

Disenchanting the Magic Circle

Although Games Studies has encountered and reencountered the Magic Circle Problem since its introduction as a design concept, games remain a minefield for scholars, players, and passers-by. The games industry continues to reckon with predatory business practices, abusive labor practices, sexual harassment from executives, and a fanbase that loudly and violently voices its displeasure for games being too political, adding “easy modes,” or including non-male, non-white characters. Meanwhile, conservative pundits routinely blame games for the uptick in mass shootings in the US since 2000, the rise in people coming out as LGBTQ+, an increase in “social justice warriors,” and the general corruption of morals in today’s youth. Games must therefore be strictly controlled with their content regulated to an extreme degree; if not, someone who enacts violence in *Mortal Kombat* or *Grand Theft Auto* may commit those same acts in the real world. To defend against these accusations, some gamers utilize an informal version of Eric Zimmerman and Frank Lantz’s “magic circle” design concept. Where the concept refers to “the artificial context of a game... the shared space of play created by its rules,” this hyperbolic version claims that games are “just games,” possessing no lasting effects on players and holding no real power over peoples’ actions (qtd. in Zimmerman). Therefore, the argument continues, that games should be enjoyed as mere entertainment while any attempts to read games critically are misguided and fruitless. I argue that this practice of enchantment—of granting games the power to “corrupt” players or the power to create a neutral space absent of politics—prevents discussions of games as a valuable part of our lived reality and how our situated experiences influence the creation and reception of games. Games can instead be read as an act of worldmaking that incorporates one’s physical being within an affective circuit, encouraging us to participate and share what lessons and skills we gain with others.

As mentioned previously, the magic circle has been debated *ad nauseum* in Games Studies. Though Johan Huizinga is regularly cited for deploying the phrase as part of a series of spaces where additional rules and practices separate them from the rest of the world, the term as we currently know it was coined by Zimmerman and Lantz in a 1999 and reestablished in the game design textbook *Rules of Play*. Eric Zimmerman later claimed in 2012 that the proliferation of the magic circle also saw the creation of an imaginary “magic circle jerk”— “a silly super-structuralist that dogmatically believes in the truth of a hard-edged magic circle” — that haunted academia due to a fear that such a distinction between fiction and reality would ignore lived experience and social contexts of play (Zimmerman). Though Zimmerman argues that the magic circle is merely a design concept “not meant to explain or define games” but instead “understand, construct, and modify games,” the magic circle’s ubiquity in Games Studies continues to drive academic discourse and invites authors like Tara Fickle to interrogate the Orientalist origins of Huizinga’s theories of play and Amanda Phillips to analyze the “feminist killjoy” trope in games fandom (Zimmerman; Fickle 115-118; Phillips 28).

Zimmerman’s “magic circle jerk” did eventually materialize. But rather than a super-structuralist that believes that “the rules of a game supplant the rules of society,” the jerk appears as a hyper-vigilant policer of game interaction (Phillips 13). One can find the jerk in any discussion of the difficulty of From Software’s games, wherein any mention of a potential “easy mode” is shut down with accusations of ruining the experience of play or tainting the game’s “vision.” James Davenport wrote an article for PC Gamer in which he noted how the final boss of FromSoft’s *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* was too difficult for him to beat normally and how he used a fan-made mod to lower the game’s speed and finish the game. In response, one “jerk” wrote the now-infamous quote, “You cheated not only the game, but yourself,” which quickly

gained popularity as an example of how seriously some players take the rules of the game over personal enjoyment or the experience of the player (Fetusberry). A similar instance played out in response to Sara Thompson's *The Combat Wheelchair*, a third-party supplement for *Dungeons & Dragons* that would allow for the creation of adventuring-ready mobility aids in the game's fiction. While disabled players praised Thompson's work for enabling the creation of disabled characters, some voiced their annoyance with the supposed game-breaking supplement by sending death threats to Thompson (Beidatsch). This vitriolic response by "jerks" applies not only to mods and supplemental materials but to the games themselves. In *World of Warcraft*'s "Shadowlands" expansion, the first transgender character Pelagos was met with accusations of trans folx being "shoved down [players'] throats," yet fans defended CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077* use of a blatantly exploitative "Mix It Up" poster depicting a sexualized trans character as edgy in-game marketing "joke" (qt. in Narlaw; Henley).

