Stepping out of the Magic Circle: Regulation of Play/Life Boundary in MMO-Mediated Romantic Relationship

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Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs) are spaces of socialization and relationship formation and maintenance. This qualitative study seeks to understand how MMO players delineate the boundary between play and life when it comes to their game-originated romance. A typology of players was devised to understand players’ constructions of boundaries, and players’ strategies against perceived stigma when moving their relationship offline were discussed. The findings call for a shift towards a more player-centric and pluralist conceptualization of the magic circle of play.

Key words: MMO, romantic relationship, online games, mediated interpersonal relationship, magic circle, stigma

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Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs) have evolved into places for people to meet up, find romantic partners and maintain relationships. Communication is one of the cornerstones of romantic relationships and MMOs are one of the latest incarnations of media used to initiate them. One such MMO, MapleStory South-East Asia (MapleSEA), a popular youth-centric MMO with a strong emphasis on relationship development, is an appropriate research site for our study on mediated romantic relationships.

Using the theoretical framework of the magic circle devised by Huizinga (1950) and further expanded by Castronova (2005), this study explores the perspectives of players regarding their romantic relationships initiated in MMOs. Castronova (2005) defined the magic circle of play as a world with self-defined rules, which still allows players to bring real life “behavioral assumptions and attitudes” (p. 147) into the play world. MMOs combine the play features of video games and communicative features similar to those of social network sites (SNS) and dating sites. MMOs allow real life interpersonal interactions to permeate the play world. Consequently, MMOs have blurred the play/life boundary,
transforming themselves from a site of pure play to a site for romantic relationship formation and maintenance. At present, there is a dearth of scholarly research on romantic relationships in MMOs with the exception of Li, Jackson, & Trees’ (2008) qualitative study on romantic relationships in a Chinese MMO called The Legend of Mir.

**Literature Review**

**MMO as the Magic Circle**

MMO play has been construed as “play between worlds” – “playing back, and forth, across the boundaries of the game world, and the “real” or nonliteral game space” (Taylor, 2006, p. 17). Castronova defined the distinction between play and life in MMOs as a “porous membrane,” such that “people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying behavioural assumptions and attitudes with them” (Castronova, 2005, p. 147). Nieuwdorp (2005) in her analysis of the boundary between game and non-game in pervasive games opted for Ervin Goffman’s metaphor of the screen which “not only selects but also transforms what is passed through it” (Goffman, 1961, p. 33). The line between play and life is ambiguous.

Limiting oneself to a structuralist view of the original concept of the magic circle may undermine the importance of players’ meaning-making process. As Consalvo (2005, p. 10) pointed out, “For many players, playing games is, in some measure, a playing with rules and their boundaries,” thus urging us to construct a theoretical framework that can transcend the “place apart” and take into account the rule and boundary negotiation process of the player.

Pargman and Jakobsson (2006) proposed a weak-boundary hypothesis that incorporated Goffman’s (1974) concept of “frames” and Fine’s (1983) idea of “frames-within-frames.” Pargman and Jakobsson suggested that game playing led us to create various roles and subframes which, according to Fine (1983) can be a primary framework, game framework, and character framework. The primary framework is “the common-sense understandings that people have of the real world” which is the basis of what we do in our daily life (Fine, 1983, p. 186). The game framework refers to the conventions of the game. The character framework refers to the conventions of the game. This framework is quite similar to Huizinga’s conceptualization of the magic circle. Last of the three frameworks is the character framework where players “are not manipulating their characters (game framework) but in which they are their characters” (Fine, 1983, p. 186). Copier (2009, p. 169) proposed that these roles and frames “can simultaneously be related to what we consider to be real and imaginary, game and non-game, online and offline. For various situations, we construct different roles and cognitive frames.” In Pargman and Jakobsson’s (2006) opinion, switching between these roles and subframes is something that people do all the time.

Given the above, the world inside the magic circle may be construed differently by players creating meaning out of the context itself (Consalvo, 2007; Malaby, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2006; Taylor, 2006). These special meanings that players attach to virtual worlds take effect when the game starts, forming a new reality as defined by the rules of the game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Hence, we can only make better sense of the magic circle and the segregation between play and life from the players’ perspectives. This has a significant impact on players’ in-game relationships; because if they do not believe that experiences in-game can be real, then their relationships may be merely a fantasy (Anderson, 2005). In this study, we would like to explore further how players construct the magic circle:

RQ1: How do MMO players construe the play/life boundary in the course of their game-originated romantic relationship?
Stepping out of the magic circle: Facing the stigmatizing discourse

The magic circle of MMOs is not as distinct as Huizinga (1950) imagined. Castronova (2005, p. 147) described the *almost-magic circle* of these synthetic worlds as a “porous membrane,” protecting the inner world with its set of rules, and yet at the same time, allowing players to cross the barrier, bringing their real life assumptions to the game. Moving in and out of the “boundary or frame that defines the game in time and space” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), is in other words, the stepping in and out of the magic circle.

