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1.THIS IS NOT A GAME:
PLAY IN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Games have a particular set of relationships to the contexts in which they are played. Although games have clearly delineated boundaries in time and space that set them apart from the "real world", some games are designed to blur that boundary. This essay, comprised of several selections from the authors' book Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, investigates the complex ways in which games interact with their cultural environment. Focusing on these questions from a game design viewpoint, the essay begins by identifying key concepts related to these questions and ends with detailed design analyses of three games that play with the cultural environments in which the games take place.

KEYWORDS

Game design, magic circle, metacommunication, games and reality, artificial status of games, play context

INTRODUCING THE MAGIC CIRCLE

This is the problem of the way we get into and out of the play or game...what are the codes which govern these entries and exits?
–Brian Sutton-Smith, Child's Play

What does it mean to enter the system of a game? How is it that play begins and ends? What makes up the boundary of a game and what occurs at that border? At stake in answering these questions is understanding the paradoxical artificiality of games and the way that games relate to the real-world contexts that they inhabit.

In "The Life of Games", philosopher Steven Sniderman, examines how players know that they have entered into the play of the game. According to Sniderman, the codes governing entry into a game are hard to define but neverthless known but players. "Players and fans and officials of any game or sport develop an acute awareness of the game's 'frame' or context, but we would be hard pressed to explain in writing, even after careful thought, exactly what the signs are. After all, even an umpire's yelling of 'Play Ball' is not the exact moment the game starts".[1] He goes on to explain that players (and spectators) must rely on intuition and their experience with a particular culture to recognize when a game has begun. During a game, he writes,

[1] Steven Sniderman, "The Life of Games" p. 2. <www.gamepuzzles.com/tlog/tlog2.htm>.

"a human being is constantly noticing if the conditions for playing the game are still being met, continuously monitoring the 'frame,' the circumstances surrounding play, to determine that the game is still in progress, always aware (if only unconsciously) that the other participants are acting as if the game is 'on.'"[2]

The "frame" to which Sniderman alludes has several functions. For example, the frame of a game is what communicates that those contained within it are "playing" and that the space of play is separate in some way from that of the real world. Psychologist Michael Apter echoes this idea when he writes,

In the play-state you experience a protective frame which stands between you and the "real" world and its problems, creating an enchanted zone in which, in the end, you are confident that no harm can come. Although this frame is psychological, interestingly it often has a perceptible physical representation: the proscenium arch of the theater, the railings around the park, the boundary line on the cricket pitch, and so on. But such a frame may also be abstract, such as the rules governing the game being played.[3]

In other words, the frame is a concept connected to the question of the "reality" of a game, of the relationship between the artificial world of the game and the "real life" contexts that it intersects. The frame of a game creates a game's feeling of safety.

It is responsible not only for the unusual relationship between a game and the outside world, but also for many of the internal mechanisms and experiences of a game in play. We call this frame the *magic circle*, a concept inspired by Johann Huizinga's work on play.

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand 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.[4]

Although the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga's list of "play-grounds", the term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game.

ENTER IN
In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. The magic circle of a game might have a physical component, like the board of a board game or the playing field of an athletic contest. But many games have no physical boundaries—arm wrestling, for example, doesn't require much in the

[2] Ibid.

[3] Michael J. Apter, "A Structural-Phenomenology of Play," in *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach*, edited by J. H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1991), p. 15.

[4] Johann, Huizinga, Homo *Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 10.

way of special spaces or material. The game simply begins when one or more players decide to play.

The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins. A fancy Backgammon set sitting all alone might be a pretty decoration on the coffee table. If this is the function that the game is serving—decoration—it doesn't really matter how the game pieces are arranged, if some of them are out of place, or even missing. However, once you sit down with a friend to play a game of Backgammon, the arrangement of the pieces suddenly becomes extremely important. The Backgammon board becomes a special space that facilitates the play of the game. The players' attention is intensely focused on the game, which mediates their interaction through play. While the game is in progress, the players do not casually arrange and rearrange the pieces, but move them according to very particular rules.

Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players. Before a game of Chutes and Ladders starts, it's just a board, some plastic pieces, and a die. But once the game begins, everything changes. Suddenly, the materials represent something quite specific. This plastic token is you. These rules tell you how to roll the die and move. Suddenly, it matters very much which plastic token reaches the end first.

