The Game is a Ghost: Differentiating the Study of Game Space

Cole Wrampelmeier

American University

4400 Massachusetts Ave

Washington, DC 20016

(202)   885-3947

wrampelm@american.edu

ABSTRACT

Debate over the "magic circle" highlights the ambiguous complexity of play, games, and the relationship of the player to the game state. Determining the boundaries of games and the influences upon the player informs game design and study as a whole. This paper will look at the historical origins and contest over game boundaries from Huizinga to social framing. Building on the idea that game studies can benefit from cross-disciplinary theories on interaction, this paper will examine how concepts from sociology, psychology, and media studies can develop the "magic circle". Specifically looking at Jaakko Stenros' "three boundaries of play" and sociological examination of existing theories on game space. The conclusion finds that the ambiguity of a play state eludes structuralist definitions and requires a sophisticated theoretical tool to be salient for both game design and overall game studies.

KEYWORDS

frame, frame analysis, magic circle, game studies, social theory

INTRODUCTION

The debate over the existence or usefulness "magic circle" has, to this author, been exhausted. The discussion of game space and how the spatial, temporal, and social influence of games upon the player remains a deep vein for expanding game studies.

"Much of video game scholarship seems to be located within a paradigm of research similar to early audience research [and] much of audience research has in recent years sought to move towards a wider understanding of how media are used and located in patterns of everyday life" (Crawford, 10). This describes the game studies research found in this paper, a movement away from structured

definitions towards a complete social research tool that informs game scholarship and design.

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

Game studies as an emerging field has found a groundwork for academic study across existing fields to dissect and describe the details of gameplay. Arguably the cornerstone of game academia has been the writing of Dutch philosopher Johann Huizinga whose 1949 publication "Homo Ludens" provided a philosophical path towards game studies. The concept of 'the magic circle' is often pointed to this particular quote from Huizinga:

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, that 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 (1949, 10).

Immediately apparent is the lack of focus on the actual term 'magic circle', lost amid a list of physical game spaces. Another point about the language is that Huizinga clearly states that this game space, this magic circle, is contained within the 'ordinary world'. Critics of this metaphor charge it with overly formal structure and while this excerpt shows awareness of the game within society Huizinga cuts off this interaction a few sentences later, "Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns...Play demands order absolute and supreme" (1949, 10).

Huizinga introduced the term 'magic circle' but only uses the phrase 6 times in his entire text. It is the work of two designers, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, that popularize the term to refer to game space. Their 2003 work, "Rules of Play", is largely cited as defining the magic circle as it is understood in game studies today by defining Huizinga's, but undefined, magic circle (Zimmerman 2012). Salen and Zimmerman address the question raised by Sutton-Smith, "how do we get into and out of the play or game?". The nature of the question suggests a clear act of entering or exiting a game, and thus a clear border between reality and the game.

Simply put Salen and Zimmerman define the magic circle as the space where a game takes place, (107) and expand upon this basic definition to state "The magic circle of a game is the boundary of the game space and within this boundary the rules of the game play out and have authority"(108).

Their definition marks the game space as separate from reality due, mostly, to the rules that govern behavior within a game. A chess board is decoration outside a game state but comes to hold significance once a game is begun. This separation of games is not as closed as many critics claim, indeed one of the first points made is to consider if a game is an open or closed system based on the view, or schema, in which one frames a game.

Games considered as *rules* are closed systems due to the formal elements that exist prior to player involvement in the game, *play* is an open or closed system depending upon observation of intrinsic game rewards or upon the social forces exerted by the player upon the system, considered as *culture* games are an open system that focuses on how meaning is imparted through the game (Salen et al. 2003, 108).

Immediately there is a contradictory nature to games, they are both open and closed systems that operate independently and within the broader social contexts. This is a key element of understanding game space that will be seen later in this paper. In an article where he rebukes critics of the magic circle, Zimmerman calls attention the context in which he and Katie Salen wrote "Rules of Play", from the perspective of game designers with the intent to aid in the design of games. He lauds the interdisciplinary application of the magic circle to game studies but points out that his focus is on utility of concepts in design, not core truths of behavior (Zimmerman 2012).

Circular Debate

Criticism of the magic circle is not difficult to find, Zimmerman reflects: "It seems to have become a rite of passage for game studies scholars...to write the paper where the magic circle finally gets what it deserves" (2012).

