

UC Irvine

Analog Game Studies

Title

The Magic Circle as Occult Technology

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2rk4d9rb>

Journal

Analog Game Studies, 9(4)

Author

Germaine, Chloé

Publication Date

2022-12-19

DOI

10.5070/V7.43IX66

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



THE MAGIC CIRCLE AS OCCULT TECHNOLOGY

Chloé Germaine

Abstract

This article builds on a broad conception of the magic circle as a way of understanding the interactions, participation and meanings generated by games. However, this article argues that the magic circle is not only a metaphor for understanding the boundaries of play; it is a technology that paradoxically erects and disturbs ontological divisions and a ritual technique that enacts—as do many forms of magic—a relationship between people and things. Drawing on speculative and animist philosophies, the article seeks to shift discussion away from anthropocentric ideas of play and consider, instead, the magic circle as a technology through which mutual participation and mutual immersion between “world” and “player” is revealed.

Keywords

LARP, magic circle, game space, gameplay, dark play, player experience, ritual, magic, horror, Lovecraft, occult technology, philosophy, materialism

The concept of the magic circle in Game Studies, where it is deployed as a metaphor to discuss the boundaries of play, has been at times lauded as indispensable and at others maligned as defunct.¹ Jaakko Stenros’s “defense” of the magic circle expands its metaphorical utility to explain the psychological bubble created during gameplay, the social contracts that frame the action of gameplay and the demarcation of the sites or space of gameplay.² As Eric Zimmerman clarifies, the magic circle is the “idea” that when games are played, new meanings are generated.³ This article builds on the understanding of this broad conception of the magic circle as a way of understanding the interactions, participation and meanings generated by games. However, I argue that the magic circle is not *only* a metaphor for understanding the boundaries of play; it is a technology that paradoxically erects and disturbs ontological divisions and a ritual technique that enacts—as do

¹ See, e.g. Mia Consalvo, “There is No Magic Circle,” *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): 408-417.

² Jaakko Stenros, “In Defence of a Magic Circle,” *Proceedings of a DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference*, 2012, <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/605>.

³ Eric Zimmerman, “Jerked Around by the Magic Circle – Clearing the Air Ten Years Later,” *Game Developer*, 2012, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/jerked-around-by-the-magic-circle---clearing-the-air-ten-years-later>.

many forms of magic—a “reciprocal participation between people and things.”⁴ Drawing on speculative and animist philosophies, I seek to shift discussion away from anthropocentric ideas of play and consider, instead, the magic circle as a technology through which mutual participation and mutual immersion between “world” and “player” is revealed.

In identifying the magic circle as a technology, I evoke the Greek root of the word: *tekhne*, which means an art or a craft. The word also retains some of its modern scientific meaning, suggesting the material, practical and systemic applications of the magic circle. In suggesting that the magic circle, understood in this way, erects and disrupts ontological boundaries, I engage a metaphysical rather than social argument about the ways in which play might disrupt players’ worlds. The anthropologist Victor Turner suggests just such a potential for what he calls the “wheel of play”, arguing that it reveals the possibility of “restructuring of what our culture states to be reality.”⁵ In its appeal to metaphysics, my reading draws on the long history of the magic circle outside of Game Studies, where it is understood as a practice (both real and imagined) of witchcraft, sorcery and ritual, a way to break down barriers between the natural and the supernatural, or to commune with more-than-human entities. Taking seriously the word “magic” in the idea of the magic circle, I follow Chris Gosden’s definition of magic as a philosophy and practice that emphasizes human connections with the universe, that enacts a continuity between human will or action and the world around us, as well as the converse of this idea: “magic allows the universe to enter us.”⁶ Whereas the discussion of the magic circle in Game Studies tends to follow Huizinga’s use of the term as an idealism enacted in the field of human culture, this article considers the magic circle as a material prop in the occult tradition. It is, however, a paradoxical prop. It creates and collapses physical, social and metaphysical borders. In so doing, it undermines human-centered accounts of play as an activity that imposes meaning on the world and instead reveals the ways in which play is responsive to, and emerges from, a world outside, or beyond, the human.

