], exceptional spaces that are autonomous "realities" that are optionally entered into and transform some social and cultural attributes, used by Nieuwdorp [33] and Copier [13].

After all these sound criticisms and alternatives, it perhaps seems difficult to understand why it is even worth talking about the magic circle today. And there is merit to rejecting the term altogether and going with another way of describing the relationship between play and non-play in games [6, 45]. However, there is a reason why it has been so pervasive as a term in game studies and to showcase this, we will look at some of the positive uses of the magic circle.

4 THE POSITIVE USES OF THE CIRCLE

Contrasting to the many criticisms, we now wish to review four perspectives on the magic circle that are much more positive about the fundamentals of the term, which are Stenros [40], Ringland [36], Conway [12], and Aupers [2]. These are especially noteworthy because they were published after the majority of criticism emerged. Of these four, Conway mentions awareness of the criticism, Stenros and Aupers are explicitly engaging with the criticism, and Ringland et al., while not referring directly to the criticism, are engaging with Stenros' interpretation based on that criticism.

Stenros [40], through his comprehensive review of the different interpretations of the magic circle, evaluates the mental, social, and cultural borders around play. For him, the magic circle has its basis in a social contract, and it is only an implied or explicit social construction, which can be shaped and re-negotiated during play, as players are able to meta-communicate about the play activity as they perform it. This is inspired by the criticisms of scholars like Copier, who also wanted to move towards a space constructed in negotiation between players—but she did not want to call it "the magic circle". Others, like Lauteren, Malaby, and Montola, also mention the importance of the socially constructed nature of play in their criticism. Stenros' primary difference is how he keeps the magic circle as part of his framework and importantly places the onus of creating the magic circle on *people*. It is a socially constructed and negotiated boundary, and this is the only way to understand the magic circle fruitfully. In fact, he rejects other interpretations (mental or cultural borders) as not part of the magic circle.

Ringland et al. [36] is a recent example of the magic circle being used in HCI. They primarily lean on Stenros' interpretation of the magic circle as socially constructed, to understand the social play between the pop group BTS and their fan community ARMY on social media. They define the boundary as intentionally blurry, messy and porous (echoing Pearce), and showcase how this play happens between fans and the group through live and asynchronous interactions. They, like so many before, end up not satisfied with the idea of a "circle" and thus suggest a "magic shop" metaphor, a tongue-in-cheek reference to one of BTS' songs, that also serves to describe how fans and the group "pick and choose" how their play operates, reflecting on each other and are actively participating in the setting and destruction of boundaries. Despite this, they are considerably more positive on the magic circle, than most of the work we have seen here so far. These two viewpoints hopefully show that the positive views of the magic circle are surprisingly similar to those that criticize it, as once again, no one wants to argue for a hard-boundary magic circle.

[2]There are many examples of this, but for one example, see "theorycrafting", a common practice in online games to play with the material realities of games (the numbers, data and effective statistics known about the game), to find the most effective, theoretical strategies available. This is a form of play too, and directly related to the game, but often done without ever booting up an executable [10].

Conway [12] goes back to Huizinga's original meaning of play, highlighting how play relies on a strong willingness to commit to an as-if on the part of the participant: We play "as-if" the situation was real. To Huizinga, bringing in the real world into the game is often seen as being a spoilsport (cheating, playing for extrinsic motivations, etc.). A magic circle happens when play is shared, when the *rules of play* become solified into more concrete shapes, giving it longevity, turning it into a "thing", a "game". Conway complicates this by showing how play and games are quite different, echoing Caillois [5]. Play is freeform, emergent, irrational, whereas games are rule-based, rigid, and rational. This presents a unique case for video games to Conway, which Huizinga did not describe, as computers deal exceptionally well with rules, not with play. However, here Conway reminds us that play is a projection of meaning onto those rules, and video games, through their incredible precision, *"are successful by making magic perceptible"* [12]. Video games are exceptional at mirroring modern hyper-rational society, giving us the means to play with it. They provide an *abundance* of meaning about the systems of society, creating the limited freedom of movement necessary for players to fully give in to the as-if of play. Conway highlights the example of "FIFA 16", as a game that not only mimics the original sport of football, but the televised spectacle and data-management of the modern sport. "FIFA 16" thus upholds the magic circle by letting the player play *as-if* the game was real, making controller inputs meaningful to a player with a modern understanding of society.