Individuals are highly motivated to make important aspects of their online identity a “social reality” (Gollwitzer, 1986) and achieved this by migrating their in-game identities into real life. However, once players bring their game relationships out of the magic circle, they face real life constraints that did not exist inside the game, specifically the stigmatizing discourse by friends and family. This discourse partly originates from the negative media portrayal of MMOs as a disruptive addiction or a cause of children’s aggression (Bowcott, October 2009; World of Warcraft “more addictive than cocaine,” February 2009; Choe, May 2010). Historically, video games have frequently been portrayed in the media as having a negative social impact. Two waves of dystopian frames have first occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. The first wave primarily entailed four key frames: video games leading to displacement of more constructive activities such as reading, contributing to health risks, leading to drug use and theft, while the second wave involved the frames regarding fears of video games’ effect on values, attitudes, and behavior including addiction, inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and increased violence among game players (Williams, 2003).

Online romance has generally not been portrayed in a positive light either, with concerns for eroding importance of relationships and marriage, or worries about safety and authenticity (Love at first byte, December 2010). Online romance as a sociocultural practice that rides on a new medium, the internet, could not escape the pattern of vilification and redemption that was observed for video games (Williams, 2003). Wartella and Reeves (1983, 1985) posited that negative media portrayals of and research agenda for new media technologies tended to follow a three-wave pattern: fear that the new medium would displace current constructive activities, followed by fear of health effects and then by fear of the effect on values, attitudes and behaviors. In the case of online romance, the first-wave dystopian frame positions it as eroding traditional courtship behaviors and promoting a shift in values as it is argued that in online dating the value of partners has been reduced to commodities to be browsed and chosen.

Nevertheless, we do not expect these negative views surrounding online romance and MMOs to surface within the game itself. Only after stepping out of the magic circle the impact of such opinions from family and friends starts to set in. Indeed, multiple strands of evidence lend support to the significant influence of approval from a couple’s social network on a couple’s relationship quality (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), commitment (Etcheverry, Le, & Charania, 2008; Lehmiller, & Agnew, 2006), and dissolution (Lehmiller, & Agnew, 2007; Le, Dove, Agnew, et al., 2010).

Wildermuth’s (2004) study is among the very few of its kind to take a closer look at the stigmatizing discourse on computer-mediated romantic relationships from the standpoint of the stigmatized. She identified the four sources of stigmatizing discourse perceived by the stigmatized: family, friends, the media, and scholarly research, following Katz’s (1981) conditions for the existence of a societal stigma.

Currently, there are no studies investigating the perceived stigma players feel when moving their in-game romance offline. Thus, we hope to explore the stigmatizing discourse that MMO players have to manage when bringing their in-game relationships out of the magic circle into real life with the following research questions:
RQ2: What kinds of stigmatizing discourse do MMO players with game-originated romantic relationships need to manage when migrating them offline?

RQ3: How do MMO players manage such stigmatizing discourse?

Method

Twenty-six semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted via text-based Microsoft Windows Live Messenger (MSN) with qualifying MapleStory players. Typed textual exchanges between interviewers and interviewees were recorded with interviewees’ permission. No additional audio or visual channel was used during the interviews. Interviews were on average 160 minutes in duration and 4029 words in length.

MapleSEA as the Research Site: Mario Meets MySpace

MapleStory, first developed by Wizet, a South Korean company in 2003, is currently available in 10 localized versions around the world (MapleStory, 2009). Three years after its launch, MapleStory had 14 million subscribers (Nexon, 2006), and its largest demographic was 17- and 18-year-olds (Funk, 2008). Sheloman Byrd, a MapleStory product coordinator of Nexon America, stated that “MapleStory is all about socializing and hanging [out] with your friends” (Funk, 2008).