My reading of the magic circle as an occult technology is informed by materialist currents in contemporary philosophy that challenge the privileging of concepts and ideas over material existence, beings and objects.⁷ It finds inspiration in speculative realism, which is a loose designation for a group of thinkers in contemporary philosophy who reject what they identify as a “Kantian” divide between perception and world that has shaped philosophy since the eighteenth century.



Figure 1: A ritual in larp. Photographed by Mark Wynn for the Dark Door Roleplaying Club. Used with permission.

⁴ Christopher Braddock, “Contagious Participation Magic’s Power to Affect,” *Performance Research* 16, no. 4 (2011): 97-108, here, 98.

⁵ Victor Turner, “Body Brain and Culture,” *Zygon* 18, no. 3 (1983): 221-245, here, 234.

⁶ Chris Gosden, *The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present* (Penguin, 2021), 9.

⁷ As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue, the demise of materialism since the 1970s has been an effect of the dominance of ‘radical constructivism’ and a ‘cultural turn’ that neglects material phenomena and processes, matter itself and material existence. See “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Duke University Press, 2010).

Speculative Realism aims to theorize reality as more than the correlate of human thought, to articulate reality-in-itself.⁸ My discussion of 'magic' is indebted, too, to the new animisms that have emerged in contemporary anthropology and philosophy in the past two decades and which overturn a colonialist notion of animism as the "primitive" imputation of spirit to the inanimate world with various relational and more-than-human ontologies.⁹ Though these philosophies are diverse, they are united in their aim of puncturing anthropocentrism and finding ways to think, and be in, a more-than-human world.

The Magic of Larp

Larp is one a mode of play well-suited to thinking with materialist philosophies.¹⁰ This article delineates larp from other gaming activities in terms of its ludic and narrative affordances. Larps are physically enacted roleplaying games that require players to enter a specific location in role as characters in a narrative for anything from a few hours to a few days. During this time, player-characters must respond to dramatic events, ludic puzzles, and narrative crises through an immersive, embodied performance that comprises the game itself. The resulting improvised narrative interacts with a ludic structure—the rules of the game—comprising gameplay mechanics that govern player-character actions. As Laura Mitchell and I contend, although sharing fundamental similarities in operating features, the experience of larp is quite distinct from that of playing tabletop games due to the focus on embodied immersion and the requirement of players to interact with their physical surroundings.¹¹ Unlike in table-top roleplaying games, for example, larp demands continuous engagement in the form of first person, embodied action, without the possibility of retreat into third-person narration. At the same time, the LARPer is always inhabiting both position of "I" and "They" as player-character negotiations occur simultaneously in physically enacted moments. One of the unique affordances of LARP is the attention drawn to the material inscription of the magic circle to manage these complex negotiations. During a pre-game briefing, for example, players will be told—and often shown—the exact location of the boundaries of the game. They may be informed, "this room is in game, but this room is not." Similarly, a door may have a printed notice on it that says, "out of character area." Or, perhaps, the game organisers will say, "the play space goes up to that fence: if you go beyond that you are 'out of character.'" There are other material ways in which a magic circle, in the sense of producing a circumscribed game space, operates in LARP, but key to each is the explicit marking of the boundaries of play.

Larp has already been described as a "technology" deployed by its players to prototype worlds and relationships.¹² Lizzie Stark's discussion of larp as a technology argues that the techniques employed in game design and play allow the representation of unsafe, cumbersome and impossible things, which includes magic spells. Larp offers a "toolbox," says Stark, that allows players to hack and transform identities and social relationships. Stark's focus is on Larp as an "anthropotechnic" that can transform social ontologies. This is also the case in Axiel Cazeneuve's conception of larp as a

⁸ For an overview of speculative realism, see Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (re.press, 2011), 1-18.

⁹ For an introduction to the new animisms, see Graham Harvey, ed., *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Routledge, 2014).

¹⁰ Chloé Germaine Buckley, "Encountering Weird Objects: Lovecraft, LARP, and Speculative Philosophy," in *Diseases of the Head. Essays on the Horrors of Speculative Philosophy*, edited by Matt Rosen (Punctum, 2020), 361-394.

