The concept of magic circle: a critical reading

El concepto de círculo mágico: una lectura crítica

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Abstract

This article deals with establishing and discussing the concept of magic circle - often present in game studies - and ponder the possible relations with the concept of liminality, worked in cultural anthropology from the rites of passage standpoint in Van Gennep and Victor Turner and with the concept of transitional phenomenon by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Towards that, we seek references in studies of the respective areas of knowledge, in order to reflect on the experience of play. The establishment of the relationship between the concepts mentioned - magic circle, liminality, transitional phenomenon - takes a step forward on the path that seeks to answer what play is and its relevance in contemporary life. Thus, given the large access to digital games today, this article provides a relevant contribution to Communication studies.

Keywords

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of the magic circle is central to the theme of games in general and digital games, in particular, among other things, because it helps us think about the concept of game and its extensions in everyday life. Similarly, the concept of liminality can be a light to understanding online and offline life, as well as the idea of transitional phenomenon can be useful for a better understanding of the game experience. To discuss these issues, we will gradually bring in the concepts and weave their points of relationship. In the research on digital games, the theme of the magic circle is referenced in a paragraph in the beginning of Huizinga's still necessary book Homo Ludens.

Presented in the book Rules of Play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), the concept, in that context, was also influenced by the works of Apter and Sniderman, according to Stenros (2012). Moreover, Zimmerman himself, in a text of 2012 in the Gamasutra gaming website, stated that the concept of magic circle was more or less invented by him and Salen for the book, from Huizinga (1938) and Callois (1958)[14], but reformulated in terms of design and semiotics.

Understood, since then, by games scholars as a metaphor, the term "magic circle" has suffered a number of criticisms in recent years.

Stenros (2012), for instance, starting from the ideas of Calleja, understands that Huizinga uses the term not only as a metaphor, but as a key feature of the examples of games that he mentions in Homo Ludens.

Aiming at a more rigorous analysis to deal with this issue, Stenros proposes in the same article a reading of the topic from other different perspectives. For some authors mentioned in the book, the concept is understood from the player's personal mentality (psychological bubble of play), for others the concept stands as a signed social contract that creates a game. In a third approach, the magic circle is understood as the arena based on space, time or product on which play takes place.

We will try to discuss different perspectives well discussed by Stenros (2012), that relate the social perspective with classical authors of Anthropology (Van Gennep 1909, Turner, 1974) and the personal approach of the player with the concept of transitional phenomenon wrought by Winnicott (1975) in 1951 and by a socio-anthropological reflection of Da Matta (2000).

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[14] In this book, at least in its English translation, we did not find the expression *magic circle*.
Caillois, Roger (1958): *Les jeux et les hommes*. English translation (2001): Man, Play and Games. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago.

2. THE MAGIC CIRCLE AS A QUESTIONER OF THE BOUNDARIES OF PLAY

The expression magic circle appears in six different contexts in the Brazilian Portuguese translation of the book Homo Ludens, and this was also found by Finnish author Stenros (2012) in the English version. As the latter points out, only three of the quotes are brought by games scholars when dealing with the theme: as (1) a material or ideally marked place, (2) as a metaphor, or (3) as sacred space (as opposed to the play space). As this is the original source of debate around the theme of game studies, we surveyed the expression in Huizinga's book.

In reviewing the occurrence of the expression, we find that the first time that magic circle appears in the text refers to the places in which the game takes place. However, Huizinga warns that these "places" refer to spaces and times of material or imaginary nature (p. 11). In the second occurrence of the expression, the emphasis is on the problem of "breaking the illusion" as disarranging the game itself[15] (p. 12). In the third occurrence it equates the game with the sacred, when he writes that "from a formal point of view, there is no difference between the delimitation of a space for sacred purposes and the same operation for the purpose of simple game" (p. 18). He also discusses (p. 45), the circular shape of the Mahabharata, stating that "the circle as such, however, is of magical significance". Ahead (p. 59), however, he explains that "no matter if it is square or round, in any way it is always a magic circle, an enclosure of play within which the common different categories of men are temporarily abolished" in clear proximity with ritual activities. Later in the end of the book (p.151-152) he reworks the idea of the magic circle, and from there we can draw his conclusion in the form of "cheap metaphor" - as he calls it – "everything is play". With this statement, in the context of the paragraph we believe that he means that the world really is not serious, because we are limited to understanding it only with reason: we're all playing and being played.