ERASURES

THIS IS NOT A GAME –
A.I.: Artificial Intelligence movie trailer

The magic circle can define a powerful space, investing its authority in the actions of players and creating new and complex meanings that are only possi-

ble in the space of play. But it is also remarkably fragile as well, requiring constant maintenance to keep it intact. What happens then, when the boundary of the magic circle is so completely erased that it is difficult to distinguish the space of play from ordinary life? What are the effects of games that blend and bleed into the spaces of the "real world"?

All games share this feature of a magic circle, a frame that demarcates the game in space and time. Certain games are designed to play with this line of demarcation, calling attention to the borders of the magic circle. These kinds of games have a number of curious characteristics. First, they create a heightened overlap between the artificial space of the game and the physical spaces and lifestyles of their players. Second, they blur the distinction between players and non-players, sometimes involuntarily roping in unsuspecting participants. Perhaps most importantly, these kinds of games raise fundamental questions about the artificiality of games and their relationship to real life proper.

The most familiar examples of this phenomenon are found in games such as Assassin (also known as Killer), made popular on college campuses in the 1970s and 1980s, a game in which players stalk, hunt, and evade each other with dart guns over days or weeks of real time. Game play takes place not in a special, isolated game space, but in and among the activities of daily life. Recent digital games have adopted similar design strategies, such as Majestic, a large-scale experimental game by Electronic Arts that took place through fictitious web sites, faxes, and telephone voicemail. When a player's phone rang in the middle of the night it might be a call from the pizza delivery service—or from a character in the game whispering a secret code. Other games, such as the cell phone game Botfighters, tracks the physical location of players

at all times and lets them challenge one another to unexpected duels.

Games like Assassin and Botfighters raise a number of interesting questions. How does the play of a game change when the difference between the "inside" and the "outside" of the game is ambiguous? How permeable is the boundary between the real world and the artificial world of the game? Are only certain games capable of blurring these boundaries, or does it happen to some extent in all games? Last, how can answering these questions help us design more meaningful game experiences for players? The three case studies that follow take a careful look at three very different games. In each case, the design of the game blurs the boundary between the game and the cultural environment that surrounds it, leading to novel forms of play.

SHALL WE PLAY A GAME?

Our first case study focuses on a game reportedly designed and operated by Microsoft as a viral marketing campaign for the film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. The web-based game, known by its players informally as "The Beast", "The A.I. Game", or just "A.I.", had participants from all over the world collaboratively deciphering cryptic puzzles and clues across a range of media. The game began with an enigmatic credit at the end of the preview trailer for the film. Savvy viewers picked up on a mysterious listing for "Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist" and a set of mysterious symbols. When viewers (now players) entered the name "Jeanine Salla" into

an Internet search engine, they began a Wonderland-style journey through a series of linked websites. The sites blended real-world information and information from the fictive world of A.I.'s back story, which concerned a dramatic struggle between humans and robots capable of human emotion.

Over the course of several months leading up to the film's premiere, thousands of players took part in the game. Many expressed profound reactions to the distortion of the boundaries between game, film, life, and reality. As one player wrote in an essay on cloudmakers.org, the most active community site developed by players of the game, "Here we are, every one of us excited at blurring the lines between story and reality. The game promises to become not just entertainment, but our lives. But where in the story is there room for the too-mundane matters of our actual lives that must be attended?"[5] While players were intrigued by and often obsessed with the game, there was a clear sense of uneasiness about the truth of what was actually going on. The ambiguity surrounding the game's status (was it a game, a puzzle, a story, an evil marketing ploy?) made the experience of play oddly compelling. Another player noted,

> On the morning of the premiere, we'll know the plot, subplot, conflict, climax and dialogue down to the last poignant pause. Surely the PMs [Puppet Masters, the game's developers] know this; they also know that most of us will go anyway, to experience it for ourselves. So something

[5] Andrea Phillips, "Deep Water." July 2001. Cloudmakers.org

[6] Maria Bonasia, "MetaMystery." 30th May 2001. Cloudmakers.org

undiscovered still remains—the heart of this (and whatever that implies).[6]

Puzzles in the game had players reading Göedel, Escher, Bach, translating from German, Japanese, and an obscure language called Kannada, decrypting Morse and Enigma code, and performing a range of operations on sound and image files downloaded and swapped between players.[7] Sometimes players received actual phone calls from unnamed parties to attend real-world events. At one "anti-robot" rally, for example, attendees solved puzzles and phoned the answers to players at rallies being held simultaneously in other cities. At every moment, A.I. played with the boundaries between the game's magic circle and the cultural spaces outside of it. The play experience of most games can be framed as a *closed system*, in which the play of the game is in some respects bounded by the magic circle. But because the space of play in A.I. was ambiguous, it operated as an *open system*, defying implicit assumptions about the scope of the game's space of possibility. As a result, A.I. mixed freely with its cultural environment at a very deep level. Players were clearly affected by the play such an approach afforded.