Many community structures inherent in MapleStory, such as guilds, guild alliances, family systems, and buddy lists, support formation of ties between players. Players can also practice engagement and marriage rituals, which are unique to this MMO, as a way to formalize and announce the “romantic tie” between their game characters to the “public” in MapleStory. Its integrated chat system also allows chat between players in different group configurations, e.g. in parties or guilds, or through whispers which are private messages that only the intended players can receive.

This emphasis on informal socializing makes MapleStory a suitable research site for this study as higher incidence of romantic relationships can be expected in this game than other MMOs. Players recruited for this study were MapleSEA players residing in Singapore. The small territorial size of Singapore increases the chance of players meeting up in real life, thus turning the game into a suitable natural laboratory to observe permeability of the magic circle.

Sampling

MapleStory players between 15 and 35 years of age, who reside in Singapore, with at least one romantic relationship initiated in MapleSEA and who last played the game in the past month, were recruited via personal contacts, MapleSEA forums, Facebook groups and mass e-mails to undergraduates at a large public university in Singapore. Those interested were asked to complete an online screening questionnaire to register for the study. Participants were selected according to age, offline encounter (have met/not met offline) and outcome of relationship (currently ongoing/terminated) by maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Interviews were then conducted with 26 selected participants, inclusive of three pilot interviews.

Participants

Participants were between 16 and 26 years old \( (M = 20.4) \), with the predominant proportion (70%) of interviewees within the 20–26 age segment. 17 of the participants were male and 9 were female. Majority of the participants were Singaporeans, with the exception of two Indonesians and a Malaysian. The predominant ethnic group in the sample was Chinese (24 participants), and the remaining two participants were Malays.
Procedures
An interview protocol was developed and used in instant-messenger-based (IM), semistructured interviews. IM was chosen as the interview medium as it can encourage self-disclosure (Lüders, 2007) especially when online romance has been subject to stigma (Wildermuth, 2004). While the aforementioned advantage of IM as an interview medium is beneficial to our focus of enquiry, this method also comes with certain drawbacks (loss of nonverbal cues). However, the lack of such cues can be partially compensated for by using certain expressions (e.g. LOL for “laughing out loud” or ROFL for “rolling on the floor laughing”) and emoticons (Davis et al., 2004). Taking into account the ambiguity and narrow bandwidth of text-based IM interviewing, the researchers were mindful and incorporated as much probing whenever ambiguity arose or when there was a change in the interviewee’s emotional state expressed through nonverbal expressions or emoticons. The researchers also set the norm in each interview by using emoticons and nonverbal expressions whenever possible from the start so as to subtly seek reciprocity from the interviewees. All participants were e-mailed an informed consent form prior to the interview, and hard copies were obtained in person when participants collected their remuneration.

Analysis
The interview transcripts were analyzed following the approach put forth by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) in the tradition of phenomenology. The analytical process consists of four steps: creating memos, identifying the emergent themes and subthemes, grouping of cases and relevant quotations with regards to the subthemes, and reconciliation between the research team members of any differences in the subthemes, groupings, or identification of quotes.

Results
A three-category typology of players emerged based on their differentiated construals of the play/life boundary permeability in the course of their game-originated romantic relationships: splitters, migrators and blenders. The following sections detail the perspectives from each of these three groups of players.

Splitter: Virtually my lover, truly my best friend
For splitters, the magic circle cannot be crossed and it marks a boundary between what counts as play and what is construed as life. Respondent P31 (male, 21, relationship ongoing, has not met partner offline) mentioned that he and his partner are “quite comfortable being with each other in virtual life.” Such words signify the players’ strong segregation of the life lived in the world of paladins and mages from that lived in real blood and flesh, suggesting that the in-game life stands separate as coherent world on its own in the mind of these gamers.

The split between play and life is also manifested in the players’ persona switch. Respondent P99 (female, 20, relationship ongoing, has not met partner offline) shifted from the role of a girlfriend to that of a soul mate when the relationship with her partner moved outside the game. She claimed that together they formed a serious romantic couple in the game, but outside the game, they were merely best friends and did not meet up due to their age difference.

We tell each other about our crush in schools and stuff. Hahaha. We were more like soul mates now that I say it . . . We were best friends in real life but couple in game . . . now he’s my real life di (godbrother) but a Maple dear still =).
The demarcation between play and life also led to such unwanted outcomes as shattered dreams. Respondent P20 (female, 21, relationship terminated, met partner offline) shared her disappointment in her in-game boyfriend when they met up:

I will think that my boyfriend is an ideal boyfriend because he can always have another personality online, but when I got to know my boyfriend through offline social activity, I got to know about his real self and also his interactions with other people.