¹¹ Laura Mitchell and Chloé Germaine Buckley, "What is LARP?," *The Manchester Game Studies Network*, 2017, <https://www.manchestergamestudies.org/blog/what-is-larp>.

¹² Lizzie Stark, "LARP as technology," *Technosphere*, November 15, 2016, <https://technosphere-magazine.hkw.de/p/Larp-as-Technology-rEFzwyH3u6VuVo9zCGXz6>.

"magical practice," in which they emphasize players' active role in the transformations larp enacts, and the shift in interpretations of the world that occur as a result.¹³ Following this work by Stark and Cazeneuve, it is tempting to connect the theme of "magic" within larp to the power of games to transform players' social ontologies, world views, and identities and, therefore, to emphasize it as a technology that develops the agency of the human player. The most obvious example of this hails from the *College of Wizardry* larp series, which developed a simple magic spell system that allows any player to attempt to cast any spell for "whatever effect they desired."¹⁴ However, as useful as it is to think about magic, magic circles, and larp as social ontology, the focus on horror-themed games in this paper contributes to a broader argument about the nature of games in its analysis of the magic circle as a material and nonhuman element of play. Horror games provide good examples because they draw on the disruptive aesthetics of occultism to produce the magic circle as a technology that erects and disrupts barriers between the human world of everyday perception and the hidden world of reality-in-itself.

Larp as Dark Play

Despite its seemingly stringent boundary-marking practices, larp is a gaming activity that exemplifies what Richard Schechner calls "dark play."¹⁵ Dark Play has been associated in Game Studies with "problematic," "deviant," or "controversial" themes, and with deceptive forms gameplay that might even be interpreted as abusive towards their players.¹⁶ Dark themes are common in Horror larp, which aim to scare players and induce adrenaline-fueled moments of real terror, which larpers refer to as "bleed."¹⁷ Such games also use horror aesthetics, including fake bodies and body parts, fake blood, and elaborate monster costumes. Horror larp, as it is organized and played in the UK context, differs from fantasy larp in that players tend to inhabit one-off characters for each game, and the expectation is that the game will end in your character's death or irrevocable descent into madness. This is especially the case for horror LARPs inspired by the fiction of 20th-century Weird author, H. P. Lovecraft comprising most of the examples in this article.¹⁸

Horror larp also has deceit built into its very design, exemplifying what Schechner calls the "hidden" agenda of dark play.¹⁹ The advertised setting and plot for a horror larp, such as the reading of a Will, an invitation to a private view of a new exhibition, a family reunion, or the annual meeting of a political party, hide the game organizers' true plot machinations. Whilst players consent to this deception, guessing perhaps that the reading of a will is going to be disrupted by the reappearance of some ancient evil, they enter the game without any knowledge of the events that will unfold nor any forewarning of what situations this will create for their character, nor how it will affect them as a player. There are social pressures in larp not to break character and whilst many systems and groups have well-being policies that allow players to take time out, the reality is that intense and disruptive

¹³ Axiel Cazeneuve, "LARP as Magical Practice: Finding the Power from Within," in *Book of Magic*, edited by Kari Kvittengen Djukastein, Marcus Irgens, Nadja Lipsyc and Lars Kristian Løveng Sunde (Knutepunk, 2021). Also Axiel Cazeneuve, "Immersion as a Method and a Mindset," *Analog Game Studies* 9, no. 2 (May 2022), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2022/05/immersion-as-a-method-and-a-mindset/>.

¹⁴ Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, eds., *College of Wizardry: The Magic of Participation in Harry Potter LARPs* (Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seuta, 2017).

¹⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction, Third Edition* (Routledge, 2012), 119.

¹⁶ Jonas Linderöth and Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Dark Play: The Aesthetics of Controversial Playfulness," in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth, and Ashley ML Brown (Routledge, 2015), 3-14, here, 4-5.

¹⁷ "Bleed," *Nordic Larp Wiki*, 2017, <https://www.nordiclarp.org/wiki/Bleed>.