Although there is much to be said about this game from a marketing perspective, our interest lies elsewhere—in how its play became meaningful, even as it erased and redefined traditional boundaries separating fact from fiction. What elements of the game contributed to its status as real-world interloper? Following are some of A.I.'s salient design features,

incorporating commentary from player Daragh Sankey's online analysis of the game.[8]

Web-based

Although the format of web-based games is not new, A.I. made wonderful use of the web's unique properties. The story was built from an amalgamation of distributed sites. A core mechanic of the game play involved searching and surfing the web, making the Internet fundamental to the game's structure.

Fictional game content disguised as reality

All of the information contained in the numerous sites created for the game was fabricated. There were not, however, any pages that announced, "This is a work of fiction." In fact, many of the websites could easily have been misconstrued as real, such as www.rational-hatter.com. This representational strategy helped reinforce the illusion that the game was part of the real world, rather than part of an artificial game world.

Decentralized content

Unlike most web-based games, A.I. had no single gateway or homepage. Content was spread across many websites, allowing for numerous points of entry. However, the distributed complexity of the game demanded a need for a central information hub. As an emergent effect of player behavior, the website www.cloudmakers.org was quickly adopted as the game's primary player-created portal.

Game events occurred outside the web

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[7] Daniel Sieberg, "Reality Blurs, Hype Builds with Web 'A.I.' Game." May 2001. CNN.com

[8] Daragh Sankey, "A.I. Game." Joystick101.org

Although the bulk of the game was located on the web, the most dramatic events seemed to occur offline. Email, faxes, and phones all played a part in the game. For example, the A.I. trailer included an encoded phone number, which when called, played a mysterious voice message from "mother." Players were able to enter characters' passwords into fictional voicemail accounts and uncover new information. Game associated A.I.s even called players at home. Most dramatic, however, were three real-life "rallies" held by the "Anti-Robot Militia" (www.unite-and-resist.org) in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Players were given a date and address, and attended what turned out to be clever theatre pieces. The rallies included puzzles that required real-time collaboration between players at the events and those at home in front of their computers.

Episodic content
Game content was updated weekly, as elements were added, modified, and taken away. Emails were sent out to players; increasingly, sites attached to the game were "hacked" by rampant A.I.s. With its complex, ongoing narrative, the disadvantage of A.I.'s episodic release was that players who joined the game later had a hard time catching up. The advantage was a heightened sense of urgency, because the game couldn't ever be put on pause. As a narrative structure, the episodic release was a natural fit for a web-based game, because most real sites do change over time. Additionally, because the game led chronologically to the launch of the film, it made sense that it built to a single climax.

Distributed problem-solving
Many of the puzzles in the game were extremely difficult to solve (some of them remain unsolved today). For example, messages were hidden in the html source code of certain web pages. Anyone could uncover this information, but since the game

had so many websites, solitary players could not possibly get it all. It is safe to say that an isolated individual could never have played the entire game from start to finish. Thus, fan sites served as a meeting ground for game players, who collaborated by sharing new developments and puzzle answers, organizing and sharing problem-solving tasks. This was a bold design decision, because in designing a game it is generally better to err on the side of simplicity and ease rather than complexity. However, with A.I. the risk paid off−the design encouraged players to interact socially, and the collaborative play heightened the satisfaction each time a puzzle was solved.

Interaction between authors and players
Players presumed from the moment the game began that there was a set story arc to the game, which would end in the release of the film. The weekly updates generally involved puzzles that players had to solve before they could access new story content. Many players speculated that because the size and effectiveness of the groups solving the puzzles was an unpredictable variable, the design of new puzzles by the authors of the game was based on past player performance. For example, if a puzzle turned out to be much too hard for the players, the authors were forced to find an alternative means to provide the story update that the solution to the unsolved puzzle would have granted. If the authors did not seek out alternate forms of dissemination, there was a risk of the story never being completed.

