

NEVER JUST A GAME: HOW THE INTERPLAY OF VIDEO GAMES AND THE “REAL”
WORLD COMPLICATES BOUNDARIES IN RUSHDIE’S *LUKA AND THE FIRE OF LIFE*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interplay of games and reality as depicted in Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life*. The convergence of several realities is a recurrent trope in Rushdie's novels. The trope often explores falsely maintained boundaries between the two realities. Rushdie juxtaposes a video game world and the real world in order to explore the benefits of play and the dangers of realizing the close link between the activities of a world of play (the World of Magic) and a world of seriousness (Alifbay). After the establishing the dependence the two world share, I argue that in *Luka* Rushdie seems to propose that reconciling the world of play and the world of seriousness requires a paradoxical commitment to serious play and playful seriousness. This commitment cultivates imagination, which Luka accomplishes during his adventure to save his father.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie has written eleven novels, three essay collections, and a short story collection. In many of these works, Rushdie explores the boundaries defining what is authentic. Authenticity is genuineness of representation, but in determining genuineness a problem occurs in that representations tend to defy fixation so an interaction happens to tentatively establish a representation. Rushdie notes the interplay happens in writing when he asserts about novels in “Is Nothing Sacred?,” “the reader and writer merge, through the medium of the text, to become a collective being that both writes as it reads and reads as it writes, and creates, jointly, that unique work, ‘their’ novel” (*Imaginary Homelands*, 426). In this assertion, a frequent motif that Rushdie sometimes uses to explore authenticity appears as characters that exist in states of flux. The result of this persistent fluctuation is liminal states, where two or more states of being exist at an interface yet never completely converge. In *Midnight’s Children* (1981), identity in post-imperial India is a major theme. From the parallel universe quest of Flapping Eagle to ascend Calf Mountain in *Grimus* (1975) that culminates in a consummation of two worlds to the Mirror and the Mughals of *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), Rushdie has sought to reconcile seemingly opposite realities of characters and demonstrate that most realities are liminal states. In *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) Rushdie continues to explore the reconciliation of realities with Luka, a boy struggling at the threshold of adulthood and to prevail against time and unspeakable death. In this paper, I intend to explore how the interplay of the video game world, the World of Magic which is an imaginary land that various myths and legends occupy, and the “real” world, the fictional Alifbay which is Luka’s reality, that indicates the activities associated with game play have great consequence for Luka as a player, and that the reason to reconcile the

two worlds is to provide a unified space yet maintain an important concept related to gaming, the magic circle.

The magic circle is a concept that Johan Huizinga describes as a boundary that partitions space and experience. Each person partitions space and experience by his or her preference. Consequently, the possibility exists for the space that one person reserves for play to be a space that another person does not want reserved for play. This indeterminate, subject feature of the magic circle means games and the space for them requires defining by the participants. In *Luka*, the magic circle divides Alifbay and the World of Magic, so only special characters, such as Luka, can cross from the one reality to the other. This separation by the magic circle permits the cultivation of the imagination as an organic entity. In opposition to the cultivation of imagination is disposability, which suggests ideas are mechanistic and replaced with ease and, possibly, interchangeable. Though games might seem to endorse an ethos of disposability due to their seeming inconsequence in the real world, games serve an important purpose in encouraging cultivation of imagination.

Luka represents Rushdie's second novel intended to appeal to children. *Luka* like its predecessor *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) is categorized as children's literature. He offered his reasoning for this audience in a November 2010 interview with Katty Kay for NPR: "It was a great children's book writer [...] who said, you don't write down to children, you write up. [C]hildren are very, very demanding readers. [C]hildren don't finish books they don't like." However, the reviews of *Luka* often dismiss the novel for being a children's book. For example, Frank Cottrell Boyce notes the only redeeming feature of the novel is the Dr. Seuss-like wordplay, summarizing that "[the brilliant wordplay] means the book has a surface kiddiness while its content seems to be aimed at older readers." The noted interplay of "kiddiness" and

mature themes is central illustrating the liminal state in which Luka finds himself, between childhood and adulthood. Reviews like Boyce's posit a pressing issue because the novel encounters similar publishing circumstances to *Haroun*. Arguably, if *Haroun* lost critical attention due to its publication after *The Satanic Verses*, there is a distinct possibility that *Luka* will lose critical attention being published after *The Enchantress of Florence* and before Rushdie's soon to be published memoir, *Joseph Anton* (2012), about his life during the *fatwa*.¹ While successive works do not necessarily supplant or diminish earlier works, the possibilities exist that critics might limit their attention to Luka or restrict their analysis to genre study approaches as Ved Mitra Shukla concludes in his essay "Salman Rushdie as a Children's Writer". The dearth of scholarship on *Luka*, due in part to its recent publication, means the critical reception of the novel is unresolved, and with the burgeoning scholarly interest in incorporating game and gaming theory into humanities research, *Luka* provides a critical lens to understand the conglomeration of realities discussed in gaming theory.

Luka is set in Alifbay several years after *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Alifbay remains a land of words (the alphabet), providing a frame for Rushdie's wordplay with Luka as a player in the fictional "real" world. Many of the main characters of *Haroun* are present: Rashid the Shah of Blah, his wife Soraya, and Haroun (Luka's older brother). Luka was a surprise for parents Rashid and Soraya. The surprise begins the inversion of roles as the aging parents "seemed to get younger" (10) as Luka grows older. The generational shift is also apparent in entertainment choice, as Luka is an avid video game player and "had joined imaginary communities in cyberspace, electro-clubs in which he adopted [identities]" (14). Luka's willingness to join communities and assume identities foreshadows his ability to transgress

¹ On February 14, 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa on Rushdie. The motivation for the fatwa was the perceived blasphemy of *The Satanic Verses*.

boundaries, such as the magic circle that separates his real world and the World of Magic, much like Haroun.

