The Magic Game Circle as a tool
by Ellis Bartholomeus

“It’s just a game ...”

But we all recognise young animals learning to deal with life in a playful matter. And we acknowledge our children (and ourselves) learning by playing. When creating applied games, or using games as a medium to achieve something in real life, we have to acknowledge the borders of the game and real life while trying to overlap the experience in real life and playful game experiences. These borders might appear vague, dynamic, translucent and semipermeable but these cases can be discussed if we are able to use a working framework to get a grip on a topic that has already been discussed for decades.

This attempt is not to define an absolute model for a game and its possible ingredients, but to look at the context of playful experiences, including the player and his personal elements which contribute to the game experience. Learning from games and play in its context will create opportunities for proper research and stretch the use of each game element one by one, in (new) combinations or enlarge gaming as a medium to educate or change behaviour.

The definite definition of a game is still being discussed by many game theorists today. Games are complex and the framework or borders of play as an activity can be discussed being clear or fuzzy or even dynamically changing? What appears to be so obvious is even harder to define without everyone using their own references and expertise about/on? play, and in a conversation people can have complete conversations while talking parallel about play, and appear to have a very different meaning of play.

Johan Huizinga wrote about gaming and play in 1938 in Homo Ludens. He mentioned the term 'the magic circle’ as “a state in which the player is bound by a make-believe barrier created by the game”.

From there many people referred and interpreted the magic circle for example; “The magic circle of a game is the space within which a game takes place. Within the magic circle, the game’s rules create a special set of meanings for the players of a game.” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

It is experienced hard to isolate ONE game element to do specific research on. Games tend to be an interweaving of elements which are related very strongly.; take one out of the context and the game might be destroyed or no longer existing. TU Delft G-motiv’s research on motivation of game-elements needed a useful definition of game-elements and instead of making it a narrow and absolute definition, we tried to find a working wide framework just for personal use at start. We came up with this model by describing context related playful moments to visualise the aspects/elements concerning game and play in which most people can relate to.

We tried to find and visualize the obvious and exceptional cases of the existing concept of the magic circle described earlier in different contexts to make the magic circle less abstract (though taking it’s need for being rather abstract serious);
Proposed magic circle examples in different contexts:

**1- Player meets game/game meets player**
When a game is present or acknowledged by a player, the space, timing and context need to be proper as well for the player to start to engage to the game, to commit to the rules and it's elements, when interaction takes place, when the game ‘returns’ feedback to the player, play will be recognised.

**2 - A mother feeding her baby**
When some resistance is recognised (or even just for the fun of it!) the mother makes up the virtual world of an airport, the baby’s mouth is the landing area, and oh-o the plane (spoon with food) most land soon, the sound of a plane... A virtual world is created with the purpose for the child to be distracted or enjoying the feeding ritual, the baby laughs and smiles, mother enjoys the smile and a solid game circle is detected (theoretically) when this child does not cooperate, it did not choose to get in the magic circle.

**3 - A child walking on the pavement alongside the mother...**
The child is playfully deciding not to step or touch the border between the stones.... this child created a magic circle around him for that moment, challenging his moves with the surrounding, created a goal and rules of the game himself the moment he gave meaning to his interaction with the pavement and it's features. When his mother got curious about his moves, she might have been able to step into the magic circle with him, by joining the interaction and challenge. When the pavement ends, or he gets distracted by something, the magic circle disappeared.

**4 - In a theatre play...**
All actors or players in a theater play commit to rules, roles and context which are abstracted from real life often, within this magic circle these rules and definition apply (the audience might be defined as a game element, or as a player. They do not commit to these same rules as the players do, but play a role in this magic circle).
5 - Teams playing football

Excited and anxiously trying to compete and win. Borders, goal, interactions even timing are all defined by the rules. These rules do not ‘exist in real life. With football the magic circle’s borders can get very vague sometimes, since we got so customized to the existence of these football rules as being ‘real’.

Or when the game is finished, the experience and emotions can still be very vivid, while the game-circle disappeared since no game interaction is there.

While interacting with the ball, trying to learn the skills, learn the behavior of the ball, learn what gravity does with the ball, learn the consequences of the strength of the movement, using his own body running faster then the other player, teamwork all quite serious stuff for personal growth, progress and self-esteem.

The professional football player playing for money as a job, can the magic circle be detected there?

Or is the magic circle then also including the audience as players or elements maybe? When supporters wear their lucky trouser for good charm and hope for their team to win, aren’t these game-elements which contribute to the game experience, are they included in a game circle and be a player in a magic circle?

6 - A gamer playing a video game

...on the verge of a so called epic win. He is interacting with the console with his hands, his minds is very much focused and absorbed, his game circle seems to be inside the game; his character walking in a virtual world, interacting with other characters and the game mechanisms. But the game circle is around him, as a player he is inside it just as the computer/console is inside, as his interacting with the computer is inside. As a person he can step outside any time when going to the toilet, not interacting with the console. (He himself might believe to stay in the circle while thinking of strategies while on the toilet but this would be more an imaginary magic circle).

7 - Role play in a sales training

...one person is being exposed to an extremely difficult customer, that moment roles and rules are defined, a virtual world is created/simulated and player commit to these rules. A
magic circle can be detected, however some might not recognize it as game-full or play-full, but game, play and players are included.

8- Playing poker
...creates a game circle during the game, the players step inside when they commit to the rules, there are cards, rules, roles. The game (circle) is defined by the space and time, and the consequences within the game circle is only a winner and a loser(or more losers)... the consequences related to that are actually outside the game circle... all players defined the magic circle, and define the rules and borders.