Line blurred between players and game designers
It is worth noting that the game's creators deliberately blurred the lines between themselves and the players. In a few cases, game pages linked to fan pages without breaking the dissimulation. Jeanine Salla's essay on "Multi-person Social Problem-Solving Arrays Considered as a Form of 'Artificial

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Intelligence'" linked to the cloudmakers page (www.cloudmakers.org); the Center for Robotic Freedom (www.inourimage.org) urged players to help fight for A.I. rights by visiting the spherewatch page (www.spherewatch.net), another fan site. In fact, one player noted that the easiest way for game authors to control the story delivery would have been for them to surreptitiously join the ranks of the fans, posting solutions to puzzles when they saw that the real players were having trouble.

Each of these design decisions contributed in distinct ways to blur the boundaries between the space of the game and everyday life. All of the elements listed share one thing in common: careful attention to the creation of meaningful play. The web-based aspect of the game, for example, took good advantage of the medium. Players were rewarded for careful web searches and source code sleuthing with meaningful outcomes. Similarly, the social play of the game, from the collaborative puzzles to the real-world gatherings, were also forms of meaningful play engendered by specific game design choices. Even the fine line separating fact from fiction—a line made all the more porous by the game's distributed, improvisational format—was only possible through successful design. Each of these game elements—use of the web, collaborative social play, fiction disguised as fact—intentionally helped to blur the boundaries of the magic circle. The many play dimensions of A.I., from its play with pleasure to its social and narrative play, all intentionally "play" with the border between

the game and the surrounding world that it infiltrates, infests, and inhabits.

A.I. takes the idea of game as invisible playground to extremes. But in one sense, all game experiences involve playing with the distinction between the game world and the rest of the world. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson's concept of *metacommunication* tells us that to play a game is not an act of naïve immersion, but an act of constant communication about the act of play itself. A dog that nips another dog signifies a bite through its action, but also communicates the idea that the bite is not a real bite; the dog is not actually attacking, but is instead just playing.

Play, as a form of metacommunication, reframes the events of the situation at hand, so that actions of "play" are related to, but are not the same as, other actions of "not play." Whenever we play, part of our play-activity involves the communication of the idea, "I am playing." This continual stream of communication between players, and between those playing and those not playing, helps sustain the magic circle. One of the functions of the magic circle is to actively demonstrate its own distinction from ordinary life. As play scholar Sutton-Smith notes, "Playfighting as an analogy to real fighting seems more like *displaying the meaning of fighting* than rehearsing for real combat. It is more about meaning than mauling".[9]

All games engender this quality of double-consciousness, but A.I. took it to new heights. Part of the brilliance of the game's design is that it incorporated

[9] Brian Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 23. Our emphasis.

metacommunication itself as a form of play. By blurring the boundaries of the magic circle as a key design choice, it made new forms of boundary-crossing possible, intensifying the pleasure of metacommunication. As players moved through the designed structures of the game, at every moment tensions between belief and skepticism, between playing a game and playing real life, moved the game forward and created compelling forms of play.

THE INVISIBLE PLAYGROUND

From the electronically mediated spaces of A.I. we turn to the real world arenas of a LARP, or live-action role-playing game. LARPs blur the boundaries between the inside and outside of a game, but do so through very different means. Live-action role-playing games are direct descendents of tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons. As in tabletop RPGs, LARP players take on the persona of fictional characters, defined through formal game statistics as well as through narrative back story and an invented personality.

Live-action role-playing games, however, do not take place around a table. Instead, LARPs occur in real physical spaces, as players walk about and interact with each other, dramatically acting out their characters' actions in real-time. Although LARPs do have Game Masters that plan and referee the sessions, as well as rules that handle combat and other complex player actions, most LARP activity consists of social interaction, as players converse "in character" to make plans, pursue narrative threads, and scheme against each other. Live-action role-playing games can take place in outdoor or indoor settings, in private or public spaces. The location in which the LARP takes place, as well as the dress and interaction of the players, depends largely on the narrative setting of the LARP. A Medieval-themed LARP might occur in a wilderness environment or a Renaissance Fair. A futuristic LARP might take place in a series of convention hall rooms or in the house of one of the players.

Nick Fortugno, a game designer and LARP Game Master, ran a LARP for many years in New York City based on Vampire: The Masquerade. His game, set in present day NYC, met regularly in public spaces that ranged from Washington Square Park to Grand Central Station. The players all took the role of vampires, ancient and powerful creatures that live secretly among humans. In typical Vampire: The Masquerade games, emphasis is not on physical confrontation or on players hunting humans for blood. Instead, the interest of the game comes from baroque power struggles waged between the aristocratic vampire clans. Fortugno's LARP, titled Seasons of Darkness, was designed along these lines, and was a game of dense social politics and intricate storytelling. Seasons of Darkness successfully engaged with its cultural environment in a variety of ways.