Luka, also like his brother, enjoys listening to his father recount tales. The pair happened upon the Great Rings of Fire parade, which Rashid condemns for mistreating its creatures, and Luka in a fit of anger unleashes a curse upon the group. With the curse, Luka effectively presses play to enter the game world as “[Luka’s] words expanded until they filled the sky, and perhaps even found their way to the invisible home of the Fates, who, according to some people, rule the world” (6). The effect indicates that Luka possesses more than the ability to transgress boundaries of the real and imagined but also the power to invoke responses in other worlds, the consequences of which extend into his world. Furthermore, the effectiveness signals that Luka as a player will need to learn how to manage his power while at play, for “there was no Exit button” (20). The most important outcome of Luka’s curse is that the dangerous “spoil-sports who called themselves the Aalim, or Learned Ones” (11) send an avatar, Nobodaddy, to defeat their nemesis, Rashid, who wants to disseminate Aalim’s knowledge of stories. The consequence is that Rashid slips into his liminal state between sleep and death as Nobodaddy begins to siphon off Rashid’s essence. However, after Nobodaddy claims Rashid, sending him into a deep slumber, Luka notices the avatar, a perfectly resemblance to Rashid, and follows him into the World of Magic, the game world. After crossing the threshold from his world into the game world, Luka must undertake a series of quests in order to reclaim the Fire of Life for his father. Failure to complete the game means the unspeakable for Rashid – death.

With the help of his companions, Bear the dog and Dog the bear, Luka ventures deep into the World of Magic to confront the deities and mythical beings from all points of time and an array of cultures. The World of Magic thus symbolizes the primary motif: the many mythologies

and cultures of humanity converging into this game world, confusing boundaries in which Luka learns how to reconcile the story knowledge gained from his father and the skills of an adept left-handed game player capable of shifting between realities thereby cultivating his imagination as a storyteller through play, both semiotic and gaming.

The remainder of this paper examines the purpose of the magic circle that separates the game world and Luka's world, and differentiates this convergence from similar convergences in Rushdie's novels. *Luka* reveals the importance of "play" in fostering an imagination and posits that "games", that is forms of extended play, have a central role in providing a space for meaningful play. Chapter 2 reviews literature in the two areas of interest, scholarship on the novels by Rushdie and gaming theory. The purpose of the review is to define the key concepts from gaming theory and literary theory necessary to analyze the novel. My review notes the recurrent trope of blurring boundaries identified and examined in the scholarship on Rushdie's novels. The scholarship examines the different ways Rushdie has examined play in other novels, usually examining the use of mythological allusions or polysemy (multiple meanings of a word or phrase). The existing gap in this scholarship about boundary transgression is examining the role of games, as a type of play, has in permitting the transgression to occur. In particular, the idea of play and how games permit different types of play to happen is of interest in order to understand the depiction of a video game in a novel and Luka as a player in that game. Chapter 3 provides the analysis of *Luka*. I identify these ideas in the text and analyze them through the lens of gaming theory. The primary outcome is investigating the role of the game in helping Luka cope with his own liminality. Finally, Chapter 4 suggests the implications of the reality blending in *Luka* and notes distinctions from previous novels by Rushdie. Possible areas for further research are also offered, especially for novels that use video games as a major trope.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Salman Rushdie is an unlikely video game theorist, but his long-standing interest in alternate realities, play, and magic can offer video game scholars a unique perspective on the relationship of narrative, storytelling, and games. Rushdie is known for his use of hybridity, the comingling of distinct features of identity and existence. A prevalent form of hybridity in Rushdie's novels is the post-colonial identity of Indians and Pakistanis. Arguably, the reason Rushdie maintains such an interest in indeterminate features is his attachment to Kashmir, his birthplace and a contested area between India and Pakistan. As Daniel Roberts notes about *Haroun*, the reason for setting the novel in Kahani (stories) with many allusions to known geographical features is "Rushdie's long-standing interest in Kashmir" (123). Rushdie's fascination and infatuation with his homeland has been noted since *Grimus*. Mujeebuddin Syed notes most readers mistakenly limit the usage of K in the novel only to "Kafkaesque resonances" and thus forget that the mythological world of K "sets up associations with Kashmir" (139). Kashmir becomes a mythological realm, for it exists in an indeterminate condition: real yet imagined in Rushdie's novelistic mind. In a similar manner, the distinction between a play world of imagination and the real world has existed throughout Rushdie's writing career. Still, few scholars have examined how the play world and the real world reconcile in the works. For this paper, the scholarship on Rushdie by Judith Leggatt, Rachel Falconer, RS Krishnan, and Meenakshi Mukherjee frame the conversation on how Rushdie portrays the mixture of character's realities and experiences. The concept of freeplay as Jacques Derrida uses it addresses the wordplay of Rushdie, and the scholarship of Johan Huizinga, Brian Sutton-Smith, Janet Murray, Jesper Juul, Ian Bogost, and James Paul Gee provide the necessary critical framing for gaming theory.

Judith Leggatt provides excellent insight into Rushdie's use of science fiction in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* as a means to balance the seriousness of exploring identity and the playfulness of creating music. For Leggatt, the entire purpose of an alternate world is to expand upon the real world. Leggatt invests most of her argument in finding a positive form of science fiction in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* to contrast with the negative portrayals of scientists in many other works by Rushdie. She asserts that "the seemingly mystical elements that characterize postcolonial magic realism stem not from an anachronistic belief in the supernatural, but rather from an openness to realities that Western science has not yet developed models to understand" (108). Leggatt positions Ormus against his own guiding double, Rai. The positioning suggests "[the characters] do not understand the technology of the newcomers [to their other world], which both renders them powerless to prevent the otherworld's encroachment into their dimension, and makes the otherworld seem magical" (Leggatt 112). Leggatt sets this as the standard for postcolonial understanding: each party fails to understand the other's world and therefore deems their opposite to be "magical" and therefore incomprehensible. Rai attempts to guide Ormus, who experiences terrible visions of the otherworld at unexpected times. The purpose of this guidance, according to Leggatt, is to "point to the importance of living in one's own world, and not ascribing too much power to another" (123). Similarly, Luka must attempt to live in his world as well, and arguably the reason he experiences difficulty with articulating himself early in the novel is his admiration of his father. A balance is necessary between Luka defining his own world and appropriating portions of his father's world.

