

The Game Frame: Systemizing a Goffmanian Approach to Video Game Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a review, explication and defense of Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) as a valid contemporary sociological theory of play, games, and video games. To this end, it provides an introduction to the frame analytic conception of play, games and video games. It demonstrates that this account provides an explanatory (rather than merely descriptive) model for the sociality of the game/non-game boundary or 'magic circle', as well as phenomena that trouble said boundary, like pervasive games or ARGs. To substantiate the timeliness of a frame analytic approach to games, the paper compares it to and partially takes issue with practice theory, specifically Thomas Malaby's recent "new approach to games". The conclusion summarizes the key characteristics, advantages and limitations of a frame analytic account of video games.

Author Keywords

frame, frame analysis, key, upkeying, magic circle, metacommunication, alternate reality games, pervasive games, playbour, play, games, fiction, practice theory

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

"Situated play", "The [Player]" – even a cursory glance at younger formative conferences in game studies [12, 25] tells of a recent shift in interest from the formal properties of game texts to the people and larger social contexts that interact with and through those games [82, 41].

In a parallel move, one of the two field-defining debates – on the nature of the game/non-game boundary or 'magic circle' –, seems to converge on the consensus that this boundary is a social construct [42]. It therefore appears logical that game studies would turn to sociology to better understand these phenomena. However, in the words of Garry Crawford [17],

"the general level of engagement with sociological literatures within games studies has at times been fairly limited. Though writers sometimes draw on philosophical/sociological ideas, such as 'the magic circle', which they claim are 'social' concepts, there is

little understanding or engagement with what this actually means." (p. 1)

Among the sociological works that *have* made their appearance in game studies, the name of Erving Goffman stands out. Several authors have pointed to Goffman's major work *Frame Analysis* [34] as a possible foundation for a genuinely sociological theory of games [15, 17, 18, 22, 24, 63]. Yet so far, Goffman's work has not been appreciated as a whole. It remained a theoretical stone quarry.

In a first step, the paper will summarize the key tenets found in Goffman's works on games and play and sketch a systemized frame analytical account of play, games and video games. The paper suggests to theorize video gaming as a "frame", a social convention consisting of mutual expectations organizing our experience and behavior in relation to a specific type of situation. The shared 'framing' of a situation is stabilized via the self-correcting interplay of attention (what 'belongs to' the situation and therefore should be attended to), interpretation (what the phenomena attended to mean) and action (how to act and react appropriately in relation to the situation and meaning of what is attended to) between the participants. The 'boundary' of a frame is effectively determined by the "joint focus of attention" of the participants, supported by metacommunicative cues ("brackets") that mark the spatial and temporal beginnings and ends of the situation.

Via chains of biocultural evolution, the video game frame inherited most properties from the older frames of traditional (card, board and other) games, which in turn descended from the frames of sportive competition and play – the latter an anthropological universal already found with animals, and the basis of many other make-believe frames, including ritual, art, and representative fictional media like literature or film. The "video game frame" belongs to the culture of a group; therefore, it differs from culture to culture and evolves over time. With different genres, games and communities, specific variations of the video game frame might develop. Individuals acquire the video game frame of their culture during socialization and reproduce it

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during a gameplay situation by the mentioned co-orienting interplay of attention, interpretation and action of all participants.

The video game frame transforms-represents other given activities into something voluntary, autotelic, engrossing, and without consequence; it organizes the gaming encounter into a nested structure of the central, more formalized “play” and surrounding preparatory, parallel and follow-up activities or “spectacle”, and it is spatially and temporally delineated by metacommunicative cues or “brackets”, involving some digital device which acts as an “engrossable” (an object or event focusing and absorbing attention) and embeds structured, explicit, preset rules, likely with competition towards an explicit goal.

In a second step, the paper will detail the advantages of this account in comparison to other current attempts of theorizing the relation of play and games to real life and revising the binary rigidness felt with Huizinga’s [39] conceptual metaphor of the “magic circle”. Several alternative metaphors to the circle – such as networks [17] or puzzle pieces [42] – have been suggested; among them, the metaphor of “frame” and specifically Goffman’s model of frame analysis have been drawn upon heavily in the study of pen-and-paper and live action roleplaying-games to conceptualize the process by which the game/non-game boundary is socially reproduced [9, 26, 17]. The paper argues why frame analysis cannot be discarded on grounds of the associations afforded by the word “frame”, and that frame analysis moves from the statement *that* ‘the magic circle’ ‘is social’ to an explanatory model *how* it works.

In a third step, the paper will organize the existing literature that has made use of Goffman within game studies into fields of application: the magic circle [15, 17, 18, 23, 27, 29, 60, 63], the organization of the gaming encounter [40, 46, 47, 77], child’s play [5, 48, 49, 50], media literacy [7, 28, 87], pervasive games [4, 57], alternate reality games [21], studies of pen-and-paper, live and MMO role-playing [9, 13, 14, 16, 17, 26, 38, 51, 55, 86], presence [24, 68], and metalepses and self-reference in games-within-games [7, 58].

In a fourth step, the paper will point to future possible fields of application, in specific the spectacle surrounding the gaming activity, and the many instances of “upkeying” or applying a secondary frame or set of social conventions ‘ontop’ the video game frame, such as gaming as testing, scientific research, work, learning, sports, or art.

Finally, the paper will argue that four qualities set frame analysis apart from comparable approaches in game studies and sociology: First is the comprehensiveness and principled way in which it analyzed and included the role of metacommunicative signs (“brackets”), the ability of multiple frames to be nested or layered, people’s ability to situationally add or subtract frames (“upkeying” or “downkeying”), to differently frame the same situation and thus misunderstand or deceive each other in regard to the current ‘real’ frame (dubbed “fabrications”). This, the paper shows, allows frame analysis to take account of most if not

all current border cases of gaming that trouble the theorizing of the ‘magic circle’: Staged games-within-games and self-referential metalepses are dealt with extensively, serious games, serious uses of games and ‘playbour’ in MMORPGs can be modeled as upkeyings of situations originally framed as ‘games’, the boundary-blurring strategies of alternate reality games can be dissected as fabrications manipulating metacommunications and nested frames, and the functioning of pervasive games without an actual delineated physical spaces shows the process of framing in full action.

Secondly, Goffman [33] expressly pointed out that the framing of a situation does not depend on shared face-to-face co-presence and is not fully created ‘on the spot’, but can be mediated through time and space over media and cultural memory within an individual. This makes frame analysis applicable to both single player gaming and all forms of mediated network games, in contrast to comparable sociological approaches such as ethnomethodology.

Thirdly, frame analysis fits nicely with current anthropological, practice-theoretical and anti-exceptionalist descriptions of video games that see games not as something irreducible or standing out of the rest of cultural and social reality, and that explain rather than merely state the social or cultural constructedness of games [35, 52, 53]. Yet contrary to Thomas Malaby’s claim that playing (or gaming) cannot be a type of activity and a mode of experience at the same time [53], Goffman’s concept of “frame” substantiates the possibility (and in fact, necessity) of one organizing principle for both experience and behavior.

Finally, frame analysis offers a convincing account of the relation between play and games that again repudiates Malaby [53]. Whereas he posits that play is a derived cultural subform of games specific to Western modernity, Goffman argues in tune with Bateson [3] and current ethology and evolutionary psychology [8, 10, 62] that games are a culturally derived upkeying of the pre-human frame of play.

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