Public Spaces

Although many LARPs take place exclusively in isolated settings, most Seasons of Darkness sessions were held in public urban spaces. Through this design decision, Fortugno (and Tami Meyers, the game's administrator) created a game that intrinsically blurred the boundaries of the magic circle. In most games, even real-world physical games, the play takes place in a field, on a court, or someplace set aside specifically for the game. Seasons of Darkness did not use an artificially designed space, but instead appropriated existing ones. The players integrated their "found" context into the game play in many ways. A balcony overlooking the World Trade Center's Winter Garden, for example, might be used to heighten dramatic effect for a player delivering a speech to other players below; the same balcony might also be used strategically, as a vantage point for spying.

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The game-space of Seasons of Darkness was congruent not just with the material setting but also with the cultural environment of New York City. Media, signage, and unknowing passersby were all fodder for the game. A character on the run might duck into a throng of commuters, camouflaging herself among the passing crowds in an attempt to evade her pursuers. Or two players might be inspired by a clothing store window display to have a conversation about current fads in "human" culture. This use of public space as the space of the game greatly increased options for narrative play. A game's space of possibility (the event-space of all possible game actions that might occur in the course of play) can be quite large, even when the game takes places in a relatively closed magic circle. But chance events and a constant flow of people and culture through a session of Seasons of Darkness made the game's space of possibility truly infinite. The game was played nowhere and everywhere at once, as players continually improvised and invented new ways to engage with their cultural environment.

Real-World Interaction

As with most LARPs, Seasons of Darkness players played their game by moving, speaking, and gesturing "in character." In contrast to most games, in which game actions are stylized, artificial gestures (move a plastic token to a new space on the board when it is your turn; pass the ball to certain players in certain ways), Seasons of Darkness players made use of naturalized behaviors. In Freeze Tag, touching another player on the arm has formal ramifications for play. But in a LARP, touching another player on the arm usually has the same communicative meaning it does in everyday life: perhaps it is a gesture of empathy, or a silent request for the recipient to stop speaking. This is a significant departure from more typical games.

The blurring and erasure of the magic circle takes place not only in terms of the game's setting, but also on the level of the player's interactions. In Seasons of Darkness, the game actions overlapped with the behaviors of everyday life. Gestures, speech, dramatic skills: these tools for social interaction were part of the cultural environment each player brought to the game. Although social communication occurs in most games, in Seasons of Darkness these activities were themselves core game actions.

This is not to say that the game didn't have its own set of stylized play actions; it certainly did. Combat and the use of supernatural powers required stylized behavior, which Fortungno designed as part of the game. It might be the case, for example, that a tap on the arm did not denote an innocent communicative speech-gesture, but instead signaled the use of a magical action. In Seasons of Darkness, a player that had used a special power to turn invisible crossed his or her arms. This gesture signified invisibility, and other players had to act as if the invisible player was not present.

There is an important distinction to make here. Although it is true that a LARP blurs the border of the magic circle, the boundary is nowhere close to being completely eradicated. Despite its lamination with the actions and events of daily life, the game remains capable of generating its own meanings. The meaning of the crossed-arm gesture is artificial, not a part of our everyday lexicon of interaction. Yet this is entirely consistent with what we already know about games. The metacommunicative aspect of player consciousness creates what game folklorist Gary Allen Fine calls "layers of meaning" in which game character, game player, and real-world context exist together within a web of interconnected cognitive frameworks.[10]

Emergent Storytelling

Whereas some LARPs rely on pre-generated story-lines and tightly scripted events, the narrative of Seasons of Darkness was a largely emergent system. Fortugno encouraged bottom-up instead of top-down narratives: many of the most significant story events were player-produced: the result of characters scheming and plotting against one another. Each session was a complex system, with the characters bumping into each other like narrative particles. Every interaction between characters built on previous ones, adding up to larger patterns of narrative behavior. In managing these patterns from session to session, Fortugno had to balance emergent (or procedurally produced) narrative elements with embedded (or pre-scripted) narrative elements. The unexpected, emergent qualities of the game kept it moving in lively, unpredictable directions. But over the course of the years that the game was played, Fortugno also developed elaborately embedded plots that were only fully realized during the game's final climax.