In contrast to Leggatt's attempt to balance between the realities of Ormus and Rai, Rachel Falconer identifies destruction in the form of viewquakes in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* that result in the destruction of one world with the emergence of another world. Falconer

explores the interaction of realities trope at length, summarizing that “an aerial survey of Rushdie’s fictional *cosmoi* would, I think, lead us to conclude that human life is something strung out between two destructive energies: bomb and whirlpool” (468). That is, the characters experience a mechanistic world that combusts their efforts or implodes according to their actions. For Falconer’s analysis, the central metaphor of Rushdie’s novels is that of Odysseus sailing between the Charybdis and Scylla – characters must choose between sinking into the whirlpool or “explosive death” by a monster. According to Falconer’s interpretation, reconciliation of realities is not possible because by their very simultaneous existence they are in conflict. The only possible interplay is that of a competition for dominion, which still means hybridity is possible but assumes a worldview will dominate all others. Therefore, according to Falconer, Rushdie’s characters constantly experience powerful interruptions to their worldview – the viewquakes – that are caused by interaction with characters from other worlds. Falconer dedicates her analytic attention to how Rai functions as Ormus’ manager in the novel and assumes an unofficial managerial role in Vina’s career. Falconer’s analysis assumes the realities are really one world but the characters must venture through the bowels of that world. The synergistic possibility of the *otherworld* rather than the *underworld* does not enter her analysis. *Luka* has a similar mythological quest form, yet Luka’s descent is not into a separate world but into his father’s world. The journey is into a familiar architecture, the video game, and even the content is familiar because Rashid provides it.

The different interpretations of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* points to the openness of Rushdie’s texts. As a result of this openness, the idea of play assumes an important role in interpreting the novels. As RS Krishnan notes about *Haroun*, which combines elements of romanticism and magical realism, “[i]n *Haroun* the narration is text, inasmuch as the language of

the text both makes and unmakes the tale” (72). The play of literature is the conditional semantics of language, the socially constructed understanding of words. Meenakshi Mukherjee concurs with Krishnan’s interpretation, noting “if in the magic world Haroun can be the savior of his father through deeds of adventure, in the real world the son can rescue him through the act of reading” (176). *Haroun* started as a story verbally told to Rushdie’s son but then became a novel. The shift from one medium to another medium permits an extension of the imaginary world. Father guides son in both worlds, and son rescues father in both worlds. In *Luka*, Rushdie re-visits this motif and arranges a new relationship between the father guide, Nobodaddy, and, the son-hero, Luka.

While the relationships among the real and imagined as well as father and son seem to be assembling into coherent form, the notion of semiotic play as Jacques Derrida defines it persists. In the structuring of a relationship, “by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of the system permits the *play* of its elements inside the total form” (“Structure, Sign and Play”, 278-9). That is, every iteration of an association among elements creates a new meaning, which is freeplay. While this type of play is present in *Luka*, another important notion of play is necessary when examining *Luka* because rather than play as indeterminacy or flux, in *Luka* play assumes a different role which gaming theorists have examined quite closely.

Though it is possible to trace the origins of gaming theory to Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Huizinga did not necessarily concentrate on games per se. Instead, as the subtitle indicates, Huizinga wanted to develop an understanding of humans at play. He defined play to be “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga, 13). The important concept that Huizinga introduced was the idea of a divide

between the play-world and the ordinary-world, marked by the magic circle. Huizinga defines the concept:

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. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (10)

The magic circle demarcates where the real and imaginary became distinct. Play becomes the comingling of the real and imagined. Huizinga notes that "[play] is *methectic* rather than *mimetic*" (15). Play and by extensions games are not meant to represent reality but to provide a means of forming human understanding of reality, hence the dividing magic circle. Once reality combines with play, the element of "not serious" associated with play is lost as well as the voluntary participation. Huizinga identified this magic circle not through examining games but rituals of many types. He notes the importance of a space that is part of the "ordinary world" yet a place of "special rules." Consequently, subsequent scholars have understood games as belonging to a domain distinct from the mundane but paradoxically important to ordinary experience.

Throughout Huizinga's argument, the prevailing assumption is voluntary participation in play; that is, an activity is no longer considered play once the participants are bound to an activity against their will. The distinction is important because freedom of participation is an

important means of establishing the magic circle. Once participation becomes mandatory, the participant crosses from the realm of play into the realm of the real. The distinction is between non-serious and not serious.

Brian Sutton-Smith in *The Ambiguity of Play* advanced Huizinga's claim by noting the distinction by developing a taxonomy of play. Some activities deserve intense seriousness due to their real world implications (such as a job interview) yet are still a type of play in that rules are present. Other activities ostensibly deserve no seriousness due to their classification as trivial (such as a baseball game) yet solicit intense seriousness from participants and audiences. Sutton-Smith proposes, in effect, that play never ceases to occur only the intensity of seriousness assigned to an activity deserves attention. In a similar distinguishing function, Sutton-Smith also provides an early taxonomy of game related narratives.

Sutton-Smith categorizes narratives and play into three groups. "Narratives and play of a cyclic, linear and parodic kind show that there is a pattern to the phantasmagorias of childhood" (Sutton-Smith, 166). The cyclic involves repetition of activity and stresses "virtual transcendency [sic]" (Sutton-Smith, 164), or the feeling of functioning in a different domain of existence. However, the linear involves a distinct teleological pattern, which "most Western narratologists assume [...] is a human universal" (Sutton-Smith, 165) and "blots out the possibilities for a larger child-oriented humanism" (Sutton-Smith, 166). The parodic resembles either the cyclic or the linear but "center[s] on absurdity" (Sutton-Smith, 165); in addition, Sutton-Smith notes the parodic has the interesting function of "learning how to cope with failure" (165) to the parodic precisely because the real world has much more absurdity than organization as implied in either the cyclic or the linear. The result is a competition for representation.

Jesper Juul in *Half-Real* concurs with Huizinga in identifying the importance of games in allowing experimentation. Juul attributes the mechanistic perception of games (Sutton-Smith's linear narrative form) to the belief that because a game has rules it must be a deterministic form. A contributing contemporaneous factor to the perception of determinism is the abundance of games available on computers. Juul states video games exist in a dichotomy of emergence and progressive. A game of emergence involves a "set up [of] challenges indirectly because the rules and the game interact" (67). For emergent games, the world in which the player is set is of greater consequence than the governing structures because the player is an active participant in events. A game of progression is "a directed sequence of consecutive challenges" (67). A progressive game is, in essence, a story. A story is simply events reported by the storyteller. The listener or reader has no role other than passive recipient. The player of a progressive game plods through the challenges of a game in procedural fashion.