¹⁸ Lovecraftian Horror larp in the UK has its origins in Lovecraftian table-top role-playing games such as Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*. Most game designers draw on a range of mythos elements, not limiting their sources to Lovecraft's stories. We also endeavor to combat the racist tropes that underpin much of Lovecraft's mythos.

¹⁹ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 119.

encounters will ensue. Indeed, such encounters are the defining characteristic of the mode, which seeks to bring about “ontological unease” often through material disruptions in the game space.²⁰ This suggests that horror larp requires a different understanding of the mode than the one put forward by Cazeneuve, which insists on the players’ determining role in bringing about immersion and interpretive transformation.²¹ Dark play suggests that player “will” to use Cazeneuve’s term is in competition with other material forces and agents.

Horror larp exemplifies dark play in more than just psychological terms, though, conforming to Schechner’s description as a form of play that dissolves frames and boundaries. The boundary between “play” and “not play” becomes very porous in larp, more so than in other types of role-play, because it requires constant frame switching as players negotiate in-game and out-of-game elements simultaneously, in material, psychological, social and spatial respects all at once, and with immediate, embodied consequences. The disruption of frames and boundaries occurs in larp via the technology of the magic circle, which exerts its effects on multiple levels, both in the narrative of the game, and at meta-ludic and meta-narrative levels. The technology of the magic circle intervenes in the collapsing of in- and out-of- game social frames, the blurring of distinctions between player and character (as in instances of bleed), and through phase shifts occurring in the physical spaces created by the game.

Examples discussed in this article also illustrate the use of the motif of the magic circle as an in-game prop and narrative device, which makes apparent the link between forms of occult ritual and dark play. Drawing on Don Handyman’s article, “Play and Ritual: Complementary Frames of Metacommunication,” Schechner suggests that ritual acts and play are images of one another, producing analogous states of cognition and perception in ways that contribute to the production of “ordinary reality.”²² In horror larp, however, the dark occult rituals enacted within the game use the magic circle to puncture and disrupt the domain of ordinary reality. This function of the magic circle recalls Huizinga’s notion of play as a “cosmic happening”—a particularly apposite description for Lovecraft-inspired larp, which incorporates as theme and content a horrifying encounter with the Outside, aiming to produce in players what Lovecraft describes as “cosmic fear.”²³ It also accords with Gosden’s discussion of magic more generally as a mode that “knits us into a dense skein of connections with all other things” and Christopher Braddock’s more “disturbing” description of magic



Figure 2: Black goat in the woods. Photograph by author. Used with permission.

²⁰ Chloé Germaine and Laura Mitchel, “Weird Experience: Transformations of Space/Place in Lovecraftian LARP,” *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, no. 7 (2021): 30-40.

²¹ Cazeneuve, “Immersion.”

²² Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 91.

²³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Angelico Press, 2016), 12, 14; H.P. Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” *The H. P. Lovecraft Archive*, 2009, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx>.

as “contagion,” a mode of participation that allows contamination and consubstantiality between the animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman.²⁴

The Magic Circle in Larp: Technology and Prop

As discussed, reading the magic circle as a technology, evoking the notion of “craft,” emphasizes its material in-game effects. Magic circles are also produced through crafted objects, such as the set of stones painted with an Elder Sign we placed around the border of a property in a horror larp called, *Who Do You Think You Are?*²⁵ With the term “prop,” I follow Kendall Walton and Chris Bateman in the assertion that props are generative: they prescribe specific imaginings, trigger emotions, and generate the fictional world of the game.²⁶ Walton’s “prop-oriented” view counters “content-oriented” approaches in that it proposes that objects have independence over and above their role in a story. Indeed, Walton inverts the view that the prop is a tool through which we understand the story, giving prominence to the generative effects of the prop itself.²⁷ This view of props as agentic accords with the agency and independence granted to material objects in speculative realisms and new animism. Such ideas are beginning to be explored in Game Studies as, for example, in Rafael Bienia’s work, which analyses the various materials of table-top roleplaying games as social actors.²⁸