According to systems theory, emergence always takes place within some kind of context: the environment of the system. In Seasons of Darkness, narrative contexts were established out of the complex back story of the game, which was derived from a host of sources: vampire lore and legend; the mythos of the published game rules; a fictional history of NYC vampires that Fortugno had written; established events of previous game sessions; consistent character personalities and their allegiances and enmities; and the public setting and other elements of the cultural environment. Any conversation or interaction between characters took place within a rich narrative context brimming with story potential.

Meta-Narratives

Playing a game in a public space has its challenges, especially when the players are pretending to be vampires. Large groups of players, milling about for hours late at night, could attract unwanted attention from police and security guards. Part of the play of the game included negotiating the friction between the real-world settings and the unusual way that players inhabited them. But remarkably enough, this very negotiation was a site of meaningful play.

In the narrative universe of the game, vampires live in secret, pretending to be human (thus the "masquerade" of Vampire: The Masquerade). The most severe crime a vampire can commit is to leak information to human society about the existence of vampires. For this reason, players speaking about matters of vampire clan politics or supernatural occult powers lower their voices when non-players walk nearby. Players manifest the in-game narrative of secrecy by pretending that passersby need to be kept in the dark about the sinister truth. At the same time, players maintain another form of secret information: the fact that they are playing a game. The secret meanings of the game, like the fact that a player with crossed arms is "invisible," remain unknown to the general public.

10 Gary Alan Fine, Shared Fantasy,
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983),
p. 186.

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There is a beautiful double logic to the way these game elements play out. Just as vampires in the fictional game-world keep their existence to themselves, players of the game secret away the very presence of the magic circle. This approach is in contrast to most games, where both players and spectators acknowledge the presence of the magic circle, and the distinction between players and non-players is immediately evident. The special information that Seasons of Darkness players have about the existence of the game is more than the formal information about its rules: it is information that defines the play community and binds it together within a cultural context.

The private knowledge that players have about the game acts to exemplify the narrative itself. Players' imaginative existence as non-human vampires is heightened by the secret status they hold within the public cultural environment where the game takes place. Private knowledge about the game functions as a form of procedural representation, in which signification arises from a dynamic process. A crowd of hapless tourists parts to reveal the menacing black-clad figure of an enemy vampire striding confidently toward you: this is a powerful moment of procedural narrative that could only happen in a LARP. But unlike most forms of procedural representation, where the closed set of rules and game interactions generate a depiction, here representation arises by layering the game onto the real world. The blurring of the game with its cultural environment is itself an act of representation.

Current Events
The Seasons of Darkness game was set in the real world, in the present day. As a result, political events occurring locally, nationally, and globally could be incorporated into the game narrative. For example, in the game narrative, Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York City for the duration of the game, was a mind-controlled stooge of one of the more powerful players. As the Game Master, Fortugno had free reign to tie real-world events to the narrative play of the game; he freely encouraged players to do so as well. When fashion designer Gianni Versace was murdered, the clan of vampires that influence and guide human art and culture played their characters in full mourning for the entire game session following the news. Building on this creative game action, Fortugno decided to make the death a vampiric assassination with larger political implications.

In this way, Seasons of Darkness exchanged meaning with its cultural context and transformed that meaning into game-specific narratives with integrated outcomes affecting future play. Fortugno encouraged players to modify and transform the game's meaning through independent acts of creation. Although Fortugno always had final approval of a player's appropriation of a real-world event, the shared context of the game and its storyline meant that he very rarely had to exercise censuring authority. The significance of player-production in Seasons of Darkness lies in the fact that players were not simply inventing an isolated game object such as a Quake skin or a work of fan fiction. Their act of creation consisted of locating an event in the real world and stretching the game narrative to accommodate it. In Seasons of Darkness, current events acted as the raw material for player-production.

Each of these design elements, acting in concert, created an extremely meaningful experience, supporting a play community of several dozen players for more than five years. Every game element was the result of careful game design choices. The danger and difficulty of designing a game as fully integrated into its environment as Seasons of Darkness is that the game can run away with itself. Because of its intentional play with the boundaries of the magic

circle, the game has the potential to blend too well into its cultural environment. If it becomes too ambiguous, the shared safety and trust that allows a play community to persist can disappear.