James Paul Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* attempts to blend the two game forms in his own version of converging worlds. "Players get practice in trying out new identities that challenge some of their assumptions about themselves and the world" (117). On the one hand, the player must abide by certain rules. On the other hand, the player is free to explore those rules to accomplish the desired outcome, and if the game is an immersive world such as *World of Warcraft* mark his or her own space within that game. The player has complete control within a specific, limited rule set. The extreme version of this is when "video games do not attempt to hide information control; they flaunt it" (Galloway, 90). That is, some games make explicit statements about the limitations of the game world, thereby calling attention to the magic circle. This idea fits Sutton-Smith's definition of a parodic narrative, which absurdly points to its happening in a different reality. Rushdie has created in the

World of Magic a game of emergence as Juul defines it. Games frame the world differently.

“We may prefer not to have to clean the house or take out the garbage, but we play games about this any way. A game is a frame in which we see things differently. Literature can make us focus on the words themselves. In the game, we can seek the beauty of the activity” (Juul, 201).

An important element of play is activity, and while Luka could be a passive listener like Padma in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie elects to depict Luka like his brother Haroun, an active participant in the world whose actions become a story.

The aggregation of these ideas into an operational definition of play means compromising some aspects of each scholar's conceptualization. Play is an activity where participants freely engage with a world that does not have immediate repercussions outside of the world. Play designates that the world is in an indeterminate state, and the participants steadily react to rules yet are able to explore the affordances of those rules. That is, boundaries exist but within the boundaries, the play participants interact in an exploratory manner and receive reinforcement through a feedback system. As Juul states, every game measures performance in at least one dimension (life points, score, progress, character level, etc.) yet the measurement should reflect three domains: the person, the entities (non-player characters), and circumstances (“Fear of Failing?”, 239). That is, the participant should understand that “failure is central to the experience of depth in a game, to experience *true* improvement” games should “support the idea that growth, the experience of learning, of adjusting strategies, of trying something new, is a core attraction” (Juul, 250). Under this definition play occurs only when a participant understands that his or her actions alone are not responsible for outcomes, but a combination of actions, the actions of others, and the game world itself will produce outcomes. Within this understanding, the participant is free to venture in the world.

This freedom, however, is not unlimited but instead concentrated on inculcating effectiveness. The game still needs to function or risk losing player interest. When Gee examines *Tomb Raider*, he claims the most important part of the game is the tutorial where the player learns to be Lara Croft, the character in the game. At once, the player understands that the character will have limits (the game cannot proceed until completion of the tutorial) yet also learns that the game will not punish exploration of the limits (bonuses are awarded to players who deviate during the tutorial). The effect is to cross the “magic circle” separating real rules and the fiction. Gee explains that when characters in the game speak, they speak to Lara but in effect speak to the player, thereby “perfectly melds and integrates talk to Lara and talk to the player” (*What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 117). Gee sets against *Tomb Raider* tutorial the introduction to *System Shock 2*, a first- or third-person shooter depending on player preference.

System Shock 2 has some deviation from *Tomb Raider* in tutorial because character development is necessary. In *Tomb Raider*, Lara is Lara, whereas in *System Shock* the character requires players to allocate points to attributes. In addition, unlike the helpful Professor Von Croy and other non-player characters, the guidance is from a disembodied voice speaking directly at the player – issuing imperatives to confirm the player knows how to negotiate the environment. Rules are imparted in both games in a similar manner, and actually the games are quite similar provided a player of *System Shock 2* elects to use the third- person view. However, the differences, argues Gee, result in the player adopts a different attitude depending on the surface features of the game. Luka must also learn to adapt to shifting surface features, which seems to be his power. He can absorb information quickly and respond as circumstances require.

Ian Bogost in *Persuasive Games* relies on assuming that the underlying structure of games is more important than the surface features of games. As an example, Bogost argues that

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas is quite conservative because the underlying system is a transaction model of morality. To demonstrate this point, Bogost quotes George Lakoff's idea of "conceptualizing well-being as wealth. Changes to our well-being are thus akin to gains and losses" (111). Bogost then demonstrates that a counter to *Grand Theft Auto* in the game *Vigilance* has the exact same transactional model. *Grand Theft Auto* and *Vigilance* only appear different because the former uses the perspective of a criminal and the latter uses the perspective of a police detective. Bogost claims that the creators of *Vigilance* appropriated and inverted the gaming procedures of *Grand Theft Auto* (gain by committing crimes, loss by getting caught). The frame shift reveals how the exact same underlying conceptual metaphor (morality is a financial transaction) and identical procedural processing (gain-loss systems) can result in a very different games on the surface.

The common thread between gaming theory and the scholarship on Rushdie's works is that both acknowledge the importance of other worlds and what the interplay of those worlds indicates. In both instances, games and Rushdie's novels, other worlds readily transgress into reality. The transgression causes confusion because order appears unstable. The usual attributes of each world also become complicated: games are serious matters, and serious matters are games. This happens because both novels and games involve participants as players in the events. Greater dangers reside in the failure to recognize that the two worlds are unified rather than discrete.

For my analysis of *Luka*, the important ideas are the concept of the magic circle as the boundary that separates the game world from the real world. This delineation between real and imagined has a complex relationship in the novel, as Luka seems to need the worlds to be separate yet he recognizes that they are not. The magic circle also contributes to the idea of

liminality. In order to be between states, a threshold must exist, and the magic circle establishes the existence of the threshold. Perhaps more important of the concepts present in gaming literature is the idea of play as methetic, both with words and through participation. Play is itself an indeterminate activity because it could have a serious tone as Huizinga and Juul note, yet it might also be less freely conducted and therefore serious in the sense of urgent or necessary, as Bogost notes. These concepts suggest Rushdie is navigating games to develop concepts that he explored in previous novels, and is testing the effect of an emerging trope, the video game, in a traditional form, the novel. *Luka* attempts to reconcile these elements of play, boundaries, and oscillation between states into a harmonizing between seemingly irreconcilable positions of what a game indicates about those who play it.