The final case for the magic circle is by Aupers [2], who wants to uphold the magic circle in a similar way to Conway but for a rather different reason: Spirituality. Aupers, like Copier, Lauteren and Conway, engage with Huizinga's original definition of the magic circle, and explain how play was connected to the sacred: *"the concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness"* [21, p. 25]. Through a study of World of Warcraft (WoW), Aupers shows how this play can still be seen as separated from daily life. To briefly explain, Aupers references Weber's descriptions of the modern world as becoming increasingly "non-magical", "disenchanted" [44, p. 139], and less sacred [38]. However, through WoW, Aupers sees a potential strategy for how play is an example of the sacred still living on in modern society, removed from its religious (as in, organized religion) connotations. The magical, enchanted world of WoW encourages players to step in and play inside it. However, this play is not as strict as the previous understandings of the magic circle, as we can, while we play, *"keep an ironic distance towards our playful behavior"* [2]. To Aupers, it is precisely this double nature of play that allows it to be a powerful strategy in a disenchanted world. *"Play - in the frivolous meaning of the word - has become an alibi to cover up for the more serious, ultimately spiritual dimensions of play."* Protected by a mantra of "it is just play", players can allow themselves a safe space to engage and experiment with the sacred. The magic circle is thus legitimizing that which has otherwise been removed from society, and gives people a chance to "play" with the mythic, magic, the sacred, and the "ultimate values" these kinds of activities espouse.

5 WHAT IS THE MAGIC CIRCLE GOOD FOR?

As a hard boundary that defines an unbreakable border between game and not-game, the magic circle is not a useful term. The idea that this "boundary" is something socially constructed is accepted and agreed on, in large part, by both critics and proponents of the magic circle. However, the question remains: What does the concept of the magic circle mean for play? The positive uses of the magic circle can help illuminate how people talk about games and play. As Carr [7] says, *"players [...] frequently disagree about the game they are playing, while they are playing it"*. Defining the boundary between play and nonplay is inherently messy and complicated and it is done in shifting, recurring dialogue and *that is the point*. As play is negotiated and diverse and disruptive, there is no single form we can place around it. The point of the magic circle is thus not to place this border, but rather something altogether different: It helps us see *why* we engage in this complicated activity. The magic circle helps us show the *magic* of play.

Instead of framing the magic circle as a construct on how games are played, we view it as an *object* of play itself. Using the notion of the double-nature of play from Aupers and the "as-if" motivation from Conway, we can see how it is exactly the idea of the alluring, clear boundary that is attractive about games. Simultaneously, we also know that this boundary is unclear, porous, inherently fraught, and up for social negotiation at all times—but the concept cannot be entirely rejected for that reason. As Stenros also said, meta-communication about the game while playing is frequently occurring, and this is simply how the magic circle manifests itself. Not as a strict boundary, but as an object of discussion. To play a game is to define what the game is, and this always happens in motion, in negotiation, and incompletely. To borrow a word from post-structuralist thought, a game is always "becoming" [4, 16] through its play. While the rules of the game might be strictly defined in code, as Conway reminds us, there is a difference between this and the play of that game. The magic circle does not exist until it and its underlying game are being played with, in which case they are simultaneously constructed and negotiated at run-time. We should clarify that while this is an object of play, it is not necessarily the only object, or the primary reason why we play, but rather a natural consequence of how play happens.

Play is attractive. The power of the magic circle is that it is socially constructed. In that statement lies a truth: We *want* to create a socially safe space for play. We *want* to enter this safe bubble, we *want* to enter a magic circle. As shown by Sicart [39], Bateson [3], Suits [41], and Huizinga [21], play is immensely powerful and human, regardless how we boundarize it. We *want* to play. The important part of the "magic circle" was not the circle (and the *circle* is truly the source of the majority of the criticism [13, 40, 45, 46]), but the *magic*. One might then ask why we should retain the entire term "the magic circle" and not take Calleja's or Woodford's advice to move away from this problem-laden metaphor? Why not call "this" socially bound concept something else? Because it is precisely this alluring quality of the double-nature of the magic *circle* that justifies it. It *is* a circle as an ideal, alluring, platonic shape, and *never* as an actual complete border. We are once again tricked by the allure of that which does not exist, trying to negotiate towards an idealized magic circle wherein our choices have meaning. This

is where Aupers's highlighting of the attractiveness of play for spiritual purposes become relevant [2]. We play in magical worlds to counter a disenchanted world [18, 20, 38]. We want to participate in "epic narratives" [18, 24] because we so rarely get to do so otherwise. It should be no secret that wanting to be a part of something greater is attractive to human beings. The magic *circle* can never exist, and this is precisely why it matters.