I also evoke Karen Barad’s theorization of posthuman performativity in my use of the word “prop.”²⁹ For Barad, performativity is not only the coming into being of the human subject via the human body and associated socio-political discourses but comprises the material-discursive interactions of human and nonhuman bodies, with matter itself playing an active role. Magic circles are a good example of this posthuman performativity, appearing in Horror larp as ludic puzzles, dramatic set-pieces, and to effect narrative crises. Examples include plots that hinge upon a magic circle that has been opened, the use of a magic circle to transport something from one reality into another, or moments when a magic circle is invoked by players seeking protection from the monsters that stalk them, and, conversely, instances when a magic circle is enacted by players in order to summon a supernatural agency. The ritual and iterative re-enactment of these magic circles as generative props in game after game, particularly through the use of materials and objects—such as stones, chalk, rope, candles, etc.—draws attention to the material performativity of play, the way in which it congeals from a lively more-than-human world. My reading here expands the senses in which such ritual acts are described as performances in constructivist. An example of this type is Marinka Copier’s discussion of the relationship between role-play and ritual



Figure 3: Larp props by author. Used with permission.

²⁴ Braddock, “Contagious Participation,” 105.

²⁵ “Who Do You Think You Are?” was written and organized by Laura Mitchell and Chloé Germaine Buckley for Disturbing Events in 2009.

²⁶ Kendall L. Walton, “Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1993): 39–57 and Chris Bateman, *Imaginary Games* (Zero Books, 2011), 100–103.

²⁷ Walton, “Metaphor and Prop,” 39.

²⁸ Rafael Bienia, *Roleplaying Materials* (Zauberfeder Verlag, 2016).

²⁹ For an overview see Evelien Geerts, “Performativity,” *New Materialism*, 2016, <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/p/performativity.html>.

performance, which argues that players construct space, identity and meaning through ritual acts.³⁰ Role-play as it emerges in the ritual performance of magic circles is a form of human narrative, of course, but it also gives a voice to objects, elements, and forces that are more than human. As Jeffrey J. Cohen, argues, “humans themselves emerge through material agencies that leave their traces in lives as well as stories, so that narratives are always animated by multifarious vectors and heterogeneous possibilities.”³¹

The materiality of magic circles in horror larp is often visceral compared to other forms of play. In its plots and props, horror LARP literalizes the metaphors about boundaries that abound in constructivist discussions of play. Erving Goffman, for example, whose notion of the “frame” has shaped much discussion of the magic circle, uses the term “membrane” to denote the permeable boundary around play.³² In the larp *The Device of Dr Harrow*, the titular character generated a magic circle throughout the game using a combination of magic and technology, his so-called “device.”³³ This was a large prop built to resemble a steampunk-style device, which included a six-feet high piece of stretched fabric onto which an image was projected. Throughout the game the image changed, becoming larger and clearer as time passed: revealing the interdimensional being the circle was summoning. At the narrative climax, a figure stepped through the screen, rending the cloth and puncturing the barrier between realities. The figure represented a supernatural creature who affected the physical laws of the player characters’ reality, wrecking violence and destruction, making sinister, incomprehensible demands. The players found themselves no longer in a world they controlled, but in the domain of the mythical “King in Yellow.” As a border between worlds, the device’s penetrable membrane embodied Goffman’s idea of “passing through,” enacting a disruptive transformation of the rules of reality.

The idea of the circle as a technology also suggests its function in both esoteric and scientific terms. Horror larp draws on the many instances in horror fiction where a magic circle is produced by a piece of technical equipment, blurring the distinction between natural and supernatural orders of reality and suggesting the imbrication of science and magic that Gosden notes is a characteristic of human culture throughout history.³⁴ These occult technologies are the site of multiple agencies interacting, including humans and more-than-human entities and objects, from which the effects of the magic circle are produced. A striking in-game example from the larp *X Marks the Spot* involved players using a mixture of household objects (including a microwave), bodily fluids (simulated by a fake blood prop), and a mixture of herbs with occult properties to create a hand-held device that generated the energy required to banish an eldritch inter-dimensional creature from the players’ reality.³⁵ The bricolage prop functioned as a technological magic circle opening and closing boundaries between worlds. As a ludic technology, the prop marked the end of the LARP because its successful deployment during the final action sequence prompted the game organizers to call “Time out!”

