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### Interventions into the Magic Circle

#### **Social Frameworks and the Magic Circle**

We live in different, often contradictory realities constructed by our minds, which intersect through our social interactions. There is often an inherent process of negotiating the terms of acceptable behaviour in such interactions. Sometimes, it involves revising our own boundaries of what we deem as acceptable and such a process cannot be detached from the context that it takes place within. Such a viewpoint fits within what Erving Goffman describes as a “social framework”. According to Goffman, “...*It provides understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence. It is anything but implacable; it can be coaxed, flattered, affronted and threatened*” (Goffman, 22). Goffman’s understanding of social framework provides a better way to understand some of these boundaries that we negotiate in our interactions. Even Goffman understands that “*all social frameworks involve rules, but differently*” (Goffman, 24). The differences arising largely from how we perceive and interpret the social contexts that we are placed within, during such interactions.

However within games, there is a belief among some designers and scholars that a form of delineation exists between what players think of as “real world” and what they see as a “game”. The term “magic circle” is often used to encapsulate many such beliefs, albeit to different degrees. Originally used in Johan Huizinga’s book, *Homo Ludens*, who described the term as: “*All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either*

*materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground*" (Huizinga, 9). Since then, some like Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen have revised the term as *"To play a game means entering a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins"* (Salen and Zimmerman, 95) to convey a form of negotiation between its players at the start of the game. Others like Pargman and Jakobson have used Goffman's aforementioned "social framework" to suggest a "weak boundary" hypothesis. According to them, *"the players can possibly switch between different "frames" of mind while playing, with only one frame being active at any specific point of time"* (Pargman and Jakobson, 11).

For the purpose of this paper, we shall consider both Huizinga's as well as Pargman and Jakobson's definition of "magic circle" to prove how the latter encapsulates games in public spaces far more efficiently than the former. In doing so, we shall discuss how such games often breach these boundaries – strong or weak -- between the players and the non-participants, where the rules of interaction are never formally negotiated.

### **Situationist International and Breaching the Boundaries**

*Situationist* is a mobile application which takes its name and inspiration from the Situationist International, an avant-garde leftist political movement that gained prominence in France in the 1950s. One of the popular ideologies of the Situationist International (SI) was to disrupt the hegemonic order of the daily routine by organizing frequent interventions. Game designer Jane McGonigal in her book *"Disruptive Play"* quotes the explanation in *"UbiComp in the Urban Frontier"* while explaining the goals of the SI, *"The Situationists sought to reinvent everyday life in urban spaces by constructing situations which disrupted the ordinary*

*and normal in order to jolt people out of their customary ways of thinking and acting. Using dérive (the urban flow of acts and encounters) and détournement (rerouting of events and images), the Situationists developed a number of experimental techniques that stressed the relationship between events, the environment, and its participants and non-participants – our urban community” (McGonigal, 168). Many of such games created by the Situationists do not respect the boundary between play and work, leisure and non-leisure, between “real life” and what we understand as Huizinga’s definition of "magic circle".*

In a similar vein, the mobile application *Situationist* developed by the artist Benrik, wishes to disrupt our modern lives and counter the demonization of strangers. It does so by tasking those who have installed the application on their smartphones with a variety of intervention-esque “situations”, which generally involve interactions with non-participants. These interactions range from simple physical compliments like hugs to more radical large-scale interventions, which might involve gathering a large crowd and raiding the nearest TV station. More than the situations themselves, it is the social contexts that the *Situationist* puts its players into, which makes the interactions particularly interesting. Even for simple tasks, it forces its players to grapple with the rules of socially interacting with non-participants in public spaces without any formal negotiation. In doing so, the *Situationist* fulfils SI’s ideals of disrupting the “normal life” of its players and the non-participants that they interact with, through the situations that it generates. As a result of which, the application also counters the demonization of strangers by making the players breach the social boundaries of non-participants.