From our brief analysis of the occurrence of the concept in Homo Ludens, we can understand why this has generated, and still generates, many comprehension difficulties. Besides being in a field close to the highly complex game concept, we must agree that Huizinga's text is not easy to read for the uninitiated in Philosophy.

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[15] This may happen owing to the action of what Huizinga (2000, p. 12) called "spoil-sport ".

From now on we will discuss the different meanings that this concept took, focusing on building a theoretical base for the study of digital games.

When Huizinga uses the term magic circle, it is clear that he does not understand it exclusively as a physical boundary, but also as something that can be marked in ideas, as he states that these can be imaginary places, therefore, not delimited materially. As imaginary places, the concept is used as a metaphor.

However, in other passages, the concept of magic circle is not a metaphor, but the name of one of the locations in which the game takes place. This is evident when he writes (p. 18) "the racetrack, the tennis court, the chessboard or the hopscotch do not distinguish themselves formally from the temple or the magic circle." Well, let us not forget that the magic circle, as a spatially confined place, is the site of the rituals in which something mythical and sacred happens.

In our initial reading of Rules of Play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) - if not the first, one of the first books that discuss the magic circle in digital games - this was an issue that seems to have demanded a lot of reflection from the authors. Understanding games (digital or not) as social systems as well as objects that represent social systems (be they real or idealized), in the final chapters they conclude that, depending on the perspective in which the games are perceived, they will be more open or more closed: if the focus is in the rules, tend to be regarded as closed systems, if understood as cultural artifacts, they are open systems. So, for them, the games are nonetheless open and closed systems.

Still, for Salen & Zimmerman, despite the permeability of the magic circle of the game, understood as a cultural object, the game continues to be an artificial object. According to Stenros (2012, p. 2) to the authors of Rules of Play, although the boundaries of the game are fuzzy and permeable, its boundaries are more formal, and "the possible development of play from culture is not relevant." While we consider this criticism to be somewhat too strong, since the authors are dedicated to arguing about the relationship between play and culture, we cannot deny that, as a conclusion, perhaps at the urging of a definitive answer, they say that the games are artificial.

> If games are not separated from the rest of culture, are they still really artificial? Yes. Calling games artificial does not mean they are totally distinct from culture. Regardless of how games can be integrated into the

culture, there will always be some aspect of the operation of a game that relies on its own system, instead of culture, to create meaning for players. (Salen & Zimmerman, 2012, p.102)

Recapturing the central debate on the magic circle, we bring back Stenros (2012), that in his review of the literature on the subject, says that the conceptualization of Salen & Zimmerman has faced strong criticism, mostly because many scholars feel the division between play and ordinary life is ultimately invalid. The author in question bases himself, among others things, in the criticisms by Taylor (2006) from ethnographic exploration of the culture of online games. Other works, including interviews and observations from hard core players in their own homes (Pargman & Jacobsson, 2008), have pointed to the absence of a clear and closed boundary between play and everyday life, according to Stenros.

Although, really, the empirical evidence of the openness of online games to everyday life, may be an important contribution to the debate on the separation between online and offline worlds, we must situate this discussion within the history of philosophical reflections on this issue. Among others, we understand that Huizinga (2000, p. 11) defines magic circle as "temporary worlds within the ordinary world," and makes it clear that it is not "another world." Anyway, Stenros makes us see that Taylor's position, questioning the division between play and life, can be an important element in the discussion on the separation between online and offline life, and it calls for a non-dichotomous model, in our view, that is still too difficult to build.

However, our opinion is that, as digital games become better accepted by contemporary culture in general, disruptive understandings will be replaced by a better understanding of digital games (virtual world) as an extension of the material world (real).

Still Stenros (2012) in his detailed review of the topic, brings the observation by Malaby (2007) on the criticisms by Marinka Copier (2005), saying that, while Huizinga understands the magic circle as a sacred space, Salen & Zimmerman transform it into a chalk circle from a child's play. What seems to bother Copier in the representation of Salen & Zimmerman is the physical demarcation between what is play and non-play. Another researcher, Sybille Lammes (2006 apud Stenros 2012), sees the metaphor of the magic circle as a simplification of play and world.

Some authors, while investigating Stenros (2012), have proposed other terms to speak of the boundaries between play and not-play, between a synthetic or online world and what does not happen in it. Instead of magic circle they suggest: magic knot (Lammes, 2006), puzzle piece (Juul, 2008) and membrane (Castronova, 2005). If the magic circle is the privileged metaphor in game studies, other areas use other metaphors such as: world, frame, screen, zone, environment and net.