As these examples show, the "jerk" attempts to dictate how games should be played, who can play them, what content they engage with, and how they should be interpreted—effectively drawing a circle-shaped line in the sand. This demarcation allows for the discussion of games as cultural objects but opposes treating those objects with the same critical rigor as film, television, novels, or other art forms. The circle also only allows *certain* games to exist while rejecting games that, for instance, explore queer identities or confront the prevalence of sexist, racist, and ableist ideologies embedded in gaming. #Gamergate, an online-born movement that claimed video game development and journalism were compromised by people with anti-male, anti-white, and anti-straight agendas, tried to force women and other marginalized groups out of the picture, and sadly it had some success. Phillips notes that attempts to combat the movement were met with accusations of "attempting to take the fun out of gaming culture," despite how said

“fun” was practiced by doxing academic panelists and reporting fake bomb threats (64). The hate that circulated throughout that movement carries on with every attempt to make meaningful games for more varied audiences. For gamers like the jerks, the magic circle remains a tool to encode misogyny, racism, queerphobia, and other forms of hate and fear into games and to prevent their removal by claiming their hurtful actions are just part of the games they play.

Not all gamers feel the same way as the jerks, of course. Games fandom has remained in constant conversation with developers and the industry as a whole, a reciprocal relationship seen across the entertainment sector with the worldwide adoption of the Internet and social media (Zubernis and Larsen 176). This has led to the introduction of robust accessibility tools such as subtitles, button remapping, custom difficulty settings, and high contrast modes in both indie darlings like *Celeste* and AAA titles from *God of War* to *The Last of Us 2* (Shin). As the Black Lives Matter movement saw renewed support following the death of George Floyd in 2020, online marketplace itch.io collaborated with 1,391 game makers, asset creators, authors, and hobbyists to raise over \$8 million for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Community Bail Fund, and other “bundles” such as the yearly Queer Games Bundle, Bundle for Ukraine, and TTRPGs for Reproductive Rights have raised millions of dollars for charity. Even within games, players find spaces to share joy by hosting weddings in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, organizing community meetups online and in-person, and hopping online to chat with friends from around the world; likewise, games offer places to grieve for lost loved ones and to reflect on the importance of cultural icons in the wake of their passing (DaReinzo; Parrish). The sheer number of people who play games and interact with the world through them prove that games have become integral parts of peoples’ lives.

A potential avenue for understanding why people feel so strongly about games and why bad actors rally so tirelessly to protect the magic circle lies in affect theory. Affect theory takes as its subject “a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected” by the environment, by objects, through human interaction, and via any number of minute factors that generate actions and reactions within the self (Seigworth and Gregg 2). Though how affect is explored differs based on one’s related fields of study, affect is generally described as “forces that inform our emotional states,” though notably are not emotions in themselves (Anable xvii). Emotions or feelings can be named, described, or categorized, but affect runs just below the level of description. Kathleen Stewart writes that as one moves through the world, “the subject channels what’s going on around it in the process of its own self-composition. Formed by the coagulation of intensities, surfaces, sensations, perceptions, and expressions, it’s a thing composed of encounters and the spaces and events it traverses or inhabits” (Stewart 79). Affect, then, is a form of situated knowledge within oneself which is “always constructed and stitched together imperfectly,” making it impossible to separate from the individual experiencing the push and pull of affective forces from the description of said experience (Haraway 47).