The bearing of the play/life split on the dynamics of romantic relationships probably is most distinct in respondent P12’s (female, 18, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) remark, “You can’t really love someone you haven’t met.” She saw a division between the life she lives in-game and off-game. This division thus enabled her to commit emotional infidelity, dating another guy in the game while also remaining romantically involved with her offline boyfriend.

Respondent P94 (female, 20, relationship terminated, met partner offline) accentuated the boundary between life and play when it is clear to her that “love” exists in two different versions: the “real love” and the “virtual love.” These two versions of “love” are not equivalent and cannot be confused, with the latter being projected onto his MapleStory character, but not onto the flesh-and-blood boyfriend per se as she thought:

He is still more or less a stranger... I could ‘love’ his maple character but I probably won’t know him well enough to really mean it [saying ‘I love you’]... so I try not to say it... I think I take ‘love’ to be more... a real life term than a virtual term.

**Migrator: Virtual is the new real**

For migrators, the magic circle splitting the game world from life is more porous and can be permeated thus allowing one to step out of the circle and translate the game-mediated relationship into reality.

This permeability of the play/life boundary is aptly shown in respondent P9’s (male, 16, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) account of his future plans “to ‘bring’ this [in-game] relationship to real life.” This signifies a conscious intention to step out of the magic circle and turn play into life. Additionally, respondent P11 (male, 19, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) described online relationship as a “good stepping stone” to offline relationship, as it “opens more topics for discussion.”

On the other hand, in-game interactions also depend on real life scripts for cues on how to show love and intimacy to each other. According to respondent P9, his partner claimed that the ‘F3’ facial expression symbolizes the act of kissing and hence they would ‘F3’ each other sometimes in the game. Interestingly, although ‘F3’ facial expression was originally meant by the game producer to be a ‘shriek’ expression, respondent P9 and his partner have reinterpreted it to be symbol of a virtual kiss. Some respondents also mentioned that they would address their partners as “dear,” “darling,” “dar,” or “honey,” similar to what they think real life couples would do.

This dependence on real life can also take the form of shared narratives. Respondent P5 (male, 26, relationship terminated, met partner offline) coined the term “running around” to encompass a variety of in-game activities shared by him and his girlfriend such as “exploring the Maple world together, travelling from map to map to search for bosses to fight.” This concept was also agreed upon by many interviewees. The line between play and life is blurred when the emotions elicited in a life narrative can be recreated in a play narrative. Exploring the MapleStory world and following the narratives required of certain characters can be compared to deepening ties offline while strolling streets amidst the city hustle and bustle. The spaces may be different but the underlying emotional aspect remains the same.
Emotion, hence, serves as a conduit linking up both worlds, allowing the magic circle to open up. Jealousy experienced in these MapleStory romantic relationships proves this point. Even as in-game relationships are to be maintained purely in-game, emotions devoted to this relationship is still subjected to offline influences. For instance, Respondent P9’s partner became jealous when she read about his previous offline crush in his blog and “thought that [he] still had feelings for that girl and [they] ended up having some conflicts.”

However, it must be noted that once the magic circle is crossed, it does not necessarily mean one cannot re-enter. In fact, reversals can and do happen. In such instances, the porosity of the membrane between play and life serves as a switch for players to regulate their own romantic affairs. In the case of respondent P5, they had had a satisfying online romantic relationship initiated in MapleStory and had successfully migrated it offline. However, later on in the relationship, parental objections as well as emotional struggles over the partner’s dishonesty drove the couple apart as they felt they could not overcome such obstacles and hence had better “strive[d] to be friends”:

> We say we are not officially together any longer as a couple. However we are still battling the emotions and desire to be close to each other. The current status is we’re married in Maple... two of our characters. We are actively still calling each other terms of endearment in Maple and operating as a couple. However in real life, we are striving to be just friends now.

By re-erecting the wall between worlds, players like respondent P5 are separating the real-life relationship that was falling apart from the in-game one that was still intact and hence clinging on to connections that were not possible in real life anymore, using symbolic representations such as in-game marriages and role-playing.

