The Magic Prison: Game Rules as a Tool for Dread in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Inscryption*

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The late 14th-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Anderson 1996) and Daniel Mullins Games' recent roguelike deck-building digital game *Inscryption* (2021) have in common the narrative frame of a game. In this paper, we examine these as examples of the very concept of the 'magic circle' of games being used to evoke dread, horror or uncanniness. In both examples, the protagonists are trapped within a game and forced to play. Crucially, the rules of these games are enforced and adhered to strictly by the antagonists, even though in their roles as game masters they could easily tip the scales in their favour.

This can also be seen in many other popular media, such as *Tron* (Lisberger 1982), *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku 2000), the *Saw* franchise (2004–2023) and *Squid Game* (Dong-hyuk 2021). However, the reason behind choosing these examples is (a) to explore an as-yet little-researched but critically acclaimed game, *Inscryption*, (b) to link it to much longer-running traditions and techniques via *Gawain*, and (c) to show by way of comparison the particular role that digital games can play in using the 'magic prison'.

Gawain begins on New Year's Eve when a mysterious green knight enters Arthur's court and presents a strange challenge: any knight present can strike a blow on him, provided that the knight may return the blow a year and one day later. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge with a cunning idea: behead the knight and he will not be able to return the blow. However, the decapitated green knight picks up his head and leaves the court, reminding Gawain of his agreement.

In the beginning of *Inscryption*, the player-character appears to be trapped in a cabin with a shadowy card dealer called Leshy. Though the player may move around the cabin freely, they may not leave. Eventually, they must play a roguelike deck-builder game, for which Leshy is the game master. Leshy upholds the rules of the game rigorously. Even if the player has acquired a card from the cabin, Leshy frustratedly allows the player to play with it on the basis that now that it is in their deck, it is valid. The game becomes increasingly metafictional, and through found footage we

understand that a vlogger named Luke Carder has come into possession of a seemingly cursed game disk, but to defeat the curse he must play the game to its conclusion.

In both examples, we see an oddly strict adherence to arbitrary and not-fully-explained game rules, despite the stakes in both being literally life and death. This turns the 'magic circle' into a 'magic prison', whereby the notion of voluntary, rule-bound, separated play becomes threatening. The two examples are also linked by a number of parallels which may be fruitful to explore. For instance, both the green knight and Leshy have some close connection with nature, and this link juxtaposes with the arbitrariness of bounded play. Both antagonists also shapeshift or roleplay as gamemasters, assuming the roles of the other characters we meet.

The magic circle is a concept briefly described by Johan Huizinga ([1938] 2014), but primarily developed by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) where the term entered game studies in earnest. Salen and Zimmerman use the term to describe how voluntarily beginning a game creates a 'magic circle', separated from ordinary life and in which players agree to play by arbitrary rules and assign special meaning to game pieces. The concept has been vigorously discussed and criticized within the field since. Most commonly critiqued is the degree of separation from ordinary life (e.g., Consalvo 2009; Pargman and Jakobsson 2008), but also arguments regarding the computational nature of digital games compared with nondigital games (Liebe 2008). However, others have defended the concept, arguing that its detractors take the metaphor too literally—what Jaakko Stenros calls the "strong boundary hypothesis" (2012, 4).

The point here is that examples such as *Inscryption* and *Gawain* evoke the notion of the magic circle but subvert it. Both show a warped sense of voluntariness. In *Inscryption*, while the player may not leave and must eventually play with Leshy, they may freely walk around the cabin and choose when to play and when to get up from the table and pause play. Gawain is bound only by honour to uphold his end of the bargain. This quasi-voluntariness problematizes the boundary between game and ordinary life. By raising the stakes of the game to life and death, the boundedness of the magic circle becomes a prison in which the player is forced to pseudo-voluntarily engage in the game. The juxtaposition between the arbitrariness and lusory attitude of adhering to the game rules combined with the involuntariness and fatal consequences is the engine for dread in these works.

We explore the implications that these examples have on conceptions of the magic circle and how the conventions of games can become the focus for a specific type of horror or dread.

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