Since affect arises from our interactions with the world around us, it follows that technology can generate jolts of affective responses. Social media, as Susanna Paasonen notes, relies on users seeking “intensity”: “Exclamations of aggression and support, waves of amusement, distanced sarcasm, descriptions of hurt and harm circulate, stick, and pull discussants and readers back for more” (Paasonen 33). This affective circuit drives users to work through less-affectively-charged parts of online experience in search of “a little nugget of enjoyment” that encourages us to “contribute to the networks, as creative producers and vulnerable consumers” (Dean 94). This is not to say that technology manipulates us so much as

we are just as affected by such technologies as we affect the technologies themselves, but technologies can heighten and distribute affective responses in unique and powerful forms (Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit 2).

Video games are one such form. Aubrey Anable's *Playing With Feelings: Video Games and Affect* is perhaps the most widely known exploration of how games "have specific affective dimensions, legible in their images, algorithms, temporalities, and narratives, that can be interpreted and analyzed" (7). In it, Anable points to how game and player form a sensuous circuit, describing how the act of touching a smartphone's screen "creates an affective assemblage that encompasses us, the game's formal qualities, the code, and the mobile device itself as a layered, penetrable, and more porous object than it often seems" (62). This assemblage incorporates social media as well, such as when players boast or lament their daily *Wordle* scores. This interaction works "to deepen the player's affective investment in the social network" of the game's community and in social media writ large (Anable 98).

One fear that arises from our daily interaction with media and technology is that our feelings and emotions may be manufactured by nebulous forces. With a trained critical eye, one can list the emotional beats of a Disney movie or guess what classic song will be licensed, covered, or remixed for the latest movie trailer. We can recognize when a work of art, a commercial product, or a friend's anecdote is trying to elicit certain emotional reactions, and one might consider such solicitation manipulative at best or deceptive at worst. Robyn Warhol writes in *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* that such arguments place emotions as something exceptional and individual and that doing so often labels certain feelings as "authentic" to limit affective experience (23). Warhol counters these readings by marking emotional responses as *learned* interpretations of affect gained throughout our lifetimes and

instilled through socialization and repetition; if a video game is structured to have players feel fear by limiting the player's vision or by having a monster chase them, then someone who has learned to process the affect evoked by those mechanics as fear will "experience [these feelings] as nonetheless intense" (119). Regardless of why one feels the need to cry when a certain song plays or excited when a twenty-sided die lands on 20, our ability to share and experience these feelings through media and technology are a core aspect of communicating with one another.

Drawing from Anable, Warhol, and other affect theorists, we can read games as cultural objects with their own affective qualities that provoke certain emotional reactions in players, which they then share with others who intensify that affective response by incorporating their own into a growing affective circuit. This circuit ties these emotions—positive, negative, mixed, or undefined—to the experience of playing the game, reinforcing and amplifying affective force. Is it any wonder then that people feel so strongly about their favorite games and gaming communities, even if the affects circulated turn out to be hurtful? As such, game designers must recognize the potential experiences players may encounter within and create encounters and tools to help players navigate their affective responses.

To illustrate some of the ways affect can be seen in game play and in game design, I turn now to tabletop role playing games, or TTRPGs. TTRPGs regularly use rules and narrative to draw participants into a traditional "magic circle," as Zimmerman would describe it: a shared space of play. However, many gamemasters (players in charge of officiating game rules) and players stress the importance of talking about the game and its rules with everyone at the table before and after every session, taking time to communicate what players and gamemasters want as well as reflecting on things said or done within the game narrative itself to process bleed. Taken from the Nordic Live Action Role Play community, bleed refers to "moments where [a

player's] real life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters' and vice versa" (Bowman). Magic circle or no, a player cannot fully separate themselves from the game they are playing, so the affective push and pull of a scene can still resonate with the player just as much as emotions or stress that preexisted the play session can influence or intensify the feelings generated within it.

