Chapter 6
Disrupting the Magic Circle: The Impact of Negative Social Gaming Behaviours

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ABSTRACT

Studies on game-based learning often focus on positive motivations, behaviours, and outcomes. However, negative social behaviours are common in play. Game play is important for moral learning since players learn to comply with rules, fairness, and accountability. Games allow, and sometimes encourage, negative behaviours, which release players' obligations to behave in accepted ways and create new social situations where players learn to control behaviours as well as tolerate such behaviours in others. Sometimes this process fails and the magic circle of play is transgressed. Negative social behaviours, such as cheating, spoil-sporting, or sabotage, threaten to “break the magic circle” by disrupting the boundary between “game world” and “real world.” Even if game rules encourage such behaviours, they can undermine the accepted social norms in both contexts. Educational game designers, researchers, and practitioners must appreciate and understand negative social behaviours and attitudes and the processes they can initiate.

INTRODUCTION

The potential of games to support learning is recognized by teachers and academics alike (e.g. Felicia, 2009; Poulsen & Køber, 2011). There are examples of their use in formal education from early years (Sung, Chang, & Lee, 2008), through primary and secondary school settings (Huizenga, Admiraal, Akkerman, & Dam, 2009; Miller & Robertson, 2010; Tuzun et al., 2009), to further and higher education (Connolly, Stansfield, & Hainey, 2007; Piatt, 2009). Playing games can also support informal learning, such as the development of social skills (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005) or creating interest in the game topics themselves (Turkay & Adinolf, 2012).

While the benefits of games for learning are implicitly related to socially acceptable or desirable behaviours in the literature, the implications of negative social motivations and behaviours, both for learning and game play, receive less attention.
The game-based learning literature focuses on positive social game-playing behaviours, such as community-building and sharing, but commonly ignores negative ones, such as cheating, sabotaging other players, or spoil-sporting. However, these negative behaviours are commonplace, some being legitimate within the game structure (for example, sabotaging other players in the game Ludo, or lying in Poker), while others take place outside of the ‘magic circle’ of the game (for example, throwing the Chess board in the air or stealing money from the Monopoly bank). There is a growing body of research relating to violent motivations and the impacts of aggressive gaming (see Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Gentile & Gentile, 2007, for example) but this is out of the scope of this chapter because the focus here is on negative social behaviours that impact on other players and threaten to disrupt the very basis of the game world. The player of a violent video game may be learning behaviours that are negative within the real world, but they are entirely consistent within the game world.

The idea of a ‘magic circle’ (Huizinga, 1955; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) that separates the real world from the game, is a key aspect of game play. It allows players to enter an ‘other world’ with different rules and codes of practice, moral and ethical structures, and ways of behaving. This magic circle of play is important for learning with games because it provides a safe space in which mistake-making is not only accepted, but is customary. However, negative social behaviours can disrupt the circle, undermining the learning benefits of the game; they threaten the social dynamics that support the game because they cross or move the boundary of the magic circle. In this chapter, the authors will argue that the circle can be viewed as a ‘fuzzy band’, not quite ‘of the game’ and yet not quite ‘of the real world’, in which play norms and rules are not explicitly discussed or agreed.

In the discourse of game studies, these negative social aspects of game-playing, and their effects on the magic circle of play, are often neglected. This is particularly true in the field of games and learning, where it is crucially important, and it is vital that these behaviours are understood and managed. In this chapter, the authors will argue that an understanding of negative gaming motivations and behaviours is crucial to appreciate the potential drawbacks of games for learning, and address the impact of these behaviours. In this chapter, the authors explore these issues in depth, starting with a discussion of games in relation to rule frames and morals, and a consideration of motivations for game-playing. Different types of negative behaviours will be presented and explored in relation to the magic circle of play. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the implications of the preceding discussions on the field of games and learning.

**MORALS AND GAMES**

To look at social negativity in games means to shift the primary focus from individual immersion to social framing, because negativity needs to be understood as an interaction between a player who shows a certain behaviour, and a second player who constructs it as negative because of its effect on him or her. As such, disruption can only be judged against a certain social norm that defines ‘proper’ conduct, otherwise there would not be negativity. Accordingly, although game theorists and philosophers disagree on an exact definition for games (see, for example Crawford, 1984; Prensky, 2007; Suits, 1978; Wittgenstein, 1958), one feature that is remarkably common throughout the definitions is the importance of rules. Hence games are a powerful vehicle for moral and social learning, as this is all about rules at its heart, and the interaction of people within rules. This can be traced back to animals: for example, when young dogs or cats play-fight they change the frame of reference, i.e. the set of rules, from ‘this is real’ to ‘this is play’ by indicating this to their peers.