³⁰ Marinka Copier, “Connecting Worlds. Fantasy Role-Playing Games, Ritual Acts and the Magic Circle,” *Proceedings of the 2005 DiGRA International Conference*, 2005, <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/169>.

³¹ Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Stone* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 3.

³² Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 65-66.

³³ *The Device of Dr Harrow* was written and organized by Tom Martin for the Dark Door roleplaying club in 2012. The source material was taken from Robert E. Howard’s “King in Yellow” stories, first published in 1895.

³⁴ Gosden, *The History of Magic*, 18.

³⁵ *X Marks the Spot* was written and organized by Eleanor Black and Simon Childs in 2017.

Doubled and Dissolving Magic Circles

This example of a prop that functioned as a technological-esoteric in-game device but also as a ludic object, signaling the end of play, makes apparent the slippages between in- and out- of game frames enacted in larp. In this sense, the larp magic circle is a curiously doubled and doubling technology, marking boundaries of play in time and space, but also collapsing boundaries between play and not-play. The magic stones in *Who Do You Think You Are?* provide another interesting case. Within the narrative of the game, the stones had been activated to provide a circle of protection by a non-player-character, but because our player-characters had been infected by a monstrous parasite, they were not able to leave. Beyond the narrative, the magic circle had further material effects: the material objects were clues that conveyed the narrative of the larp to the players, forming a ludic puzzle; in terms of the hidden, or “dark,” agenda of the game organizers, the stones produced feelings of entrapment as player characters began to panic about being unable to escape their fate; the stones also marked the edges of the play space in a practical sense and gave players a narrative reason for their players to remain within its confines. As a ludic technology, the boundary marker stones merged player and character frames in their provision of this narrative justification for not simply running away and leaving the game. Sensible characters would obviously wish to run away from the events unfolding in game, or else rush to the nearest source of aid, but the player knows the game has spatial limits. Larp designers want to create an immersive sense of the game as an open world while keeping players within the marked boundary of play and to do so involves producing moments where in- and out-of-character frames merge, as in the case of the boundary stones. These formed a circle in a circle, drawing players’ attention to the boundary marking practices that allow larp to function.

As discussed, posthuman performances of the magic circle in larp includes marking out a discrete space with clear spatial boundaries and temporal limits. Nonetheless, once play begins such boundaries dissolve in the construction of an expansive shared narrative with cosmic dimensions. Almost always, the characters encounter a threat “from beyond” that will engulf or consume the game world, a world that extends far beyond the fence post or boundary stones marking the edges of the play space. Likewise, though characters may be trapped within a house, either through material or supernatural means, they often experience a terrifying vision of the cosmos or catch a glimpse of an eons-dead world, of vistas of incalculable dimensions, reminiscent of descriptions from Lovecraftian fiction. These “visions” are typically narrated by game organizers and such in-game “set-pieces” function to suggest the “cosmic” scale of the game. The initially bounded play space (a rather mundane performance of the magic circle) transforms into what speculative philosopher Eugene Thacker describes as a “magic site.”³⁶ Where the magic circle is largely controlled by human agencies, albeit through interaction with nonhuman others and objects, the magic site refuses such human governance. Through the course of player immersion in the cosmic narrative of horror larp, the demarcations of a magic circle with spatial and temporal limits begin to dissolve and the whole world is placed under threat. The game becomes, through immersion in both the magic *of* the game and the magic *in* the game, which Braddock suggests is characterized by “contagion”, a magic site rather than circle, its effects spilling beyond the borders marked at the beginning of play.

³⁶ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol 1* (Zero Books, 2011), 82.



Figure 4: Image of author in ritual garb at *Lords and Ladies*, a LARP by Chloé Germaine and Jonathan Buckley. Used with permission.