Some TTRPG designers encourage bleed by making games with powerful embodied experience in mind. For instance, Italian studio Chaos League's *First They Came* is a hybrid TTRPG and LARP that places participants in the role of fugitives— "persecuted by the regime for ethnic, political, gender or religious reasons" —hiding in the dark by asking players to wear blindfolds or turn out all the lights (Chaos League). Though the lights can be turned on at any time, players are encouraged to embody the feelings of claustrophobia, paranoia, and fear evoked by the setting. *Alice is Missing* by Hunters Entertainment opts to bind players' mouths instead of their eyes, requiring players to communicate through text messages, chatrooms, or email "as though they aren't in the same place together" (Hunters Entertainment). As the game's missing persons case is described over the course of ninety minutes, the connections between the player characters and the disappeared Alice unfold in fits and starts, bubbles indicating words not-yet-written or minutes between messages increasing their weight.

Both *Alice is Missing* and *First They Came* utilize safety tools created by the role-playing community to address moments where the affective forces of the game and its players grow unbearable or discordant. The "X Card"—included as a physical card in *Alice is Missing* but could also be represented by an "X" in online games—allows players to quickly relay that they have grown uncomfortable with the in-game content. Someone with powerful arachnophobia might use the X Card to signal their discomfort with the gamemaster's introduction of a giant

spider and offer to change it to a giant rat, or a plot element introduced by one player could too closely mirror a painful memory for another participant, who uses the X Card to propose skipping or removing the content. The X Card can be useful for players who are quick to recognize when the game bleeds into and calls out their real-world conditions, but it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. As the rulebook for Weird Age Games' *Hard Wired Island* notes, "what about people who freeze up when they get anxious? Who don't know something's going to be a problem before it becomes one? Who aren't comfortable calling attention to their own vulnerability?" (313). Thus, the role-playing community have crafted a plethora of tools to support players with different needs and situations, and compilations such as Kienna Shaw Lauren Bryant-Monk's *TTRPG Safety Toolkit* include resources for creating content warnings, incorporating break times, and ensuring audiences watching games played online or in person are given space to process affective resonance as well.

Accepting that games can have such profound effects on players and on people who only watch the games being played exposes players to conversations that the magic circle theory could counteract. Namely, arguments that playing or watching games that allow for such powerful affective responses could promote dangerous ideas and encourage harmful behavior continue to pop up. The Satanic Panic of the 1980s claimed that role playing games tempted children with un-Christian values or conjured literal demons, while the Columbine shooting saw parents blaming *DOOM* and other violent video games for promoting violence or even *causing* the violence to take place. Recent tragedies like the mass shooting in Buffalo found moral entrepreneurs like Fox News citing how games "just de-sensitize people" to gun violence (qt. in Baio). Panic induced by transphobia has some parents wondering if games like *Apex Legends* are "turning my son transexual [sic]" by seducing players into playing characters of the opposite

gender (or, in the case of the character Bloodhound, non-binary) (qt. in Valens). While moral panics over games content often elude more logical explanations (“I can see no reason why a teenage boy would be interested in female characters”), they at least accept that games possess affective qualities and bring forth feelings compelling enough to change our worldviews (qt. in Valens). The fantastical ideal of the magic circle—that games are separate from reality and therefore cannot influence or be influenced by the real world—likely appeals to game designers who want to make games without curtailing their creative vision and to game players who seek to enjoy the feelings these games can conjure while evading public scrutiny. If it is only a game, then how could it affect anything?

As I have demonstrated here, such lofty notions do not reflect the lived reality of those who play and make games. If we are to understand the powerful effects games can have on us as we craft our own games and play experiences, we must recognize the affective circuits that games and games fandom invite us to participate in as well as the types of feelings and emotions that we share and receive within them. This does mean that we must address issues like the prevalence of violence-as-solution in games; the constant primacy of straight men in games marketing, development, and fandom; the industry’s ecological impacts; and the psychological tactics used to entrap players in addictive pseudo-gambling, among many other complex points of contention. We should also accept that games can be a vital source for communicating situated knowledges and havens for those who cannot express their true selves in their daily lives without fear of harm. The magic circle does not make games a magical experience; the people who make and play them do.

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