And the play is important here, because it *lures us in*. Saler [38], in a historical review of turn-of-the-century fandom communities of Lord of the Rings, Sherlock Holmes, and H.P. Lovecraft that became popular as a counter-reaction to the modernized, "disenchanted" world Weber described, showcases how it was only a carefully considered mixture of magic, veiled in a sense of rationality and logic[3]. As Conway and Aupers argue, playing video games is one of the ways people do this today. We get attracted by the fact that it is just play, it is pretend, it is "just inside the magic circle". Yet, video games are rationally constructed, filled with rules and systems that our modern brains are also attracted to. And we stay because it is enchanting that which is outside, we stay because we, naturally, are outside the magic circle too, even as much as we use the circle to allow ourselves to play in the first place. As a secular society, we have lost the ability to play in traditional myth and magic, and so we create our own, and the fictional aspect, the realm of play, the fact that it is *fake*, inside a pretend circle, is *why* we allow ourselves to play with it.

This is what we will call the "masquerade of play". The play is a trick we play on ourselves, to allow ourselves to enter a reality that is a little more magical than the one we otherwise would have. It is an allowance we grant ourselves, a token of acceptance. Because it is a *game*, because it is *fiction*, we may play with it. But of course, it is not entirely fake. We know this too, and it is part of the reason why it works: The "real enough" [20] nature of these worlds is crucial to making us feel more a part of them. The play is only there to uphold the masquerade, but we know well enough that even masquerades[4] are real, too.

The magic circle is a problem-laden metaphor, because it, by definition, cannot exist as an actual, complete circle. One cannot play in a world entirely separated from "real life", and yet that is nevertheless what we attempt every time we play. And it is precisely because of that conflict that "the magic circle" is still a useful metaphor. People willingly enter a masquerade each time they play, each time adopting an attitude (a lusory one, if you will [41]) of accepting a frivolous yet powerful meaning laid onto "meaningless" actions purely because we decide socially that they matter, and yet continuously redefine how they matter. It is, in essence, a magic trick, a never-real object of discussion that allows us to believe in something, regardless of how irrational that belief is. The magic circle reminds us, in our modern age, about the importance of play as a magic, enchanting, alluring activity.

[3]The worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien are considered and internally consistent, mappable, and with their own careful history. This is catnip for a rational mind, while still allowing the indulgence of magical reality.

[4]The ironic medieval connotations of this term, prominently discussed by Huizinga as part of his studies of play [21], are not lost on us. A masquerade is, like jousts and tournaments, a pretend-play of something "real", evoking its fakeness through recognizing its play-quality [21]

6 CONCLUSION

The magic circle is not useful for defining a boundary between play and not-play. This is something all criticisms and endorsements of this concept agree on. Furthermore, many have identified that it was not intended nor originally defined as such, and has taken on new meanings through these criticisms. This is why it seems appropriate to dismiss the term entirely. However, in the original meaning of a "magic circle" still exists a meaningful description of the nature of play, that describes the magic double-nature of play. Play seems frivolous and "playful", and yet this is a facade that hides the fact that we know it is more meaningful than it appears. The magic circle, thus, is a social construction, designed to maintain the masquerade, which allows us to give into play despite it being voluntary, non-serious, for its own purpose. The magic circle never exists and we can never point to an exact boundary because it is always under negotiation and in flux as the masquerade shifts and changes form, as we change the rules of the game during play. This masquerade of play is an intentional tactic people use to both maintain an ironic distance towards play while simultaneously allowing themselves to give into it, accepting its frivolous nature while being able to discuss it from the outside. Understanding the magic circle like this—as what is being discussed through play—allows us to see why the term is useful and present still, while taking into account all the criticisms and debate around it.

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