**Blender: It is just another platform**

The third group of players, the blenders, believed that the boundary between game and life does not exist. The circle is never constructed and play and life are blended into one reality. To them, the game world merely serves as another ‘platform for meeting-up’ as respondent P101 (male, 21, terminated relationship, met offline) remarked:

> To me it [having a girlfriend via a computer game vs. knowing one through offline social activities] is exactly the same. From my personal experience, both are just media for us to get to know each other. Everything else developed exactly the same way and our feelings towards each other were just as genuine and as true as a normal couple.

Evidently, in contrast to respondents P94 or P99 who perceived the game world as virtual and the offline world as real, rendering love in each realm independent of each other, respondent P101’s perception of both worlds as a single reality has saved the relationship with his girlfriend from a differentiated treatment due to the real/virtual demarcation. Respondent 101 said, “I treat her like how I treat my real life friend... ’coz she was always my real life friend. I never see her as merely some random online-game friend...” For him, his in-game girlfriend was fully entitled to the emotional treatment that any of his offline friends would deserve while respondent P94 maintained that the proclaimed love was projected onto the virtual representation of the partner in the form of the MapleStory character, but not the flesh-and-blood person per se.
Stepping out of the Magic Circle

It won’t last: Perceived stigma against game-originated romantic relationships

When the magic circle is porous, players blur the play/life boundary. Hence, they can step out of it and turn their partners at play into partners in life. However, once out of the circle and play becomes life, players have to manage the stigmatizing discourse associated with their game-originated romantic relationships.

Almost all of the interviewees had perceived some form of stigma attached to online romantic relationships. The negative perceptions identified include online relationships not being serious (respondents P2, P31, P11, P28, P20, and P97); based on impulse (respondents P9 and P75); unsustainable and distant (respondent P75); not lasting (respondents P11, P12, and P94); dangerous, deceptive, and impersonal (respondent P2 and P5); shallow (respondent P5); for desperate people (respondent P20); and as a cheap way to get to know girls (respondent P11).

Where does the stigma come from?

Personal experiences and tales of online romance experienced by friends shape how respondents make sense of the stigmatizing discourse on online romantic relationships. Respondents who have experienced unhappy episodes of online romance tend to cast such relationships in a negative light especially when corroborated with similar narratives from their friends. For instance, respondent P75 (female, 20, relationship terminated, has not met partner offline) broke up with her in-game boyfriend due to difficulties in maintaining and committing to the relationship. Based on her experiences, she felt that online relationships are “sort of unsustainable and distant.” Her unsuccessful attempt at online romance was further confirmed by her friend who “manage[d] to have real life relationships with people they meet online, but unfortunately these relationships seemed short-lived too.”

Respondents also perceived stigma from within their family, mainly their parents, due to a generational gap. Respondent P78 (male, 22, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) pointed out that for people born in the 1970s or earlier, they are not used to technology and hence may develop negative perception on online relationships. He compared these people to those born in the 1980s, who would be “50-50,” while “for the 1990s onwards, the online gaming thing hits them as early as 10 years old, [hence] they would have a greater acceptance of the issue.” Respondent P97 pointed out that he thinks his family would not “want [him] to find some random people [he] never met before to be in a relationship,” and he attributes this to “[them coming] from [a] generation different from [his]” (Respondent P97, 18, male, have met partner offline, relationship currently ongoing in-game and offline). Nevertheless, it seemed that this problem of generation gap can still be overcome, as respondent P99 shared that she “manage to persuade [her] family that [the] people [she] met online are safe.”

Mass media also play a part in building up stigma towards online romance. Respondents P75 and P99 believed concerns about online relationships portrayed in negative light by the media as possible sources of stigma. In particular, respondent P75 pointed out that “there have been many media reports about such failed attempts in the past,” and hence online relationships are not highly encouraged. Respondent P99 shared this view about “news always say[ing] people meet guys who cheat on their age,” highlighting these reports as the roots of the problem.
Fighting the Monster Outside the Game: Managing the Stigmatizing Discourse

Mainstreaming: We’re just like pen pals
Respondents resist the stigmatizing discourse by drawing similarities between their relationship and existing forms of mediated romantic relationships such as pen pal exchanges thus in an act of mainstreaming.

Some respondents likened online relationships to long distance and pen pal relationships (respondent P64), blind dates (respondent P11 and P38), and speed dates or matchmaking sessions (respondent P11). Respondent P64 (male, 20, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) felt that online relationship is “just one of the many type of relationships” and that “there isn’t much difference compared to the other relationships,” while respondent P38 (male, 21, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) finds online relationships similar to blind dates in terms of how “[partners] never meet each other before, and don’t know each other, and slowly take time [to] meet up.” Respondent P92 (female, 21, relationship ongoing, has not met partner) asked, “If you don’t feel a stigma towards pen pal why would you feel so towards online friend?”