Metaphysical Magic Circles: Accessing the “Outside”

The occult themes of horror larp emphasize the paradoxical effects of the magic circle as a technology that both erects and dissolves borders. The use of the magic circle as an in-game prop is influenced by a plethora of occult literature as well as by the aesthetics and practices of occultism and esotericism that periodically emerge into popular culture and horror literature, such as in the occult revival of the 1960s and 1970s. The occult horror aesthetic emphasizes the ritualistic aspect of the magic circle in game studies, its function of bringing about a sacred, or higher order mode of being-in-the-world. Horror larp thus dramatizes play as an “act apart” not only in a cultural and social sense, but in the sense of pertaining to revealing another mode of being in the world, one attuned to its realities underlying cultural and social construction and, even, human perception. Speculative philosophers refer to this reality as the “Outside.” For example, Reza Negarestani argues that the “radical outside” is delineated not its “exterior functionality of activity.”³⁷ On the one hand, this outside is impossible to possess for the human subject. On the other, it can be discerned through its “affect space or openness.” Larp is one activity that discloses this exterior “affect space,” albeit only in brief moments of boundary collapse, bleed and hyper-immersion. Elsewhere, Quentin Meillassoux’s describes the outside as reality “existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign

³⁷ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (re.press, 2008), 243.

territory – of being entirely elsewhere.”³⁸ Meillassoux’s description owes something to the colonialist imaginary of science fiction, here, gesturing to the discovery of a zone hitherto outside human experience. Translated into horror fiction, the trope of discovery modulates as the intrepid explorer is more likely to experience annihilation of the self than the exhilaration of encountering a new world. The dark play of horror larp uses player-character death, psychological disintegration and monsters that cannot be killed to emphasize this annihilation.

The fiction that has inspired many speculative realist thinkers is the same as that which inspires designers of horror larp. Weird, “cosmic” and Lovecraftian horror fiction suggests an ontology in which the phenomenal realm of human perception gives way to the murky noumena of eldritch beings and unplumbed space, but such a separation of noumena and phenomena simplifies the paradoxical maneuver that comprises an encounter with the “outside.” The magic circles enacted within horror LARP dramatize this paradoxical maneuver. As Eugene Thacker suggests, horror fiction has long been engaged in confronting the paradoxical proposition that the world is, in reality, a “world-in-itself” beyond the access of human thought.³⁹ Such fiction confronts the human-centric concept of the “world-for-us” with a nebulous “world-without-us,” a simultaneously “impersonal and horrific” zone between the “for-us” and the “in-itself.” This horrific “world-without-us” discloses that the “great outdoors” is not out there, but already close around us. It is just that we fail to recognize this fact. Thacker suggests that the trope of the magic circle in horror fiction reveals something of this hidden yet omnipresent world-without-us. Analyzing examples from William Hope Hodgson’s Carnacki stories and Lovecraft’s “From Beyond,” Thacker argues that the magic circle, traditionally held to serve as a protective barrier for the human occultist, becomes a portal to “another dimension,” focusing and intensifying the passage between seemingly separate realms.⁴⁰ As discussed above, this is the function Gosden ascribes to magic more generally in human culture, noting that it ‘immerses us’ in the world.⁴¹ Horror larp dramatizes these moments of magical immersion represented in fiction, so that when players chant the correct magic incantation, or turn on the machine inscribed with runes, the boundary they have created in that moment simultaneously dissolves. This is signaled, perhaps, when the game organizers call “time freeze” so they can set up an unexpected dramatic set piece in response to the rite. Sometimes they simply unleash the monsters waiting behind the door. Magic circles are not safe spaces in horror larp, then, not even when players have constructed them as a protective barrier. They always generate a crisis, a turn of events, or an opening, that discloses the cosmic dimension of the game’s narrative, and the non-separation of seemingly distinct realities. Larp thus enacts situations in which ‘the magic circle, whose function was to govern the boundary between [the supernatural and the natural], begins to spiral out of control.’⁴²

What these speculative accounts of the “outside” do not disclose is the idea that the outside is already within the human subject, located in the strangeness of the bodily self, which is home to countless nonhuman others. Furthermore, the interpenetration of inside and outside is a fact of material reality at the microphysical level, but is also continually enacted in bodily, psychological and other forms of interactions discussed by new materialists. A magic circle enacted in the larp *The Black Goat* dramatized just such an interpenetration of outside/inside.⁴³ Characters were alerted to a ritual that was being enacted in their local area to summon a cosmic entity. The players countered

³⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (Bloomsbury, 2008), 7.