CHAPTER 3. NEVER JUST A GAME

Salman Rushdie has noted the merger of reader and writer in the text. As he notes in “Is Nothing Sacred,” “The reader and writer merge [...] to become a collective being” (*Imaginary Homelands*, 426). This interplay creates the story in the novel in much the way that Gee describes the player as “The players must learn to see the game world – designed by the developers, but set in motion in particular directions by the players, and, thus, co-designed” (*Good Games* 25). Both reader and player find their interaction wavering between two worlds. However, with *Luka and the Fire of Life*, Rushdie has created Luka, who is capable of not just merging with his game world but also altering it and weaving his life in Alifbay into the World of Magic. In this way, Luka is a powerful character wielding both the play of words and the play of games. Consequently, *Luka* combines several types of interplay that place the novel at the threshold between several forms: a story and a game; words and actions. The liminality of the novel creates the portal that permits the reader to engage with the text and play as well. However, Rushdie also seems to advocate the importance of maintaining the magic circle that separates the world of play and the real world. The magic circle permits the types of experimentation that a novel undergoes as reader and writer interact. Without the magic circle, the interplay does not happen.

In audio several interviews, Salman Rushdie relates one piece of advice that his son Milan offered during the writing of *Luka and the Fire of Life*: make the novel serialized (Patel; Kay). Stories should appear in short installments so the reader could contemplate the material in manageable amounts. Unfortunately, the publishers did not allow a serialization; fortunately, Rushdie elected instead to incorporate levels similar to a video game to emulate serialization. Video game architecture has a richness of form that rivals many other mediums, so Rushdie is

able to return readers to Alifbay and its parallel the World of Magic, but depicts the parallel world in a much different fashion than in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. In *Luka* as in *Haroun*, two major tropes are the relationship between a father and son, and the quest of the son to rescue his father, which forces Luka's participation. However, unlike his brother Haroun, when Luka quests to rescue his father, he enters the World of Magic as a character in a video game. The idea of a game world as a space for play quickly becomes compromised as Luka realizes that he must play the game in order to save his father's life. Through the character of Nobodaddy, Rushdie provides a persistent link between the real world and the world of the game thereby conflating the boundaries between playing in a game and playing in reality. The purpose of this paper is to examine how video game form influences the understanding of interplaying realities with emphasis on the nature of Luka's playing a game that has consequences in the real world. The primary areas to assess include the nature of the game world built from a vast storytelling tradition, the concept of play and how liminality obscures the boundary complicates Luka's participation, and the role of failure in maturation of Luka as a storyteller as well as a gamer.

3.1. Liminality: The world was not always what it seemed to be

Rushdie establishes the importance of games early in the novel, and also presents two perceptions of video games. Luka enthusiastically plays video games, and his enthusiasm produces two distinct responses from his parents. His mother represents the position that video games are useless because they both distract Luka from school work and have no bearing on the real world. "In the real world there are no levels, only difficulties. If he makes a careless mistake in the game he gets another chance. If he makes a careless mistake in a chemistry test he gets a minus mark. Life is tougher than video games" (15). Real-world Soraya emphasizes the mimetic failure of games. Soraya understands games in a way where a game is "not so much

figurative as actually reproduced” (Huizinga, 15). For her, games are mindless instances of progressions – levels – that have no corollary in the real world. This position assumes life is not for dallying with certain activities because life is finite – unlike the virtual world where “you could store up as many lives as your skill and good fortune could get you” (14). The accusation of mimetic failure has existed for most media at some point. The accusation depends upon reducing a medium to its negative elements in order to produce a narrow frame of reference. For video games, the most common point of emphasis is, as Soraya states, education suffers because of video game playing.

Rashid counters Soraya’s argument with the quixotic version of video game playing. “But see how well he is developing his hand-eye coordination, and he is solving problems, too, answering riddles, surmounting obstacles, rising through levels of difficulty to acquire extraordinary skills” (15). Rashid has described a game of progression as Jesper Juul defines them in *Half-Real*. A game of progression assumes a linear world as opposed to an interplay between the world and the player. Games of progression actually are not as beneficial, in the sense of developing competence with information management, as games of emergence. However, Rashid does note “[Luka] lived in an age in which an almost infinite number of parallel realities had begun to be sold as toys” (13). The game worlds seem like universes planted into reality, but with the attribution by Rashid that these realities are toys, they assume a place in the world of play and childhood. In effect, Rashid establishes video games as a domain separated from reality in the sense of Huizinga’s magic circle demarcating where serious activities occur and where alternate as well as non-serious activities occur. Luka is a participant in crossing the boundary between realities by using his gaming devices.

However, Haroun is aware of a different risk involved with crossing boundaries and being a participant in a game. Haroun notes the inherent risks of participatory culture noting Luka invokes a strong power through a curse. “But be careful. Cursing is a dangerous power. I was never able to do anything so, well, *dark*” (8). Haroun recognizes that Luka does not adhere to the limitations of progression. The events are not predetermined and mechanistic but a developing process. Luka has input in the outcome, as his curse proves, and therefore can play with reality – but the consequences of his play are imminent as the curse starts the quest. Captain Aag has his vulture deliver a melodramatic response to Luka’s curse: “Dreadful black-tongued child [...] Throw out a curse when you can’t control it, [...] it will come back to smack you in the face” (22). The power of words has become evident. The curse results in “[Luka’s word] poleaxes someone [he] loves” (22). Luka has tapped an immense, personal power and unwittingly started his own great adventure. An utterance branches into a sequence of enactments: the slumber begins, Nobodaddy ruptures the Frontier to claim Rashid. In the process, he has also started to blur the distinction between the play world and the real world.

The start of Luka’s quest represents the start of his adventure, and his parents’ positions become moot because neither of them identifies the possibility of games as an experimental space. Luka will experience a story of his derived from his choices. Huizinga refers to this as the methectic element of game worlds. Unlike mimetic culture forms which seek to emulate existence, methectic culture forms seek to purposefully separate participants from the real world through immersion into an experimental space confined by rules. The idea is a game should be a distinct space where the players are free from the constraints of the real world. The magic circle creates a barrier between events in the game and consequences in life. Dying in a game is not dying in life. Rushdie sets the World of Magic as such a space that is under constant threat.