### **Blurring Lines between the Real World and the Game**

Many of the interactions originating from the *Situationist* brings out the aspect of play that anthropologist Victor Turner terms as “liminoid” or “*the freeing and transformational, moments of play when the normal roles and rules of a community or society are relaxed*” (Turner, 52). This goes in line with what artist Anne-Marie Schleiner categorizes as, “...*the attempts of early SI activists in adopting this liminoid "subjunctive mood" (when anything can happen) into a more general approach, as a way of doing and being in the everyday, in order to transform material life with ludic actions*” (Schleiner, 149). In her essay, “*Dissolving the Magic Circle of Play: Lessons from Situationist Gaming*”, Schleiner describes the nature of many of these games, “*Situationist games bleed into the city, the workplace, the personal computer, the mobile phone, public and private transportation and communication, and into and inside escapist rule-based game environments themselves*”. (Schleiner, 151) In a similar vein, what the *Situationist* does is that it blurs the boundaries between the “game” (the situations they are tasked with) and the “real world” (the environment in which they have to carry out those situations), by making its players interact with those who are not part of the game. In doing so, the players have to constantly negotiate their own boundaries between what they deem as socially acceptable behaviour in the “real world” when interacting with strangers, and what they’re tasked to do within the “game”. In other words, while the tasks of the *Situationist* may put the players into a “liminal” mood, the players have to switch between different social frames based on how they perceive and interpret the social context. This is akin to the “weak boundary” that Pargman and Jakobson describe which players often pass through while switching between different frames of mind. As Schleiner describes in her essay, “*In transgressing the “magic circle,” a Situationist gaming tactic attempts to give transformative potential not just to play but to “normal” life*” (Schleiner, 150). Through such tasks, the *Situationist* utilizes the “liminoid mood” of the player to make them aware about their own boundaries between themselves and the non-participants they interact with. In doing so, the

*Situationist* doesn't evade the delineations between the "real world" and the "game", so much as merge them altogether.

### **Closed Gardens and Who Defines the Rules**

When looking at a creative application, it is also important to look at the role that authorial control plays in the users' interactions with the rules. While the *Situationist* allows its users to submit any "situation" that they can think of, the range of potential situations is controlled by the moderators. Even though the developers of the *Situationist* may claim that this is purely for the sake of vetting out inappropriate situations, it is still a form of authorial control that creates a level of hierarchy, which goes against the ideology that Benrik and SI stands for. The fact that many of these "situations" are vetted by the developers brings in another aspect of what's acceptable within the game. In addition, Apple banned *Situationist* from its App Store, which exhibits another case of a superior entity controlling what's deemed as acceptable for the masses, based on its own set of standards. While the developers of the *Situationist* thought their moderated tasks were acceptable, Apple clearly thought otherwise and found it in violation with their rules. Both cases of moderation reflect each developers' set of beliefs on what they think is acceptable within a social context in public space and what isn't. Any approved situation that the *Situationist* tasks the player with implies what the developer thinks is acceptable for the player to do. This may sometimes come in direct conflict with what the player think is acceptable for them to do, within a particular social context that they are placed within. Thus, this requires another level of negotiation between what the developers deem as acceptable and consequently formulate as

rules of the “game”, and what the players themselves believe is appropriate to do in the “real world”.

However, since *Situationist* doesn't supervise its players in any way, they have the freedom to improvise the rules and even interpret the success of the “situation” they are tasked with. This follows along closer to the “liminoid” that Turner describes, where once the situation is given out, the rules imposed by developers are relaxed (or removed entirely in this case), and the players can decide how they want to pursue it. They can bend or morph the rules to achieve what the situation demands. For example, they can choose to hug five friends instead of strangers, and still interpret that as succeeding at their assigned “situation”. Thus, the moderation processes of both the *Situationist* and Apple underlines the important role that its developers play in not just determining the rules of the game, but how the social boundaries will be negotiated by their players. But the lack of supervision also grants the players a degree of freedom to bend and make their own rules and metrics of success for each “situation”.

## **Conclusion**

As we saw with the *Situationist*, games in public spaces which involve interactions with non-participants often breach the boundaries between the “real world” and the “game”, pushing its players to negotiate social boundaries on their own. Thus, “frame-switching” within a liminoid encapsulates such games and its interactions with non-participants more capably than a strong boundary interpretation of “magic circle”. Moreover, the moderating role that developers play in formulating the rules of the game can involve another layer of negotiation

with their players', who might bend or morph such rules based on the social context that they are placed within.

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