

The magic circle

Description

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When I was a kid, the Magic Circle was well known as an association of stage magicians. Those within it knew the rules of the illusions and had to keep them secret. The other meaning of magic circle is obvious: a circle that is magic.

Perhaps itâ??s the former that the philosopher Johan Huizinga had in mind when he draw attention to the â??magicalâ?• aspects of the spaces in which people play games. A place of play is consecrated and set apart for play: â??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.â?•(10).

Different rules

Game theorist Jesper Juul provides a suitably ordinary example of where the magic circle happens. Most people think it is impolite and unacceptable to snatch the salt from the table as soon as you see one of the other dinner guest make a reach for it.

Yet, later on in the evening while playing a card or board game, the same diners will think nothing of breaking with such social niceties: by making a grab in a game of snap, deceiving opponents by conveying misleading signs in poker, or extracting huge rents from poorer players who land on your expensive property in Monopoly. What is unacceptable in polite social interaction becomes acceptable in game play.

Video games offer more extreme examples: inflicting violence on people and property or shooting people dead in a video game. In fact, magic circles form around fiction and film. Authors are exempt from the consequences of the virtual crimes they commit through their characters. What would happen to story-telling if JK Rowling were prosecuted for the misdeeds of Voldemort or Dolores Umbridge!

Juul argues that the boundary of this magic circle is not fixed, especially when we think of â??meta-games.â?• Sometimes players want to lose because the social situation presents that as a viable option, as when playing with a small child. A player may also make a bad move to keep the game

interesting, or lose interest and become less vigilant against the moves of their antagonists.

Breaking the rules of time and space

I could also add that the boundary is blurred as we think of various meta-game tactics, such as, in the case of video games, saving the game state in order to reset after failing in a high risk move.

The film *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) with the tagline â??live, die, repeatâ?• plays on this theme of meta-game repetition, as the lead character conquers invading aliens by â??resettingâ?• each time they kill him. Through repeated iterations he is able to improve his battle skills. *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Source Code* (2011) play with similar themes of reset and repetition.

Whether in the game or at the meta-game level, we players and audiences have become accustomed to time travel and games that exhibit temporal paradox. Some games also play with spatial paradox within the gameâ??s magic circle.

At least since *Star Trek*, audiences and gamers are used to the idea of transportation that takes the traveller from one location to another without having to negotiate the space between.

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Games that present impossible operations within space (i.e. the laws of Euclidean geometry and physics) include *Portal* (2007). In this game the player aims their portal gun at walls, floors, ceilings and platforms to create entry and exit holes, called â??portals.â?• If your avatar jumps through the entry hole in the floor, then you will end up in the same space but re-enter through the wall. The game involves learning what you can and cannot do in this alternative universeâ??s â??magic circle,â?• in order to progress through successive levels of difficulty and reach the goal of the game.

Anamorphism

Artists and architects have long worked with paradoxical spaces. In tromp lâ??oeil, the artist paints some objects, or extensions to a room as if we are looking at something in three dimensions. Architects in the Renaissance would employ fresco painters to provide an illusion of depth to a space, as if the dome reaches higher, the nave of the church extends beyond the altar, and there are columns and pilasters protruding from an apparently flat surface.



Such *anamorphism* includes distorted images that appear

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coherent when reflected in a cone or cylinder, or from a particular angle. There are many examples online of 3D pavement art drawn to give the impression that people are walking around a gaping hole, or someone standing on the pavement is balancing on a precarious pinnacle above a waterfall, or on an island in a lake.

Online guides say the illusion works best if viewed with one eye closed, and there is of course a privileged eye position from which the illusion works. So such works are best appropriated via photography.

The impact of the work comes from being able to photograph it from one position often with live human figures in the scene, and then shared and circulated as online images. Google image â??3d pavement art from wrong angleâ?• to get the picture.

The graphic artist M. C. Escher (1898-1972) produced many enigmatic woodcuts and lithographs based on tessellation patterns and spatial incongruities. On YouTube there are several examples of people trying to build Escherâ??s perpetual motion water device out of wood in three dimensions. The illusion works as long as the contraption is filmed from the right angle, and the effects of the water are achieved by carefully composited videos of water flowing along various channel segments. Watch a video.

The video game *Monument Valley* to be played on a smartphone or a tablet computer presents similar spatial anomalies via a range of isometric 3D image renders and animations. The player can rotate around the finely crafted 3D building models, and manipulate elements such that a tiny human character can progress through doors and arches.

It seems that players have little difficulty in playing with the spatial impossibilities of such magic environments. Once we get used to them we move adeptly in and out of magic circles all the time.

Bibliography

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- Fairfield, Joshua. 2009. The magic circle. *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law*, (Washington & Lee Legal Studies Paper No. 2008-45).

Notes

- The image is a screen snapshot from the smartphone game Monument Valley, most closely resembling Escherâ??s perpetual motion water wheel. See an interesting promotional video on the developersâ?? website at www.monumentvalleygame.com.
- Apparently the Magic Circle was the name given to an alleged group of gay lawyers in Edinburgh in the 1980s as reported in the Scotsman.
- I am grateful to MSc by Research student Yao Zhang for alerting me to the theme of â??resetâ?• in film and video games. In an essay on the topic she also references the film *Run Lola Run* and the *Scott Pilgrim Versus the World* graphic novels and film. Her interesting point is that the reset idea has crossed over from video games into films, and vice versa.
- Undergraduate MA(Hons) architecture student Anthony Ani alerted me to the challenge of relating game spaces to architectural spaces in his interesting dissertation, especially in relation to *Portal*.
- 3D pavement art seems to have gone the way of much projection mapping on the sides of buildings and is used for creating media events for marketing purposes. Iâ??ve not yet managed to photograph any myself.

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Category

1. Play

Tags

1. architecture
2. game
3. nature
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5. video games

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