Acknowledging this danger, Fortugno kept the game design tightly constrained in many respects, re-writing the rules and streamlining the formal game mechanics so players could focus on role-playing and storytelling. Although the game existed in public spaces, there were always constraints on where players could travel and what they could do during a game. The time of a game session was also clearly marked: every session began and ended with a Peter Pan-inspired ritual in which Fortugno blew imaginary pixie dust and pink smoke over the players. Even in a game with such permeable borders, the time and space of the magic circle remained unambiguously demarcated.

IDEOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT
For a third and final case study, we look at Suspicion, an unpublished card game designed for an office environment, to be played over a week of real time. Eric Zimmerman created Suspicion while working at a game development company in New York City in the mid-1990s and organized two full playtests of the game. As with A.I. and Seasons of Darkness, the game's design makes explicit use of its cultural environment. But it also engages in a form of cultural resistance not found in the other two case studies.

Each game of Suspicion began with an invitation. Everyone in the company received an email explaining that a game would take place the following week; if they wanted to play, they needed to send a reply. Players were instructed not to disclose to other employees whether or not they had decided to play. In a company of about a hundred, each game involved approximately 20 players. The following week, when the game began, players were given the game rules and a small collection of cards.

One of these cards contained the player's identity. Each player in the conspiracy-themed game belonged to two groups, a sect and an institution. A player might, for example, belong to the Sect of the Turquoise Gear and the Institution of the State. Every player's pair of group affiliations was unique, so no two players belonged to the exact same pair of groups. Each player also began the game with six Stash Cards. Each Stash Card had the color and insignia of one of the groups in the game. The goal of the game was to locate other players in your groups and work with them to acquire Stash Cards with the color and insignia of the group you shared. The first Sect and the first Institution that came to the referee with all of their members and a certain number of Stash Cards corresponding to the group won the game. To help players find each other, each group was given a code word or code gesture to help identify other players in that group.

In order to acquire Stash Cards, a player had to use Accusation Cards to formally accuse another player of being in a group. If your accusation was correct, you could use any of your Stash Cards to "attack" the accused, an attack that played out as a simple dueling card game. If your accusation was incorrect, the target could take a Stash Card from you. Players could also freely trade cards with each other, but usually did so only with other members of their groups. The general trajectory of the game started with players figuring out who was and was not playing, next using code words and gestures to identify others in their groups, and eventually sharing knowledge and Stash Cards within a group in order to strategically attack other players. The play of Suspicion engaged with its cultural environment in a variety of ways.

Lived Conflict

Suspicion took place in a physical space not designed for the artificial play of a game: an office environment. Unlike Seasons of Darkness, the game space was not a public one that players visited for a limited time. It was the place where they worked, including their offices, lunchrooms, and conference rooms. The game space was one players already knew intimately. For this reason, the game truly colonized its environment. The workspace became synonymous with the magic circle; the time and place of the workday became the time and place of the game. There were a few formal restrictions on where the game could be played (a scheduled meeting with an outside client was out of bounds), but otherwise, when a player arrived at work, he or she had to be ready to attack or be attacked. All games embody a conflict, and tension arises in a game as players struggle to resolve the conflict. One of the roles that the magic circle plays is to contain game conflict rather than allowing it to spill out into ordinary life. As with Assassin, in Suspicion there was no escape from the game conflict; the play of the game had to be integrated into the rest of one's life.

Interventions

Because Suspicion operated in and among ordinary work activities, the play of the game took over and transformed the workplace. For example, in Suspicion each group has a code word or code gesture that it can use to identify other members of the same group. This communicative game mechanic leads to strangely strategic conversations. Each player attempts to reveal his own code word or gesture to find allies, but does so in a very surreptitious manner, so that another group won't notice and acquire the information.

As a result of this mechanic, players became very self-conscious about how they interacted with one another. The game added a new layer of meaning to every in-office speech-act, turning it into a complex action that could be used to identify allies or to foil rivals. Part of the play of any game is making sense of its meanings and representations. By invading and appropriating ordinary communication, Suspicion brings this sense-making aspect of games center stage. Is the person you're talking to about a work task playing the game? Are they trying to tell you something? Have you unintentionally let your code word slip? The sense of altered consciousness was so pervasive that even workers not playing the game joined in, pretending that they too, had a secret identity. From the player reports that followed each playtest, it was clear that these extra layers of meaning were somewhat uncomfortable to inhabit, but nevertheless intensely pleasurable as play.

Shaking It Up

Suspicion was designed to undercut the existing power relationships at work. In any company, an institutional structure defines control and authority: who makes the decisions, who is paid more, who is the boss of whom. When Suspicion players are randomly assigned to sects and institutions at the start of the game, the makeup of these groups has nothing to do with the existing departmental, spatial, economic, or authoritative relationships among players. Suspicion reshuffled and thereby transformed these power relations, changing in some way each player's relationships to the other participants.