In philosophy it is common to find the word "world" (Riezler, 1941 apud Stenros, 2012; Heidegger, 1928; Fink, 1960). While Riezler makes a clear distinction between the game world and the ordinary world, Heidegger and Fink bring them together. Bateson (1955) uses the idea of a "frame" as a kind of mental representation that keeps the player aware of the fact that he is "just playing." Goffman (1961 apud Stenros, 2012) took Bateson's frame metaphor to the social and cultural context, distinguishing what is relevant and what is irrelevant when the player plays and understood everyday life as similar to games. For example, when the player plays, his social status outside the game does not affect the play of the game; inside what matters most are the rules that govern it.

In addition to choosing new concepts, we wonder: as play takes up more space in our everyday lives - as it penetrates the rigid structure of the world of work - and the production of genres of pervasive and online games, would it be better understood as a "mundane" therefore no longer artificial and detached from everyday life? We can go a little further into this discussion, pointing out some reflections to help us out of this mess.

3. THE INTERTWINING OF PLAY AND WORLD

Fink (1960) had already warned us that when we begin to reflect on play, we realize that we know nothing of what we thought we knew so well. Our previous knowledge appears as a "not-knowing", as something fragile and illusory. As the philosopher indicates, realizing this makes us uneasy, and shows an ignorance that causes many people to abandon reflection. For others, the restlessness of "not knowing" triggers the human will for truth. For others still, it triggers the will for philosophy, says Fink.

To him we can speak of two games: the game of the real, which is a phenomenon, and the cosmological game, one that cannot be pointed with a

finger, nor be subject to induction, it can only be deduced, as arising from an abduction (Peirce, 2005). In this argumentative logic, the actual real play would be based on cosmological game, or, as Heidegger (2000) said, games exist because we play and not the opposite.

As a phenomenon, the game is always in the here and now. Thus, we realize the impossibility to access any game with a previous absolute classification. Remember: a game can only be called as such when someone enters it, that is, when a game is played (Gadamer, 1997), an issue that we work from several other philosophers (Petry, 2010). From the perspective of the concept of gameplay, Consalvo (2009) also states that a game cannot be thought without the action playing and goes one step further when she adds the contexts and reasons on which the player's actions occur. Reflecting on what elements are part of the game, when it is being played, also shows us a path to game analysis, an issue that is not discussed in the scope of this article.

 From another perspective of games as a phenomenon, in recent history of digital games we have seen recurring reflection on whether one or another new game title may or may not be considered a game. Although scholars on this theme struggle to define and put limits on what games are, games themselves break the limiting definitions. This is what happened to the game Heavy Rain (Quantic Dreams, 2010) and Dan Pinchbeck's Dear Esther. Initially doubted as digital games, and subject of study of scholars, they were subsequently included in the games category.

Fink (1960), thinking the cosmological game, uses the story of Sophocles, Oedipus the King, to say that man plays and is played. He plays when he knows more than others and, like Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx. He is played when the truth about himself, which he had been looking for, is revealed. The philosopher, much appreciated by Heidegger and Gadamer, says that while playing man no longer remains inside himself. What does he mean with this?

Be them intertwined or adjacent realities, Stenros brings in the teachings of Berger & Luckmann (1966) when they speak of a fundamental reality of everyday life in comparison with the reality of the gaming experience. They remember that religious and aesthetic experience is rich in producing transitions and in articulating the reality of everyday life with the reality of gaming experience. As for the aesthetic experience, we found in Gadamer´s Truth and Method (1997), originally published in 1960, an exquisite discussion,

previously announced by Schiller in Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man in 1795. In both, the always tensioned encounters between the sensuous and reason is highlighted, and this encounter never ceases to happen when we have a [genuine] game.

Well, history is fruitful in showing conceptions of delimited spaces within everyday life, that are capable of transforming social reality. For example, in the field of psychodrama, Jacob L. Moreno (1965 apud Stenros) proposed the concept of surplus reality, a kind of alternative social reality, in which a group can rehearse situations in the life of a participant. It is this dynamic of "role play" - a method used to explore unknown worlds or for the expansion of the self (Cukier, 2002) - the psychosocial basis for the creation of the characters in Role Playing Games.

4. THE MAGIC CIRCLE AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, THE LIMINAL AND THE SUSPENSION OF THE CONTRACT

Having discussed points that conceptually bring the magic circle and play together, as well as having shown how the boundaries between play and non-play are blurred and almost non-existent for some, for others, in this topic we will discuss the magic circle in a social perspective, relating it to rites as studied in cultural anthropology.