“The World of Magic was kept hidden for thousands of years, guarded by mysterious cloaked spoiled sports who called themselves the Aalim, or Learned Ones” (11). The Aalim want the World of Magic disguised because the realization of the world’s existence, the import of the activities in the World of Magic, confer onto them tremendous power. Luka inadvertently challenges their security and enters a testing ground to disprove Soraya about the usefulness of games.

3.2. Play and Games: Some things just are

The reason Luka enters the game world is obvious; he tracks Nobodaddy thinking Rashid has awoken. The manner of Luka’s entrance into the world is obscure. As Luka learns, stumbling across the boundary is almost beyond perception, and Nobodaddy thought the transition was “not supposed to be this easily ignored” (26). The transition into the World of Magic means Luka has crossed the magic circle, and with this crossing, I identify four of the rules of play. The first rule is competition exists and is very serious. Nobodaddy explains to Luka how Rashid will be absorbed unless Luka can “Un-Be” Nobodaddy. The second rule is that Rashid is in essence the programmer of the world, providing the information from the stories and setting the landscape of the world. An extension of the second rule is Nobodaddy is aware of Rashid’s knowledge and therefore aware of the game world, as Luka notes when Nobodaddy prompts a test of the dream hypothesis: “You know what my father knows” (30). Finally, the quest is a game of progression (Luka rescues his father or Nobodaddy absorbs Rashid’s life force) yet the World of Magic itself is an immersive environment for game of emergence (Luka can perform whatever action he desires). Even though the game format is one of progression, as Juul asserts, fixed rules are actually affordances not just limits.

In terms of the video game world, Luka recognizes the familiarity of sites and even discerns how to interact with a world designed by his father. The first encounter with The Old Man of the River demonstrates the speed with which Luka establishes the link. As he contemplates his strategy, he knows “Rashid loved riddles” (52) and therefore issues a challenge. Furthermore, Luka knows the limits of his father’s knowledge and can use the riddle of the Sphinx to defeat the Old Man. The riddle battle is actually important because Luka recognizes the interaction from the real world.

Luka has several opportunities to apply his knowledge, and the domain is generally inconsequential. In order to obtain lives in the game world, Luka “used his favorite tricks” (50), which function just as well in the World of Magic as they do in other domains. In this area, Luka exemplifies Bogost’s proceduralism, specifically a procedural reflex which is when “physical input based on time-sensitive responses operationalized the rapid response” (*Persuasive Games*, 303). Luka is aware of the time constraint, but unaware of the procedures of time (i.e. the rate at which Nobodaddy absorbs Rashid’s essence), so he deploys a known successful tactic. The freedom to test strategies is important to play. While Luka might not know the precise rules, the punishment is not severe at the first level. He is able to explore the affordances of the world and orient himself. The real world seeps into the game world, and this seepage signals the erosion of the boundary between the two worlds. The use of real world knowledge assists Luka in another instance, when he provides the Insultana Soraya with the itching powder strategy to defeat the Rats in the World of Magic – a tactic used to defeat Ratshit in the real world during the playground war. The duplication triggers the realization in Luka that he might need to invest more seriousness in his quest if the connection between the two worlds holds true in all regards. Luka steadily realizes the carefree Nobodaddy might have his own strategy at play, which is

contrary to the idea that the cultivation of the imagination requires thoughtful investment of energy. Play should be fun yet point toward larger concepts. Nobodaddy symbolizes what has happened to Alifbay: “People wanted to feel good even when there wasn’t that much to feel good about, and so the sadness factories had been shut down and turned into Obliviums, giant malls where everyone went to dance, shop, *pretend*, and forget” (emphasis added, 37). By associating mindless pretending with the ennui of Alifbay, Rushdie begins to set his own liminal boundaries with the concept of play. In contrast to the pretend of Obliviums, “Luka, however, was not in the mood for self-deception. He wanted answers” (37). Luka exemplifies cultivation of imagination by orienting his play, participation in the World of Magic, with accomplishment of goals.

Although Nobodaddy did not desire to assist Luka and only provides marginal guidance, Luka manages to concentrate on the one important feature of Nobodaddy, he resembles Rashid. “The worst, or maybe the best, thing about Nobodaddy was that he always behaved like Rashid Khalifa” (34). In this way, Nobodaddy demonstrates the liminality of the game world. The play aspect of the game world is nullified with the resemblance because Luka is well aware of what Nobodaddy represents, though he prevents Nobodaddy from uttering the word. In Luka’s mind, a game is a representation set in a distinct fictional world. The World of Magic is Rashid’s design and the Aalim are Rashid’s adversary within the world. The paradigm fits a game, yet the magic circle is violated as Luka must participant. In this frame, Luka and Nobodaddy are more than adversaries; they are competitors.

The sight of Nobodaddy provides Luka with a time reference and by extension a representation of why he must obtain the Fire of Life. Nobodaddy though a part of the game prevents Luka from actually enjoying the gameplay. The magic circle is in effect violated because Nobodaddy connects the imagined world of the game with the real world.

Nobodaddy oscillates between being helpful, as a father ought to be, and being a hindrance. When Luka must drive the Argos, Nobodaddy refrains from helping. On the one hand, this might reflect Rashid's own incompetence with operating a video game-like device. ON the other hand, this might be an instance of Nobodaddy delaying Luka. The difficulty is sorting through the real and the imagined, whether Nobodaddy is incompetent because he is Rashid's avatar, or is nefarious because he is Luka's in-game opponent.

Through these inversions of real and imagined, Rushdie rearranges the typical paradigm for real world and game worlds. Advocates of games suggest the skills honed in games have applications in real world pursuits, but Luka invests his real world experience into the applications in the game and again demonstrates his versatility in transgressing between two realities. However, Rushdie also eliminates the play element of the game world by having Nobodaddy provide a direct link to the real world and the consequences of the game extend into the real world. The magic circle has effectively been not only transgressed but obfuscated.

Under conditions where the boundaries are unclear, video games architecture excels because the world responds to the player's actions. Luka realizes the outcome is "up to the Real World team" (200). The most important inversion is the function of Luka's curse in the game world to defeat the Aalim: "*we* [real people] will make [life] whatever it is, good or bad, happy or sad" (202). Just as a player must negotiate how to function in a game, so a person must negotiate how to function in life. Luka is aware that Nobodaddy is not Rashid, yet he frequently forgets that the increasingly less transparent guide only resembles his father. Nobodaddy is either incapable of refraining from behaving like Rashid in many instances or periodically wants Luka to succeed in defeating him.