Mia Consalvo has written at length about cheating in games, a boundary searching study, and examines why the magic circle is a misused metaphor in her article "There is No Magic Circle". Consalvo's concerns come from building theories of game study upon a 1930s writing "by a theorist with particular views of what did and did not constitute play" (2009, 409). Consalvo's larger point is that player's do not enter a game de novo. Outside knowledge from reality will always inform the player about the game (often by design) but there will also be interpretation, mistakes, and distractions that press upon the player, as Consalvo concludes, there is no innocent gaming (415).

Daniel Pargman and Peter Jakobsson argue that the magic circle represents a 'strong-boundary hypothesis' that refuses to acknowledge that "Reality is messier" (2008, 227). In their interviews of hard core digital gamers found that the participants had turned their gaming into monotonous activity and rarely

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found any magic to the experience (233). This is particularly concerning because it suggests that the mental bounds of play operate differently between the medium for interacting with the game.

The emergence of new technologies of play present interesting challenges to defining games and game space. The idea that video games work under the same theoretical frameworks of traditional games has come under challenge by several scholars. Michael Liebe and Gordon Calleja argue that the magic circle, including rules, is a social negotiation maintained by participants which is not possible to negotiate in most computer games (Crawford 2009, 8).

Several scholars come to the defense of the magic circle but rarely agree with the definitions presented by critics. All articles researched for this paper recognized an inherent social aspect of the magic circle, Jaako Stenros even finds the harshest critic of the magic circle, Roger Caillois, finds complete separation between gameplay and reality (2012, 4).

The key component in the debate surrounding the magic circle is a focus on the 'boundedness' or 'separation' of the game state from reality. Salen and Zimmerman routinely discuss the external social forces and the way they affect design. Yet they are often quoted using the structuralist terms that to contradict their recognition of social pressures upon the game space and open their arguments to criticism.

Stenros joins in defense of the magic circle, claiming it has always been social in nature, but comments: "It seems to be a useful, powerful metaphor, though it has not been exactly clear what it is a metaphor *for*." (Stenros 2012) Games are a context which the player applies meaning based on real life influences or game influences. The game creates a psychological and social frame of the play and thus the gameworld connects to the reality of the player. The permeable nature of the game space creates a dialogue between reality and the game.
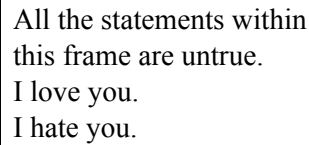
Perhaps the criticism of the magic circle is semantic. The metaphor is singular in form and inflexible to new theoretical developments. It is a concept from psychology and sociology that provides a more sophisticated method for evaluating the mental state of the player in games and informs the next

FRAME ANALYSIS

Goffman states that he got the term frame from Gregory Bateson, who introduces this concept in his 1955 essay "A Theory of play and Fantasy". In this writing, Bateson breaks down the metacommunicative elements of play, specifically the moments that signal "this is play". In this he discovers an inherent paradox to the

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play when we engage in play, "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (Bateson 317). He uses this statement to set up his discussions of frames and begins the conversation by illustrating a paradox:

Figure 1.

All the statements within
this frame are untrue.
I love you.
I hate you.

Within this frame the paradox exists and one cannot distinguish between the first statement that frames itself as an untruth and as an evaluation that implies its own truth. Bateson argues that there is a primary process that operates at a higher level, this process allows the persons to step outside of this frame and metacommunicate about the message within the frame (Denzin et al. 1981, 56).

The necessity of a metacommunicative process to navigate the paradox of a frame shows that there is not a clear division between the "frame" of play and reality. Bateson, as a psychologist, points out that the division of the frame are machinations of the human mind "because human beings operate more easily in a universe in which some of their psychological characteristics are externalized" (Bateson 1955). While the frame may, in fact, be all in our heads it creates a necessary distinction that allows persons to signal and recognize play outside of the play itself.

Signals for play are as varied as play itself and some scholars have explored methods for how play reinforces the framing of itself as play. Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne argue that play maintains the Bateson frame through certain mental cues: actions (e.g. exaggeration, repetition), objects, physical scenes, vocalizations, characters, and attitudes" (Stenros 2012). These cues are traits of this metacommunication that exists outside of play and the mental state of the frame suggests that a permeable play-reality border is *necessary* for the play state to exist.