Klasbebers (2006 apud Stenros, 2012) while studying the magic circle, understands it as a kind of social contract and the game as a formal artifact of that social contract. In this approach between the magic circle and play, the author says the magic circle relates to the rules and devices that will be triggered when the game starts. For example: before starting any card or board game it is necessary that the players come to an agreement on the rules with which they will play. In digital games, it is part of game design, to have the moments (usually early in the game) for learning the rules and properly using controls or keyboards, an this, in our view, is equivalent to the arrangement of the social contract to start the game.

According to Stenros (2012), Montola understands the magic circle as a metaphor and a ritualistic contract. For us, Montola's action in bringing the relationship of the magic circle with rituals to discussion on digital games was very timely and his realization that the magic circle works as a contract that prohibits players to bring external motivations and personal stories to the

game world and take game events to everyday life, finds resonance in other anthropology authors, as we shall see. In this perspective, the magic circle boundaries would be much more perceivable than some would think.

In order to situate this issue, we will briefly review what rite is and its relationship with play, as well as another key concept for this debate, namely, the concept of liminality.

The relationship between ritual and play appears in classical studies in anthropology, as seen in The Savage Mind by Levi-Strauss (2005). To him, a "rite, is also something that is 'played'" (p. 46). In comparison to a game, it seems like a particular and specific kind of game match. That is, the rite begins by exhibiting asymmetric relations between participants, and goes on by leading everyone to move to the side of the "winners", complete the preconceived script of a particular ritual. For Lévi-Strauss, as for the previous philosophers mentioned above who discuss the games (Petry, 2010a; Petry, 2010b), this is characterized by an openness and "a virtually unlimited number of matches" (p. 46). Although participants begin with equal conditions according to the same rules, in the end, we will have an asymmetric relation between winners and losers. Having in mind this distinction between ritual and play, we can consider that both produce in their participants unique experiences.

Can we say the same about digital games? Do digital games also allow us a virtually unlimited number of matches/experiences? Some would say that they only allow us the experiences programmed by the machine (Liebe & Calleja apud Stenros, 2012), because they take the game as a closed system in itself. Others, when they include the player as part of the (open) game (Aarseth, 2003) say that human experience play makes us perceive them as infinite, even making it the reason why we want to play (Petry, 2010a .) Can we still think digital games as a generic category? Or should we define the field in specific games or genres to answer these questions?

We leave these questions open and bring the term liminality into discussion. It refers us to the name of Arnold Van Gennep and to Victor Turner's work, being the latter primarily responsible for the rescue and popularization of the first modern anthropological studies.

In order to describe the transition from a culturally defined state or condition to another, Van Gennep Arnold (2011)[16], used two groups of terms in three stages. The first group was composed of: separation, margin and reagregation. The second group contained the preliminal, liminal and post-liminal.

The first group, according to Turner (1974) relates to the structural aspects of the passage. Structure, for Turner and the English school of anthropology to which he belonged, means social structure, "a characteristic disposal of mutually dependent specialized institutions and the organization of mutually dependent positions of actors and what they imply"[17].

The second, Van Gennep applied to units of space and time, "in which the behavior and symbolism find themselves momentarily freed from the norms and values that govern public life of the occupants of structural positions" (Turner, 1974, p. 201.)

The preliminal or separation phase covers the removal of the individual or group from a point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions or both. The margin, or "threshold or liminal" phase is the intermediate one and the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous in it. It carries few or no attributes of the past, and still does not enjoy the future state. In the third phase, the passage is completed, returning to lie in a relatively stable state, and because of this, has rights and obligations to their social group.

Individuals or groups in liminal situations "are in the middle and between the positions assigned and ordered by law, by custom, convention and ceremonial" (1974, p. 117). The liminar phase, when ritualized, is expressed by a variety of symbols. Thus, "it is often compared to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness and to an eclipse of the sun or the moon" (p. 117).

In the preliminal stages of the ritual, the simplification or elimination of the social structure in the British sense and even the amplification of the structure in the sense of Levi-Strauss (Turner, 1974, p. 202) are frequent. In other words, social relations simplify themselves while myth and ritual are complex. As Turner (p. 202) says: "if liminality is regarded as a time and a place of retreat from the normal modes of social action, it can be seen as a potential period of examination of the central values and axioms of the culture in which

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[16] The book was published for the first time in 1909 and was originally called *Les Rites de Passage*.
[17] For Lévi-Strauss, this is not about structure. What concerns the regulating logical categories is the relationships they have among them.

it occurs." It is in this perspective that we have found some reports of players, when speaking of the effects of digital games in their lives.