³⁹ Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, 5, 6.

⁴⁰ Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, 62.

⁴¹ Gosden, *The History of Magic*, 13.

⁴² Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, 74.

⁴³ *The Black Goat* was written and organized by Jenny Wilkinson and Lee Wilkinson for The Dark Door in 2017.

this threat by forming a circle within the circle, enacting a ritual of their own to re-stabilize reality. The ritual players concocted for this purpose combined elements of folk superstition with real-world mathematics and physics and culminated with them forming a circle in the pitch-black woods. We held hands and chanted over and over: "Molecules remain in your natural state and vibrate with consistency and constancy." Our curious reference to vibrating microphysical particles aimed to give verbal force to the effect we hoped our ritual would have, but it also countered the visual metaphors that normally govern interactions between inside and outside. Outside is what exists beyond the boundary formed by the eye, whilst inside is intimate and enclosed. In this case, however, the outside resided in the very intimate micro-physical makeup of the characters' bodies and our dramatic magic circle was an attempt to stabilize forces of interpenetration and transformation that threatened to completely dissolve the boundaries of the self.

The in-game incidents featuring magic circles I have discussed in this section enact a microcosm of the "act apart" that is larp itself. In its paradoxical and material performances of the magic circle, larp is a form of play that encounters the world rather than constructs it anew or prototypes a new reality. Although larp organizers and players impose meanings on already existing spaces and objects in the course of play, the magic circles that congeal through play require the interactive agency of nonhuman objects, space and landscape features. Larp magic circles are posthuman performances that demand players' responsiveness to the complex interplay of material and discursive processes that make the world. Larp magic circles are not merely metaphors to describe social interactions and psychological states, then, nor do they impose human meaning on a passive, mutable background.

Immaterialism? The Future of Larp's Magic Circle

Although I have emphasized the material and embodied practices of magic circles in larp, many larp designers have been finding ways to create games online. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed larp culture and practices and, with it, the technology of the magic circle. In some senses this technological development has been very literal, as larps moved from country houses rented for the weekend to online platforms such as Discord and Zoom. The *Séance* larp in 2020 made effective use of such online technology, inviting players to partake in a Victorian-era séance to conjure the spirits of the dead.⁴⁴ Each individual player forming the circle around the "table" sat in their own darkened rooms around the country, making use of a digital backdrop to hide their bookshelves, stacks of boardgames, cats and coffee cups. As in traditional larp, a double magic circle was enacted, with set-up involving players being put into Zoom "waiting rooms" for an etiquette and rules briefing. The inner circle was then produced from a mixture of digital sound effects, the chanting voices of the players and the visual affordances of Zoom, which suggested—at least—that we were all sitting in front of the same damask wallpaper. Despite the distance involved with larping online, game organizers went out of their way to induce moments of bleed and dark play, and players were subject to sneaky jump scares set up by their housemates or partners at the behest of the game organizers. One player even experienced books flying off the shelves of her living room. These experimental techniques push the boundaries of the ways in which larp paradoxically enforces and then puts pressure on spatial borders, since the player's living room was exactly that which the pre-game preparation was supposed to erase. The séance thus momentarily fused digital and real-world spaces and managed to produce a third space that was neither of these but, really, a dark Victorian

⁴⁴ *The Séance* was designed and organized by David Garwood and others for Gothic LRP in 2020.

parlor in which spirits were being conjured. As larp continues to develop post-pandemic, I predict its magic circle technologies will become ever more inventive and unsettling.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Laura Mitchell, Paul Wake and Jack Warren for comments on drafts of this article.



Chloé Germaine is co-director of the Manchester Metropolitan Game Centre, UK, and teaches game making and game studies. Her research explores analogue, tabletop and material games, especially board and roleplaying games. Current projects investigate the affordances of games in a time of climate crisis. She is co-editor of *Material Game Studies: A Philosophy of Analogue Play* (Bloomsbury), and has written several games, including 'Mother's Love' (for *Cthulhu Hack*), 'The Miasma of Miswell Hill' (for *The Between*), and 'The Bureau of Irregularities' (for the *Codex*).