The similarities also mirror negative aspects. Respondent P38 thinks that it is possible for offline couples to be cheated in offline relationships, for instance for money, and hence these negative impressions should not apply solely for online relationships. In the same manner, the stigma of false identity and safety in online relationships, in respondent P5’s opinion, also exist in pen pal exchanges. Hence, he feels that if the older generation could think of pen pal exchanges without any stigma, they should be able to do so with online relationships as well.

Concealment: A different story to tell
Another strategy gamers use to deal with the stigmatizing discourse is concealment. They construct a different version of their tale to tell their family and friends. “I have to be wary of how I tell my parents about how I met him. That’s why I stuck to the story of meeting him through a mutual friend,” said respondent P27 (female, 21, relationship ongoing, met partner offline). However, for respondent P27 or respondent P3, such concealment holds pragmatic functions such as avoiding parents’ disapproval. Yet, they themselves felt no shame regarding their online relationship. As respondent P3 (male, 20, relationship ongoing, met partner offline) said, “Sometimes I would tell my friends how I really met my girlfriend. To my surprise, they find it really, really amazing.”

However, fear of others’ derision of their love story as unreal also made some couples lie about how they met up. “Sometimes we don’t tell people that we know each other online because they will look at us differently and do not treat us as a real couple,” remarked respondent P12 (female, 18, relationship ongoing, met partner offline). Fear of ridicule also makes it hard for them to integrate their partner into their current offline social circle.

Discussion

From Huizinga to Castronova and Beyond: The Magic Circle as Player-Constructed and Pluralist
A typology of players emerged from our in-depth interviews: splitters, migrators, and blenders. In particular, splitters’ experiences closely mirror Huizinga’s (1950) notion of the magic circle: an isolated
world of nonserious play with rules. These players tell us of how they can invest their love and emotions in a romantic relationship with their partners in the game, while at the same time only sustaining a friendship in the real world. One reason that this magic circle is kept enclosed in their relationship is the existence of real life constraints such as age differences. Another reason is found to be that of incompatibility between partners when meeting up in real life. However, the barriers to crossing the magic circle are exogenous. Whether the players themselves have the motivation to permeate the membrane between the game and real life might also play an important role in explaining why the circle is closed. This is also an area that Huizinga (1950) did not explore when conceptualizing the notion of the magic circle: the participants’ role in conceiving it.

Unlike splitters, the boundary between play and life is permeable for migrators, as they described how their relationships are brought into real life by meeting their partners face-to-face. This rendering of the play/life distinction is more in line with Castronova’s (2005) concept of the \textit{almost-magic circle}. This concept, describes players bringing with them their “behavioral assumptions and attitudes” when they move in and out of these worlds, despite play being confined to a space defined by rules separate from the real world (Castronova, 2005). Such players migrated their relationships out of the magic circle due to one reason: seeking other aspects of the real world that the game world is unable to duplicate or re-represent, such as the experience of strolling down the beach, feeling the sea breeze or meeting the family.

Even so, our findings seem to indicate that the step out of the magic circle is a more complex phenomenon than simply bringing their romantic relationship offline. Variations in experiences, such as meeting up offline as friends before becoming a couple versus becoming a couple in-game before meeting up offline, signify the complexities involved in each individual’s construction and meaning-making of the magic circle. Hence, it may be more useful to argue that there may be more than one magic circle construed by a single individual with one for each aspect of their relational experience in the game world: emotions, romance, friendship, etc., and each may take on varying levels of permeability for different players. Hartmann (1991) mentioned in his research that “most people, of course, fall between these extremes [completely thin or completely thick boundaries], or have a mixture of thick and thin boundaries.” Thus, it is reasonable to argue that each different individual might have different “thickness” or “thinness” regarding the different magic circles that he or she constructs for various aspects of his or her in-game relational experience. Understanding this perspective is important as it moves us away from the structuralist view of the game world, to a more player-centric study of how the magic circle is construed.