When we refer to subjects, liminality is the passage between 'status' and positions. People in the liminal phase "are not here nor there, they are in an intermediate stage" and are usually represented as possessing nothing.

Turner also uses the term "liminal phenomena" for moments that would be located "in and out of time." One way to better understand this, would be to think of what happens in the rituals of "reversion of status" he studied. The individual who is to rise in status, is humiliated by other subjects in the village (those who will not change their status). His submission situation guards something sacred, because there is recognition (perhaps a sincere thank you) that his future place only exists because others will not leave their places.

Turner points out that liminal situations frequently attribute characteristics of contamination, or danger to those who have not been incorporated into the liminal context. It seems that who cannot be classified, and remains on the border, is considered dangerous by those in charge of maintaining the structure.

This reading agrees with the trend indicated by Brazilian anthropologist Da Matta, of focusing the collective, consisting in "taking the symbolism of the rites of passage as a dramatization of values, axioms, conflicts and social contradictions" (Da Mata, 2000 p. 12). This trend shows the positivity of liminal states for the constitution and arrangement of society itself, a situation that involves questioning the marginality and deviations beyond mere criminal or pathological behavior. In this perspective, the liminal moments, as pointed out by Turner (1974), would have the opportunity to question society itself, since its structure would be exposed "upside down."

Stenros (2012, p. 9-10) states that for many authors, as Harviainen and Lieberoth, Riezler and Bateson, "the border between play and non-play is not just social, but has also a strong psychological element in attention to shared intentionality" which we will discuss now.

5. THE MAGIC CIRCLE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE

Michael Apter (1991 apud Stenros, 2012) works with the idea of psychological bubble, a kind of small and manageable private world that temporarily becomes immune to the outside world. Although it might be a world that can

be shared, the sense that it provides is of an enchanted place, protected and free from threats. Being a psychological state, sometimes a physical representation gives it a frame, such as the outside lines of a soccer field, the computer screen or the controls of a video game console (Murray, 2003). In other situations, words have the strength of acts (Austin, 1990) as in fairy tales with "Once upon a time ..." (Bettelheim, 1980). Moreover, the rules of the game work as idealistic builders of that other reality.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi does not see games as the sole possessors of flux. For him (Stenros, 2012) flow can occur not just fun and games, but also at work. However, it is interesting to note that a feature of Csikszentmihalyi's flow is the centralization of attention in a delimited field of stimuli (focus), characteristic of what occurs within the magic circle.

This detachment from everyday reality - that the game provides – when it produces liminal people, who are in a position to be more "creative in their release of structural controls" (Turner, 1974, p. 5), revealed as potential for the human psyche, as time and space for a new structure.

In this way, one of the interpretative trends of Van Gennep's liminality and rites of passage, highlighted by Da Matta (2000), situates rites as part of the individual process of adaptive change of position within a social system, for example, the passage from childhood to adulthood. Another way to understand it is our need for privacy, of being at a certain distance from intense group activity.

With the experience, both in literature and in computing, Janet Murray (2003), starting from Turner's teachings (1974), says that computers, mice, and joysticks are liminal objects[18], that bring us closer to the concept of liminal magic circle. When Murray takes the liberty of adding the notion of liminal subject and liminal phenomenon, what she calls liminal objects - which act as supports of the input and output of the game world - it may be useful to keep the concept of magic circle to understand the psychological experience of play.

In Hamlet on the Holodeck, Murray also uses the term "transitional objects" taken from Winnicott (1975), to refer to the characters and events as "real" supports of what the player projects from inside. For Winnicott (1975), these objects are transitional because they are situated on the border between external reality and our own minds, offering us the security of an object

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[18] Liminal is a word derived from Latin (*limen*) that means limit or threshold. In this sense computers are for Murray passing objects.

outside ourselves upon which we can project our feelings. So are toys, so are games and video games.

In this perspective, the games, thought of as an object governed by the magic circle - while defining material or imaginary and magical space (prefer this to the sacred) in which differences between participants are abolished - for more than becoming part of everyday life to represent and influence, maintain the status of "non-serious activity"[19], as a necessary freedom in the face of rigid social structures whenever required by civilization.

However, despite the psychological experience of a protective bubble that enables us to live - like in a rite of passage - a transitory moment, the game experience does not pass without consequences to everyday life.