As mysteriously as Luka appears in the World of Magic, Nobodaddy also crosses the boundary to become Luka's guide. Neither Luka nor Nobodaddy understands the formation of their relationship. All Nobodaddy can muster as an explanation is "Once someone like me has been summoned [...] someone alive must pay for that summons with a life. I'm sorry but that's the rule" (42). The Aalim summoned Nobodaddy to "Un-Be" Rashid. The irony is that Rashid has invented the entire World of Magic; therefore, he is responsible for the summoning rule.

The importance of the summons is that a procedure has been implemented. Again, neither Luka nor Nobodaddy understands the rule. The rule is a limitation of the world. This rule sets establishes two processes: the mechanism of time in the game world (the steady absorbing of Rashid by Nobodaddy) and the shift from the real world to the fictional world. Both of these processes are parts of a larger procedure, which Bogost describes as "subroutines in codes" (*Persuasive Games*, 12). What Luka and Nobodaddy experience in this particular procedure is a lack of control. Summoning, or calling a function in computer parlance, automatically begins a sequence of further subroutines enacting a cluster of activities.

3.3. Play and Reconciliation: Becoming grandmaster of the games

The departure of Nobodaddy actually stimulates Luka's reliance upon the true guide that he needs, Rashid's knowledge of storytelling. Rashid represents the play of words, such as when Luka recalls Rashid's description of the Aalim, "there's nowhere that doesn't have its Yesterdays, that doesn't live in a Today, that doesn't hope for a good Tomorrow" (199) and even cues Luka's memory about Luka's special power: "Nobody has ever seen [the Aalim's] faces, and everyone is afraid of their passing – except for a few particular children..." (199). Luka completes his father's thought, "who can defy Time's power just by being born" (199). The ellipsis of Rashid gives space for Luka to enter. Father and son have crossed boundaries, and

Luka demonstrates his ability to combine his game play with Rashid's wordplay. Long comments from Rashid are interjected into the narrative in much the same way that a disembodied voice might offer overt information to a player in a game. The result is a suggestion that Luka has command over the information that Rashid has shared over the years, and by extension the potential to be a magnificent storyteller. In the absence of Nobodaddy, "Luka became aware of a change within himself. He felt as if something more powerful than his own nature had taken control of him, some stronger will than his own" (157). The sense of flow between the play of words and the play of the game has permitted the force of Rashid to replace the physical presence of Nobodaddy, and this end to the misguidance results in a mature, focused Luka.

With his father's voice as his new guide, Luka recalls Rashid's comment about time. "Time is not only Itself, but is an aspect of Movement and Space" (168). This comment accurately reflects principles in physics. It is a summation of abstractions. Unfortunately, Luka wanders into the unnecessary procedures of deriving an equation – setting variables, *S* for space, *T* for time, and *M* for movement. This returns to the debate between Soraya and Rashid about video games. The real world physics, such as finding an equation, are causing Luka to fail when his life actually depends upon implementing the correct procedure.

The great concern of Luka's quest is the decision making processes to capture the Fire of Life require bouts of despondence. "Even this task, which I took on for the very best reasons, involves making choices that are not 'good', choices that might even be 'wrong'" (156). Luka loses his physical reference point in Nobodaddy but retains the knowledge of Rashid in the form of stories. In addition, Luka shows that he has matured because he realizes that "this whole adventure had just been Nobodaddy's way of passing the time until his real work was done. It

had just been *something to do*” (145). Luka recognizes what Soraya suspects of video games: they can indeed be a waste. However, the shift from Nobodaddy to the disembodied voice of Rashid signals the recognition by Luka that he has achieved the necessary competency to complete the quest. The cost of experimenting at Level 9 has increased to one hundred lives yet Luka has the awareness that his earlier hacks are no longer applicable. “You have to put in the hard work. You can’t cheat your way to the Top” (163). Luka appreciates the energy and effort necessary to benefit from being a boundary crosser. His play has taken a serious turn, and he has absorbed his father’s wisdom about stories yet also acknowledges the position of his mother that “Just keep your [hands] busy, that’s all. Go left by all means, but don’t dawdle; do not be left behind” (12). References to education policy aside, Soraya has influenced Luka as much as Rashid. The earlier opposition among the parents finds reconciliation through their son’s play. Luka again obscures boundaries by uniting his parents’ outlooks about games.

When Luka finds himself lecturing before the assembled deities, he has encountered his own liminality between fear of speaking and competence as a game player. This is evident because the tone of the book shifts for the first time to Luka’s future, “Looking back on these events later in his life, Luka was never sure if the Revolt of the Gods had been provoked by his speech under the Tree of Terror, [...] or if it had been conjured up by his Curse, whose purpose had been to break the strangle hold of the Aalim over the affairs of both worlds” (203). It is important to note the implications of the two provocations. On the one hand, Luka’s impassioned speech about how the World of Magic “*isn’t [Supernatural Beings’] World [...] This is my father’s World*” (182), his moment of finally being able to speak, is responsible for victory. On the other hand, Luka’s puerility in uttering a curse is responsible. Either option involves venturing through the play of speech (cursing and speaking) and the play of games

(competing with the Aalim). What video games permit is modeling of existence in a controlled environment. This returns to Leggatt's idea about how mysticism, and by extension imagination, permit openness to development of ideas. A model is simply the mind playing with the world to shape phenomena into coherence. The game might be of progression but emergence intermittently interjected as Luka performed seemingly impossible feats to sustain his father and the World of Magic.

Luka defeats the Aalim, the procedural implementers, in order to continue a very humanistic practice of self-definition through narrative as Jenkins defines it, a world as a nexus for storytellers rather than a specific sequence of events. This returns to Juul's definitions of the two types of games, emergent and progression. Luka coalesces the seemingly implacable progression of the real world and the exuberance of the game world. This feat is reminiscent of Leggatt's interpretation of the role music serves in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*:

Stand what ground you have, even as you acknowledge that it might melt away at any moment; and while you respect the validity of other people's realities, never let anyone else tell you that your world is not the real one (124).