Some players we interviewed have also shared a new way of thinking about the magic circle. These players think of the world within the game and outside of the game as the same world, in other words, there is no magic circle. This seems to suggest that everything that takes place in the game world is a part of their construction of reality. If so, perhaps it is possible to argue that to these players, there is no such thing as play. For them, exchanging loving messages via avatar interactions is no less real than talking to their boyfriend or girlfriend face-to-face or over the phone. Hence, for this group of players, the game is just like any other of the media used throughout the history for initiating and maintaining romance rather than a constructed world with different rules or a different plane of reality.

\textbf{Stigma as Rooted in Fear Towards Novel Use of Technology}

The findings that MMOs can be regarded as the latest incarnation of the media used to initiate and maintain romantic relationships suggests that the stigma enacted towards MMO-mediated romance possibly be rooted in attitudes toward technological advances. Gumpert and Cathcart (1986) proposed a four-stage model to understand the evolution of general interest in new forms of media for mass
communication which are similar to other technological advances. Going through the stages, the new medium will gain increasing acceptance from the public. This perspective helps explain why a generation gap leads to the stigmatization of MMO-mediated romance. While the young players in this study may very well have already been in the third stage in their views towards MMOs as a medium for romantic relationship initiation and maintenance, “assuming that the particular medium has always been present and there is no choice whether to use it or not” (Gumpert & Cathcart, 1986), their parents might still linger behind at the second stage and are filled with concerns about the negative effects.

However, it is also useful to argue that Gumpert and Cathcart’s (1986) perspective should be extended as it originally only elaborates on evolution of public attitudes towards the new medium itself but not towards the various uses of the same medium. For the players, the act of stepping out of or erasing the magic circle has transformed the original use of the game as a medium for leisure into a medium used for romantic relationships. The parents of these players construct the magic circle in a much more rigid manner that distinguishes play from life. For them, games are for playing and play is not life. Hence, stigma stems from a lack of agreement on the construction of the magic circle permeability by different generations.

**Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research**

**Turning to the player’s magic circle**

The typology of players differentiated by their construction of the play/life boundary indicates that they are active participants in creating and appraising the play experience and determining how it should be transformed. This has important implications for game designers, who cannot expect to predetermine the boundaries of play/life, but rather to leave them to be defined by the users.

Informal socializing is increasingly an important motivator for players to keep playing a game, which has a bearing on subscription rates and profits. The majority of players mentioned that the friendship and love they found in the game were the reasons for their loyalty to the game, and hence such socializing experiences should be supported by the game environment. The game designers need to understand how different players construct their magic circles and cater to them accordingly. For example, the splitters distinguish sharply between play and life and thus their intimate relationships are mediated heavily by the symbolic representations in the game itself. Thus, creating more game features to enable the in-game couple experiences such as couple quests and to allow them to express their love symbolically will cater best to this group.

In contrast, the migrators are more flexible with the play/life boundary and hence will be more attracted to features that link up their play experience with life such as offline couple events can be organized to allow in-game couples to have a safe ground for their first offline encounter. Finally, for blenders, who think the game is just another medium for meeting up, their socializing experiences will be best facilitated with game features that mirror social networking sites or dating sites e.g., a “hero’s file” for each player acting as an equivalent of a profile page with information about interests and hobbies.

**Bridging the generation gap**

The considerable proportion of young migrators and blenders found in this study suggests a trend in which young people move from traditional sites of courtship to the more novel ones. However, this move is often stigmatized, particularly by their parents, forcing some of them to adopt a concealment strategy. This may make the couples more vulnerable, and can negatively affect their chances of building a stable relationship. Hence, efforts should be made to bridge the generation gap and let parents understand the potential social benefits of online games in addition to simply alerting them to negative consequences, such as aggression and addiction.
Limitations and future research

Our analysis of the magic circle comes solely from the perspectives of the players themselves. In future, interviews should also be conducted with the family and friends of MMO players to gain further insights into how stigma towards game-originated romantic relationships is formed and communicated and why it seems resistant to change. In addition, this study was focused solely on MapleStory; future studies can explore cross-site comparisons to see if the reported typology of players holds across different MMOs.

Another limitation of our study is the lack of cultural variation; it is clear that cultural differences are likely to be important moderating factors in the formation of stigmatizing discourse towards game-originated romance and in young people manage that discourse. Finally, as mentioned before, Singapore is a small nation state, which means that MapleSEA players from Singapore have more opportunities to meet each another face-to-face. Given that, one can expect to find many players stepping out of the magic circle and moving their game-originated relationships to real life. However, in larger countries like Japan or the United States, meeting other players offline is more difficult, and hence we expect that the dynamics of online-offline relationships may also be different.

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