As the experience of the dream, to some extent, invades our life awake, and our life awake is material that has manifestations in our dreams (Freud, 1981), games also permeate these two sides of a same structure. When we think of the designer, games are at the same time, social expression immersed in a more or less universal context and are the expression of a particular mindset. When we think of a player, at the same time that a game expresses a particular idea or proposes an experiment, it is also reorganized from the point of view of the player, who obtains his specific and particular experience with it[20].

At this point, we can already perceive that the psychological formulations, different from the social approaches to the theme, emphasize phenomenological readings. "This helps in explaining why different people have differing interpretations of playful situations – or even as to what counts as playful – as the protective psychological bubble is not uniform and shared, but personal" Stenros writes (2012, p. 11). From here on in this text, the social and the psychological will cross.

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[19] The idea of the game as a non-serious activity appears in Huizinga when he says that "play is diametrically opposed to the seriousness" (p. 8), it provides, often laughter, although he also states that "the contrast between play and seriousness is not decisive nor immutable "(p. 8), because we usually take seriously the games we play. Finally, he says that "there is no room for any distinction between play and seriousness" (p. 161). In the context of the expression in our sentence, the meaning is supported on the first of these perspectives.

[20] The experience of each player towards certain games have shown to be so particular in our research, that it is similar to the experience with regular artwork, despite the consecration of some titles in the gaming market.

6. THE MAGIC CIRCLE AS A SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

When we think games from an empirical point of view, we find the intersection between the personal and the social, as games require rules - although they can be personal – these are generally socially shared. However, for the game to be possible, all participants must accept the rules. That is a personal choice.

"Play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviours which in humans continue undiminished throughout life" says Stenros (2012) on the ideas of Richard Schechner. For the latter, thinking that play is dangerous is absolutely central to understanding it. As in rituals, playing is to create multiple realities, their own boundaries and kingdoms, a certain kind of "creative lie". As in rituals - when the limits of social structure are temporarily disrupted - the games go beyond the limits of everyday life, carrying certain "danger"[21] to the social structure. This would be the reason why the player needs the magic circle: to feel safe and secure in a (mental or physical) region in which what might happen [in the game] will not affect everyday life of society. The fun, the fact of having chosen it voluntarily or of participating of an ephemeral activity, are psychological "masks" or "disguises" necessary to live the experience as fun instead of what, in fact, would keep certain danger. Anthropology has called this process a ritual.

What interests us here is to understand that "during the intermediate 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous". They are in a cultural domain "that has little or almost none of the attributes of the past or the future" (Turner, 1974, p. 116-117). In this sense, the magic circle is a condition of ritual and liminal (phenomenon, object or subject) will function, respectively, as an event in a time or space of a subject in transition.

According to Stenros (2012), the idea that sports and games are safe is deeply rooted in the field of game studies and especially in game design. This idea leads us to think of games as separate from everyday life, and the actions performed in them have little or no consequences beyond the game session. Malaby (2007, p. 110), for example, considered games as artifacts, to emphasize that they are not only produced, but also are socially constructed to be apart (in varying degrees) from everyday life. However, from an empirical point of view, some games test those limits. Not only RPGs, as we already

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[21] The danger in the context of this argument relates to what anthropologist Victor Turner called social anti-structure, a moment in which social structures are suspended and are questioned.

mentioned, but also the so-called pervasive games with their faint and expanded borders (Andrade, 2012).

In a more contemporary anthropological reading, Da Matta (2000) makes a connection between the idea of liminality of cultural anthropology and that of individualism, being the latter forged in the mid-nineteenth century by Tocqueville and developed on reflections about institutions and political, economic and religious aspects of society.

Individualism, according to Da Matta, is an ideological construct that is central to modern Western culture, which turned out to be "designed in other societies and cultures as a universal fact of human experience" (Da Matta, 2000, p. 10). As a result, the individual is a being endowed with independence and autonomy never seen before, to the point that he [the individual] becomes greater that the society to which he belongs.

As Da Mata (2000, p.10) tells us, he realized in his studies about Brazil, especially about Brazilian Carnival, the possibility of relating the liminality with individuality, what led him to undertake a criticism of anthropological literature on the concept of liminality. In his understanding of Turner, unlike ours, he perceives liminality to be negative. We, on the other hand, understand that Turner (1974, p . 5) also perceives in liminality a creative possibility when, for example, he says that "Liminal passages and liminal people (people passing) are not here nor there, and are in an intermediate degree. Such phases and people can be very creative[22] in their release of structural controls, or may be deemed as dangerous from the standpoint of maintaining law and order".