The structure of player identity in Suspicion (each player is assigned a unique combination of group allegiances), ensures that you cannot completely trust anyone else. You might have found the members of your Sect, but each of them belongs to a different Institution that is opposed to your own. One of your Sect members might suggest that you pool your Stash Cards with his, so that your Sect's valuable

cards are more properly protected—but he might simply be planning to selfishly use the cards for his Institution. This sense of constant uncertainty and distrust created a tense game atmosphere. The game rewarded deception and play involved much trickery and backstabbing. Not only were existing power relationships undermined, but they were never given the chance to settle into a stable hierarchy.

Suspicion revealed some of the cultural ideologies that help constitute the workplace. But because the game transformed power relationships, it also served as a site of cultural resistance. By undermining the company's existing patterns of authority, it highlighted the typically invisible ways that power usually operated.

Games sometimes exhibit forbidden play, forms of non-game interaction not permitted in ordinary life (examples include kissing in Spin the Bottle or physical aggression in Boxing). Suspicion also permitted forbidden play. In the game, a worker might drop in on his boss, accuse her of being an enemy, and attack her mercilessly with his Stash Cards. By recasting company authority as a tangled web of deception, relationships among company workers were radically transformed. Through its play, Suspicion operated as a cultural critique. It succeeded only because of the way it blurred the edges of the magic circle. A softball game at a company picnic might act temporarily to reframe company authority, but it is not taking place in the participants' actual workplace. The subversive potential for cultural resistance in Suspicion emerges directly from its literal appropriation of the cultural context in which is was played.

In a typical game, the magic circle acts to contain inter-player conflict. Suspicion was not only designed to create mistrust and deception, but had players acting against each other in their usual place of work. The magic circle enframed the office; there was no escape from other players after the game if things went wrong. During the climax of the second game, one player made an offer to pay another player cash for her Stash Cards. The exchange of money never took place, but its mere possibility caused intense emotions to erupt. The game was in danger of imploding, leading the designer to implement a rule outlawing the use of real-world money in the game.

This anecdote points out the power and challenge of designing games as invisible playgrounds. As a transformative political statement about the power of the corporate workplace, Suspicion was a success, seducing players with its genuinely pleasurable game play even while the game play itself engaged in a cultural critique of the players' work context. At the same time, the mischievous resistance of the game was balanced by the need for a sense of responsibility toward the players, as even a game that embodies a radical critique needs to maintain a spirit of fair play to those it impacts.

THIS IS NOT A GAME:
PLAY IN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

CONCLUSION

In the course of this paper, we took a detailed look at three games that explicitly blurred the boundaries of the magic circle. In very different ways, A.I., Seasons of Darkness, and Suspicion played with their cultural environments, effacing the boundaries of the magic circle to a more extreme degree than more conventional games. Yet in each case, although the magic circle blurred, shifted, and blended in with its environment, it still in some way remained intact. In A.I., the players never forgot that the game was really a promotion for a Hollywood film. In Seasons of Darkness, the game sessions took place within strictly delimited physical and temporal boundaries. And in Suspicion, play boundaries, such as the restriction on using money, nudged the game in the direction of being a closed, rather than a more open system. In these three games, the magic circle never entirely vanished. If it had, we probably would not be able to call them games.

So the magic circle did not disappear after all. But each game, in its own way, played with its possible disappearance. The rigid structure among which the play of the games took place was in fact the conventions of games themselves. A game framed as an invisible playground plays with the very definition of what a game is. But some part of that defining game structure remains intact, even as it is transformed through play.

A game that plays with the possibility of its own existence offers game designers potentially rich approaches, leading to entirely new forms of game experiences. For example, designing a game as a cultural environment is an effective way to mount a powerful cultural critique. During the twentieth century, most forms of art and entertainment have engaged critically with their cultural contexts, from Marcel Duchamp's readymades to Hip-Hop's sampled tracks. As a new century dawns, it is time for games to recognize their role within larger cultural environments, in order to celebrate their complex relationships with the rest of culture. Designing games as invisible playgrounds is one design strategy for creating more culturally relevant forms of play.

* NOTE: This paper contains edited excerpts from several chapters of *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, September 2003). If you are interested in the ideas explored, we recommend that you explore these ideas in the larger context of the book.