9 - A dice
A dice might instantly be recognized as a game element and bring up the suggestion of a magic circle, even game-experiences might be experienced instantly. But as long no player is interacting with the dice, when no rules, meaning, goals are related to the dice, there is no magic circle detected (yet).

10 - Cheating
Interesting situations occur concerning the border of a magic circle are when someone tries to cheat in a game, this can destroy the game circle (depending on the other players and rules) but this can create another magic (circle), maybe within another circle, or overlapping someone else’s magic circle. Or this can destroy the magic circle...
To make a summary of the game circles appearance and features from this exercise;

A magic game circle is defined by:

- the **player** (= the person interacting)
- the **play** (= interaction including the meaning the player gives/feels in the goal and rules)
- the **game** (= the definition of the rules and goals)

The user relates (**meaning**) to a game (element) and commits or engages to **interaction** becoming a **player**, when interacting the **magical game circle** appears or is created, and the **player experiences play** (which includes emotions).

Without play (interaction) there is no magic game circle, without player, there is no magic game circle, without game (broad defined, as a rule, meaning, goal or also ‘play’) there is no magic game circle.

(This framework is strongly related to the existing model: product - interaction - user which is well know and used a lot in industrial design, interaction design and product design (Don Norman, The Design of Everyday Things)

Each magic game circle has different elements inside, in belonging to one of these three categories.
**Player elements**
Player elements describe the emotions that player’s feel when they play. Within a game both positive and negative emotions can increase the overall enjoyment in the game. We emphasize this point by subdividing the player elements into positive and negative emotions.

These player emotions are the most important element in a magic circle, because they seem to have the largest impact on transfer outside the circle.

From a taxonomic perspective a game element can be preceded by “I feel…(thrilled, anxious, challenged)”

**Play elements**
With play elements the interaction, game play, or effect of the deployed game elements can be described. Both game element and player are necessary. A play element is passive or active. A player can undergo specific types of gameplay/interaction/behavior and a player can interact/play/behave with the game elements.

From a taxonomic perspective a game element can be preceded by “I am…(collecting, shooting, emerging, disguising)”.

**Game elements**
Game elements are the items that product designers or game developers directly control. They not only consist of tangible elements like a ball, dice, or joystick. When designing for play, intangible elements like rules, goals, and roles play a vital role. This makes a game (or playful activity) a complex system of tangible and intangible game elements.

From a taxonomic perspective a game element can be preceded by “it is…(a rule, a context, a control, a dilemma)”.

An example of the magic game circle model with football-elements:
Different players can discuss their perception/experience in this model by prioritising and create a discussion about the game and its elements and learn about the game:

What then is discovered is the balance within the elements and their contrasts. Is reward (as a game-element) opposite or complementary to punishment? Is succeeding (as a play-element) opposite to frustration? Is malicious pleasure (as a player-element) opposite to empathy? How do these elements relate to each other and with each other and in their context in the magic game circle. A game is not only about enjoyment, but related
to frustration enjoyment is experienced. Learning about these contrast makes us more able to learn how to facilitate the magic game circle and design effective games.

Another example of the magic game circle model with Pac-man as game including the suggested subcategories:

The game circle is an abstract ‘condition’ or situation which can not be fully controlled or designed, but being able to recognise and discuss it’s existence and features makes us able to determinate “play”. By realising how the elements in relation to the other elements or/and their position or/and their function, we might create opportunities to at least make an attempt to control the magic circle or to facilitate a magic circle to be created... Always recognizing the players role, his experience and emotions (and preferably his motivation to enter this facilitation, to stay in this facilitated area, or to make use outside of what is being facilitated inside the magic game circle...

The context of the player is another issue to take in account when facilitating a magic game circle, does he feel save to play, is he able to play, does he understand the game, does he trust the rules or game, does he feel free to play?
Freedom, safety and trust are very important matters to take in account when creating games for players.

It is easier to look at the game elements in its context to learn from it instead of determinating a game or the game as a product without its context since games are complex systems. It is hard to learn from a game as a whole while detecting the game circle in all its colors and shapes is a more inspiring and rich laboratory. (a game as Pacman is being written about in many ways, but the experiences of a player, and the interaction might be very different if the player is a 80 year old person, or a toddler or a person never using a computer before... Still plenty of opportunities to look at games in a context as an inspiration for game-developpers, product-designers, interaction-designers and researchers.

**Take away or warning: Applying play-elements: Warning not just to put a chessboard on the floor!**

Abstract or virtual worlds related to the real world creates great opportunities to design playful experiences. An example for using the magic game circle in practise: The game element is a football and products are cubes. We don’t want a cube with foot ball print. We don’t want a beach cube. We want a bouncy cube. Therefor we do not only need to regard game elements only but in the context of the game circle to make optimal use of the opportunities games can deliver us for serious applications.

Products and users suffer from gravity. They are both entities in the ‘real world’ and when they interact experiences and emotions occur. In the magic circle this is different. There is no object, there are only game elements. These game elements are the foundation for play. And play is the foundation for intense player emotions and motivation.
The risk of taking a game element and just apply in other context might loose its context and playfulness, which is a danger in gamification which is applied often out of context, reward a player for no effort might loose all players engagement to a task.

How great would it be inspired by the magic game circle and develop a game focused on “thrill” or “fear” or malicious pleasure.

So how can we facilitate a magic game circle? How we are able to use this model to look at the magic circle overlapping real life, and learn how we might transfer experiences from inside to outside the magic circle to know how games can have an effect in real life.
Let’s play, watch play, discuss play, experience play and use the magic game circle to learn how we can create meaningful games!
Credits
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