The context for frame analysis is important to consider when applying this theory to game studies, Bateson explored and understanding play but for the advancement of his psychological understanding. He insists that his idea of the frame is a "psychological concept" and goes on later in the same paper to explore the application of his theory in psychotherapy treatment of schizophrenia and other dissociative disorders (Bateson 1955).
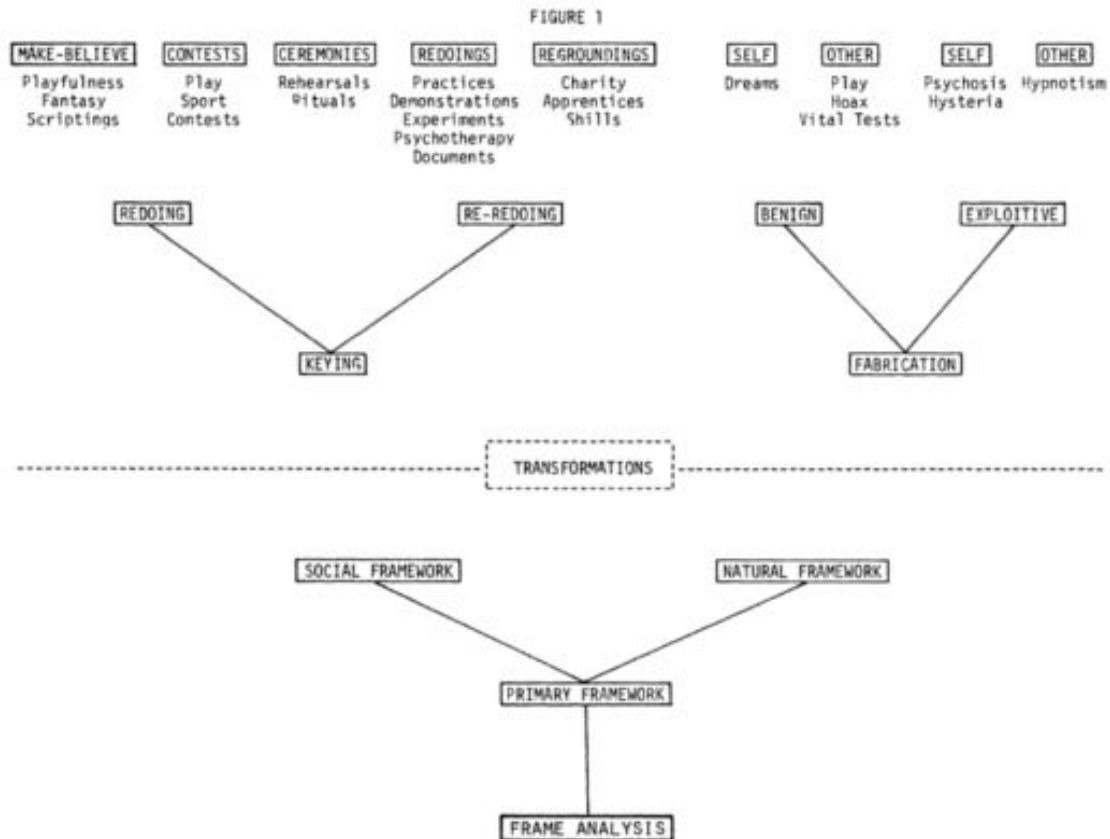
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Thus we return to the sociologist, Goffman, who approaches frame analysis as a social encounter (rather than the mental associated put forward by Bateson) which allows the participants to identify the 'what' - rules, norms, roles - that the social actors play within the frame. At any given moment, in or outside of play, we create a 'primary frame' that shapes the interpretation of any given moment. Thus, the frame exists as a primary tool for setting the stage of play and the participants set about transforming this new social space through 'keys' or by 'keying'. Keys operate as a secondary frames to transform the meaning of the primary frame.

[T]he set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by participants to be something quite else" (Goffman 1974)

Goffman refers to 'patterned activities' such as make-believe, contests, ceremonials, technical redoings, and regroundings as instances of keying, see figure 2. Not only do persons have the ability to transform the meaning of their frames through keying but also through fabrication, a process that deliberately creates a false belief so as to manage the activity. Thus the persons can navigate the social encounter of play - the primary frame - through a combination of keying, fabrication, and re-keying. This is informed through the social context of the actors, personal desires, motivations, and any other external influences upon the actor(s).