This conclusion is too strongly individualistic to reflect fully the effect of Luka's blending realities, for I find Luka by depending on the disembodied voice of his father for knowledge while pulling from his own video gaming experiences balances traditional and emergent culture forms. The novel begins with Rashid "listening to the story of Luka's day" (5) suggesting the greatest interaction of any medium is its harnessing narrative. The main threat to narratives is silencing narratives or channeling narratives through limits such as formulaic plots rather than affordances such as imaginary worlds. Video games and games generally provide more affordances than other mediums through their encouragement of contributing to the design of the

world through play. The boundary, the magic circle, sets the world apart with good reason. Luka is able to facilitate change, as his curse demonstrates, yet is inexperienced with his actions, his voice, having an effect. He needs a space offset from reality in order to learn how to wield his power, yet this world cannot be completely severed from the real world – or else the space contributes to what Soraya dubs dawdling, or to what Gee describes as “leaving children to the mercies of the real world by just letting them loose” (*What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 137). The ease of change that a player enjoys also has the liability of creating unwanted change. Luka’s curse is a clear example. By removing Luka from Alifbay and immersing him in the World of Magic, Rushdie avoids both dawdling and tossing Luka to the mercies of the real world. In regards to interplay, video games can as a culture form can benefit from the wisdom of Rashid, “If you’re going to be a thief, steal the good stuff” (199).

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING UNIVERSES INSIDE THESE BOXES

The disruption of the binary of play, as represented in the World of Magic, and seriousness, as represented in the land of Alifaby, calls into question the future of storytelling itself. Rushdie blurs the two worlds by having Luka reconcile the storytelling of Rashid with the video games. The reconciliation acknowledges that storytelling does not need to be procedural, a mechanistic process represented by the Alim, the rote performance at school, and time itself. On the other hand, storytelling is not a random collection of thoughts devoid of formulation. In Luka, Rushdie provides a character capable of transcending dichotomies to glean a sense of unification.

The reconciliation of the real world and the video game world necessitates a subsequent reconciliation. Nobodaddy notes early in the quest that more important than games is storytelling. He informs Luka that “You of all boys should know that Man is the Storytelling Animal, and that in stories are his identity, his meaning, and his lifeblood” (34). This statement is as important as the claim that a game is not *just* a game. The binary between narrative and games warrants closer attention as Rushdie asserted in an interview for *Boston Bibliophile* that “There will be new ways of creating fictions, undoubtedly, but that’s a question for someone half my age or even younger. It isn’t going to be me who discovers the potential of the electronic world.” In this way, Rushdie implies a new interplay between two more worlds: a burgeoning art form, video games, and a long operating aspect of humanity, storytelling.

The outcome of Rashid’s guidance whether as a disembodied voice or through the resemblance to Nobodaddy is to instill in Luka a sense of empowerment. Luka possesses a special power, yet he does not know how to wield it. The presence of his father, however, supplies the necessary guiding force as Luka reconciles his world (video games) with his father’s

world (storytelling): “It felt like you were right there with me all the time, advising me and filling me in” (213). The cultivation of imagination requires a direct investment in activities implemented to maintain the world. The cultivation is not an effort to somehow prevent progress but it is an effort to tend to the inhabitants and environment. Rushdie explored this theme at length in *Fury* in Malik Solanka, who failed mostly because “nobody knew how to argue with money” (*Fury*, 224) when addressing imaginary worlds. A similar failure of cultivation is implicit in *Midnight’s Children* when William Methwold stipulates the conditions of the sale of his estate: “the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the new owners” (*Midnight’s Children*, 105). The theme appears in most every novel by Rushdie, and the refrain is: The amount of energy necessary to prevent change in the world is beyond the capacity of any being, real or imagined. Existence is like tending a garden, not like tinkering with a machine.

The frame of provided in gaming theory extends possibilities of examining linguistic play already known to Rushdie scholars. The post-colonial lens of Leggatt and Falconer could benefit from perceiving the inherent politics of games. But more importantly, gaming theory could benefit from appreciating the play of language that Rushdie provides in *Luka* and his other novels. Juul claims “since the rules of video games are automated, video games allow for rules that are more complex and hence more detailed fictional worlds” (162) yet never explains how this differs from the immersive world of science fiction novels. Games by no means have sole claim to the concept of the magic circle. The interaction between player and game has many more similarities to the interaction between reader and book.

Furthermore, many applications of gaming theory are possible given the pervasive appearance of games of many types in other novels. *Please Don’t Call Me Human* (Chinese

1989; English 2003) by Wang Shuo describes the quest of the Chinese government to identify the last of the Spirit Boxers in order to defeat the United States in a martial arts tournament. The format is reminiscent of many fighting games, but the novel also provides examples of *xiehouyu* (riddle words). The purpose of *xiehouyu* is to exploit the limited phonetics of Mandarin to produce one phrase in writing yet another phrase when spoke. The infamous example being the different uses of *face*: for honor, for disgrace, for traitor, for hero. The playfulness of Mandarin, the written character signaling one meaning while the pronunciation signals another, creates a sustained semiotic indeterminacy. Among the wordplay, a fighting contest unfolds as a son attempts to free his father. Shuo's novel is not the first to investigate the effect of gamification of politics.

An alternate history political game occurs in *The Game-Players of Titan* (1963) by Phillip K. Dick. As Robert O'Connor has noted, "Aware of the application of formal game theory to Cold War strategy, Dick abhorred the use of Minimax principles in military decision-making" (45). Dick was writing contemporaneously with the emergence of a formalized economic game theory, and he recognized the importance of exploring the implications of gaming the world. The idea of sterile mathematic models determining policy frightened Dick. The similar concern over misuse of games suggested in *The Game-Players of Titan* and in *Please Don't Call Me Human* belie possible benefits of harnessing games.

Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card contains a wealth of game types and gameplay as the titular character, Ender, attempts to resolve universal peace. Card clearly has the magic circle in mind with his depiction of the war room. Gaming theory provides the means to unpack the complexities of Ender's interaction with the multitude of games, and his eventual decision for

resolving the games. Gaming theory warrants further application as its attention to a very basic human endeavor, play, reveals deep insights into the human condition.

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