While Da Matta (2000) understands liminals can be considered dangerous, because they break with the prevailing law and order, our reading understads this potential danager as an element that fosters creativity. Backed by Heidegger and Peirce, we defended in our thesis (Petry, 2010a), that risk is an element that is present and vigorous in the generation and production of new knowledge.

In a Nietzschean reading, we would say that one needs Dionysus - the liberation from desire and will – for a new process to come into action, but would also need Apollo - the order of a form - so that another possibility might become present. The desire or impulse leads to the search of disruption from

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[22] Our emphasis.

everyday life, while the transformation of the status quo will require a transgressive organization (as described by Turner when referring to the rituals of reverse status).

For him, the emphasis given by Turner to the anti-structure[23] and rites as a denial of rigid social structure, that is, a kind of reaction against the rigidity of societies, is not what best explains the rites of passage. What would better explain them would be the need, of the collective, of individual and temporary seclusion of its members. Here is how he reached this conclusion.

By studying Brazilian Carnival he realized that it is a festival which at the same time stimulates domestic and hierarchic rank competition, and at the same time adopts bourgeois technologies while reproduces an antibourgeois ideological system, promoting anti-puritanism, in a kind of temporary suspension of social rules. In this festival, "old and routine relationships are loosened and [...] [people live] new identities that enable innovative readings of the world emerge. What helps to gain - as with the sages, anchorites, shamans, witchdoctors and traditional renouncers – a new and differentiated knowledge about society and about the person himself" (Da Matta, 2000, p. 14).

However, its inner construction shows a wide variety of Brazilian cultural manifestations of every kind (food, sexual, religious, racial, bureaucratic, among others) as always in an intermediate or liminal that makes us find in Turner and Van Gennep's liminal not only a temporary state during the time of some ritual, but an experience that can be much more common in our society and in contemporary Western life.

What we understand that Da Matta wants to criticize in Turner and Van Gennep is the motivation of the rite as a manifestation of opposition to the fixity of social structure: maybe society cannot in fact be so rigid, nor the rite only involve contestation, since it aims to restore the previous situation. For him, that would indeed be central to the rite is also described in anthropological observations by Van Gennep to Turner, is the separation of the young rookie the rest of society as a time individualizing.

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[23] Anti-structure, term organized by Turner (1974) as opposed to the structure, refers to the transient states in a society, which was called by Van Gennep (1909) a liminal.

The central thesis of Da Matta is that what truly characterizes the liminal phase of rites of passage is the experience of individuality (experienced as a state of loneliness, lack, suffering and isolation), whose end is not the removal of the person from the group, but the promotion of a renewed encounter with society in a triumphant return to take on new roles in it. Many of the myths studied by anthropologists say that the acquisition of important elements for the tribe was made by characters who have stayed away (voluntarily or not), learned and returned as heroes, acquiring a prominent social position : the so-called "hero's journey" described by Joseph Campbell (2004).

As pointed out by Da Matta in the same text, in the case of tribal characters, what is at stake "is not to build a psychologically and existentially autonomous being, but to shape subjectivities whose conscience cannot do without their mates and masters of initiation" (p. 19). Would this be the motivation in modern Western society that makes us focus on ourselves and praise individual achievement? Again, in initiation rites, the construction of individuality and collectivity reassert each other, and are built by the same set of values. Yet, in our society, individualization is built highlighting a striking interiority and is centered in the self.

> I want to suggest that the distinctive feature of liminality is the segregation of a person (or a class of persons, treated as a social or mystical corporation) of their social ties, releasing them temporarily from their family obligations, lineage, village or clan which transforms the individual temporarily in an "out-of-world" individual, in people without social ties that allow their full social classification and define, thus, their obligations to society (Da Matta, 2000, p. 20) .

In this sense, to play a game, especially single players, and try this "temporary removal", the experience of being "out-of-the-world", can be (in the manner of a liminal experience in ritual) the possibility of the formation of an unusual and distinct social construct , nurtured by the experience of individualization, of being by yourself in the immersive environment of a game. The question is: can this experience of isolation better serve society as a locus of being in the world, as well as to be of service to the search of freedom and independence from others. But under what conditions could the experience of play have this "return to the village?"

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The first question, given the debate initiated by game studies, would be to try to answer if magic circle would be a valid concept for understanding digital games, in which perspective it would still be valid.