Gary Alan Fine uses the frame analysis of Goffman to inform his study of fantasy role-players in his 1983 publication "Shared Fantasy". Fine tunes the ideas of frames and keying, arguing that rather than applying alternate meaning to the primary frame keys represent a rapid switching between frames. Thus a player may quickly alternate between negotiating the relations of fantasy characters in a game with their "real" world relations with a player.

Figure 2

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FIGURE 1

MAKE-BELIEVE	CONTESTS	CEREMONIES	REDOINGS	REGROUNDINGS	SELF	OTHER	SELF	OTHER
Playfulness	Play	Rehearsals	Practices	Charity	Dreams	Play	Psychosis	Hypnotism
Fantasy	Sport	Rituals	Demonstrations	Apprentices		Hoax	Hysteria	
Scriptings	Contests		Experiments	Shills		Vital Tests		
			Psychotherapy					
			Documents					

REDOING   RE-REDOING   BENIGN   EXPLOITIVE

KEYING   FABRICATION

- TRANSFORMATIONS -

SOCIAL FRAMEWORK   NATURAL FRAMEWORK

PRIMARY FRAMEWORK

FRAME ANALYSIS

Fine takes this reconceptualization of keying to posit that three frames exist within fantasy gaming.[1] First is the frame of 'common sense knowledge'- what Goffman refers to as the primary frame, the world of game rules that are built into the game structure, and the knowledge of the fantasy world itself (Fine 1983). Fine's emphasis on the rapid switching between these frames, his definition of keying, allows for the social context of reality to constantly tug at the fantasy of the game state. He openly acknowledges that the voluntary nature of a fantasy is quite susceptible to intrusions from the 'mundane' world (197).

While Fine's conception of frames are structurally similar to the arguments of Goffman the flexibility of frame analysis reveals a sophisticated toolset for understanding the nature of game states. The shared analysis from psychology (Bateson) and sociology (Goffman) has been adapted to game studies (Fine) with

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[1] Important to contextualize Fine's understanding of frame analysis within the confines of his specific study. The findings of his research on fantasy role-playing are highly specific to this area.

slight changes to the core principles of framing and reframing - keys and transformation.

Application of Frame Analysis in Game Space

Arguments against the magic circle have focused on the concept as a 'strong-boundary hypothesis' that ignores the social nature of games and the personal influences exerted by the player (Pargman et al. 2008). The argument that frame analysis offers a 'weak-boundary hypothesis' ignores the While the debate over the magic circle is largely over semantics and definitions frame analysis offers an alternative in two key areas, social embedding and multiple tools of analysis.

As a theoretical tool the magical circle is limited in describing the social interaction between the player at play and the player as they exist in reality. Crawford asserts that frame analysis allows us to examine the social framework that surrounds games and the player. Similar to Fine's examination of frame analysis, Crawford finds that frames neatly embed games into society. This social claim comes under question from other sociologists, Denzin & Keller (1981), who find flaws with the structuralism that defines Goffman's frame analysis. Regardless, the magic circle fails to provide tools for examining *how* games are social and frame analysis provides the theoretical tools to begin such research (Crawford 2009). The frame accommodates the game as one form of social encounter, experienced by the player and contains a built-in method, keys and fabrication, for understanding the social context in which the game is played.

Goffman provides additional terms that assist with understanding how the player enters the play state, through the *rules of irrelevance* and *transformation rules*. Rules of irrelevance is the idea that in a game the players must focus on the elements of the game and focus on that which is relevant to that game, which is determined by the rules. This irrelevance is a social contract by the players, reached to abide by the rules of the game space, leaving player influences such as background and status outside of the game itself. Characteristics inevitably affect play but are understood to be as divorced as possible from the game state. The transformation rules says what external influences are given expression within the game (Stenros 2012).

The key distinction between Bateson's argument of frame analysis and Goffman lies in the paradox. Bateson presented contradictory nature and a metacommunicative frame that signals particular messages, "this is play". Alternatively, Goffman attempts to create structure out of the paradoxical origins

with an immutable reality with little room for interpretation of meaning (Denzin et al. 1981, 57).