Analyzing the prospects of the object under study as an arena (as space, time or product in which the game takes place), as a set of rules established in a social contract and as a psychological experience of the player, as proposed by Stenros (2012), the understanding of magic circle, in our view, is still very useful for understanding the central features of digital games (it is a cultural artifact, it occurs in space and time, it requires shared rules). We include - what is not considered by all but in the phenomenological perspective is indispensable - the Aesthetic experience (Gadamer, 1997) or the production of presence (Gumbrecht, 2010), or immersion (Murray, 2003) as an element that produces the magic circle, the element that "traces the circle" (Lacan, 1998) of the magic circle. Without the player in a given state, the game will not be more than digital software. In this vision of digital games, the "magic" idea of the magic circle disappears and has nothing to say.

From the reflections of Da Matta about Van Gennep and Turner, we agree that -especially in the contemporary world- what best explains the rites is necessity not only of the group, but primarily of the subject (in the psychoanalytic sense of the term), of the individual and temporary seclusion of members. The isolation and solitude open and accentuate an intense inner dialogue, typical of modern individualism, a dialogue glorifying autonomy, privacy, self-development, socio-centrically taken as the dignity of man, in which the ability to remain undivided is a sign of integrity and strength of character.

Thus, it is the experience of being "out-of-the-world" that engenders and characterizes liminal states and the magic circle, not the other way around. In other words, liminality and its properties, as discovered by Turner, have no power in themselves. But it is the approximation of liminal states of individuals that makes novices become marginal. It is, in a word, the individuality that engenders liminality. Basically, the rites of passage deal with transforming individuality in complementarity, isolation in interdependency and autonomy in immersion in the network of relationships that the ordeals, by contrast, establish as a model for the plenitude of social life (Da Matta, 2000, p.23).

Just to recapture: as we already discussed (Turner, 1974, p. 202): "if liminality is considered as a time and a place of retreat from the normal modes of social action, it can be seen potentially as a period of examination of the core values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs", but it can also be seen as a potential time for the "liminal subject" to examine himself.

In modern societies, especially with the increasing complexity in the social division of labor and the increasing specialization of society and culture, what was in tribal society a set of transitory qualities between states became an institutionalized state. With this, liminality proved prone to enter the structure and receive a supplement of roles and structural positions (Turner, 1974), for example, in the institutionalization of adolescence. With this would we, therefore, have lost the characteristic of "life in suspension" of liminality?

Or was it the other way around: with the uncertainties of contemporary society, in which living in transitional states became something permanent, such as the current situation of unemployment among young people (Canclini et al., 2012), do we have just a constant "life in suspension"? And with the expansion of digital game genres that blend online and offline life, in which we are living in the reality of everyday life (for instance, selling avatars in World of Warcraft) and in the reality of the game (conquering items and overcoming challenges), are we constantly in and out of the magic circle?

In our view, these two realities are giving visible signs of merging, to the extent that the acceptance of digital games advance in contemporary society blurs the boundaries between work and leisure, blurs the boundaries between material and immaterial, between the physical body and synthetic one. This means we go into and out of the magic circle more often than we previously did. At every time we experience the game world within the world of life and no longer perceive ourselves living in rigid and static structures, but in constant and fluid transformation (Bauman, 2007), in other words, in liminal states. Likewise, the world of life enters the world of the game as we carry our expectations, hopes and desires of our real lives to the game world (Consalvo, 2009). As Turner wrote in the preface to The Ritual Process:

> The people of the forest, of the desert and tundra react to the same processes as the people of cities, of courts and markets. Revolutions and reforms can be studied by employing the same terminology that is used to study the cultural products of large and stable civilizations.

Despite the attraction that computers and the narratives supported in them have on us, players are rarely completely absorbed by the game, what makes the meta-communication about the game possible, that is, the game is open and allows an expansion out of it, generating meanings and understandings. In this sense, it has reflections in everyday life, although (with the exception of pervasive games and that "play/work" in MMOs), they do not act directly on reality. With this, we mean that it is no longer possible to think digital games as a universal category; it is necessary to study them starting from themselves.

A final debt to our reader: in what does the debate on the concept of magic circle take us further in defining what play is?

If we understand the idea of game as a closed system only in terms of a list of criteria that are necessary for something to be called a game - then the digital game is not what Lévi-Strauss defines as game. That is, the digital game does not have limitless possibilities, but what the programming and design allowed as possible.

If we understand that a game in the wake of the phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer, is only a game when it is played, we need the presence of the human subject (player), to understand a game, since it is he who puts the game in action. Thus, Lévi-Strauss is right, because the experience of the play will reveal its many interpretive possibilities.

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