Goffman's critics argue that the sociologist fits the person into the frame rather than adapting his frames to the self and individualized experiences. In this way Goffman provides context for analysis but lacks the varied tools necessary to provide a comprehensive theory of game sociology. Games, from Goffman's analysis are world-building activities from which identities, roles, and meaning emerge that would not be understandable outside of the game's frame. In this way frame analysis is similar to the magic circle. The game space, frame or magic circle, acts as a social contract and the game is the formal artifact of that social contract (Stenros 2012, 7).

FULLY SOCIAL THEORY

Crawford posits that the magic circle and frame analysis are too limited in their scope for the theoretical development of game studies. He points to the early growth of criminology in the 1960s and 70s that drew across disciplines to develop a 'fully social theory' that has informed criminology since. Game studies itself already draws greatly upon a breadth of disciplines to inform research, though it lacks the organization that developed a coherent social theory for criminology.

Zimmerman highlights the strength and weakness of games studies in his response to critics of the magic circle. "Game studies scholars are working in a radically interdisciplinary space, where ideas and fields mix freely. This only increases our need to be cognizant of our differences" (Zimmerman, 2012). Zimmerman refers to the difference between the meaning of ideas in design versus game studies but theories and practice from many other fields already contribute across the game disciplines and there are many concepts that can contribute to the theoretical framework of game studies.

The development of video games has changed the consumption and understanding of gameplay, so much that some doubt that video games share the core theories that define traditional gameplay (Crawford 2009, 8). These claims remain debatable but offer the critical point that videogames are, in part, as much a media as game. The interactivity of video games is often stressed to distinguish them from traditional forms of t.v., theatre, or reading. However, assuming that traditional media audiences are passive observers is flawed and ignores a wealth of research on audience interaction with their particular media. Understanding the mental framework required for participation in, arguably, less engaging media can shed light upon the game state (Crawford 2009).

Similarly there is a wealth of research on *local information environments*, from the field of library and information sciences. J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth argue that there is an informational angle that separates the participant from the game/ritual: "resignation of elements within the situation, increased attention to shared intentionality, and the fact that during such activities, access to information outside of the activity is limited" (Stenros 2012, 9). Here we see that the library sciences share similarity to the keys in the frame analysis of Goffman with "resignification of elements within a situation". There is a utility to the multiple tools of frame analysis that lend itself to adaptation for the necessary examination of mental states.

Another theory of mental states that share some resemblance to the nature of frame analysis would be the idea of *flow* as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975). Flow is a playful mindset that fully immerses the person in the action and is usually characterized by calm, energized reactions to stimuli within that state. This centering of action frames the person in a mental state to perform said action, often at a high level.

Key to all of this is a recognition by Stenros that players have a need to feel safe that is characterized by a paratelic state: "the player is knowingly fostering a playful approach, even if she may not be able to switch from a telic to a paratelic or autotelic mindset on a whim. Humans not only play, but they are aware that they play" (Stenros 2012, 11). Thus the theory has come back to a social contract that a player negotiates when they enter the state of play, the magic circle.

Stenros concludes with a discussion of three different boundaries of play, they do not operate together as a sophisticated theory of behaviour, but each offers a different angle for understanding the game mindset. The psychological bubble is a personal space in which the player is fully in a paratelic state, the need for feeling safe is tantamount though it is not necessary for the player to truly be safe.

The magic circle, or social contract, that the player creates through implicit or explicit negotiation and metacommunication. This has expansive potential as there is a shared structure for encounters with the social contract. There is equally game-breaking potential if enough individuals in this shared contract lose their sense of safety and lapse from an autotelic state.

The arena of play is the spatial and temporal regions of play that is also a culturally recognized structure for playful activity. This extends from a prolonged social contract that has become culturally established (Stenros 2012, 15).

CONCLUSION

Game studies relies upon a theoretical basis that is, relatively, young for an academic field. The examination and questioning of basic assumptions runs deep in the literature that has been reviewed in this paper. The conclusion drawn reveals that much of the debate amongst the theoretical framework comes from a difference in academic practice. Amongst the academic writing on games there is a study of play (ludology), design (utility), development (best practice), and game studies that fill in the remaining history and analysis. The varied studies need a common language to speak in order to reconcile the differences between practices.

There are several disciplines that inform all the four fields of games, namely sociology and psychology. The frame analysis developed by Bateson has shown remarkable adaptability to new fields, including sociology (as shown by Goffman) and game studies (as shown by Fine). However, there are unique challenges that game studies must reconcile and this paper finds that there is much to be gained from comparing audience interaction studies with the developing theories of games.

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