Forget the Magic Circle (or Towards a Sociology of Video Games)

Garry Crawford,
University of Salford.

Abstract

There have been several sociologists who have written, sometimes quite extensively and informatively, on video games, and more commonly many within video games studies have tapped into wider sociological literatures. However, more generally, the willingness of sociology to engage with video games and gamer analysis has been rather underwhelming, and this is particularly significant, for as Nieborg and Hermes (2008) argue, video games offer a key area for developing our understanding of contemporary audience, consumer and production patterns. Similarly, 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. Hence, this paper offers a (further) critique of the magic circle and similar concepts, but argues that the key weakness of these concepts is their lack of engagement with, and applicability to, other spheres of social life. To this end, I suggest that the (also sometimes used in game studies) concept of frame analysis, does offer a *more* social theory; however, what is truly needed in game studies (reflecting the arguments of early criminological debates in the 1960s and 70s) is a 'fully social theory' (Taylor, Walton & Young 1973) of gaming.

The Genesis of a Paper

The origins of this paper can be found here, at the first *Under the Mask* conference. Here, last year, myself and my colleague Victoria Gosling presented a paper that argued that the concept of 'scene', as typically applied to music, such as the goth or Merseybeat music scene, might be a useful tool for understanding video gameplay and culture (Crawford & Gosling 2008).

We argued that 'scene' recognises that cultures can be both local and translocal at the same time. That is to say, that a scene, such as goths, has greatest significance for its participants at certain times and locations, such as in goth clubs or at the bi-annual Whitby Goth Weekend in North Yorkshire. But beyond these specific locations and times, the goth scenes lives on in people's identities, fashion and music choices, conversations and imaginations — and hence is also translocal, and at time mundane.

By focusing just on specific locations and times where these cultures take on greatest significance, can give the impression that these constitute a tightly bounded and coherent culture — something we criticise Hodkinson (2002) for in his ethnography of goth culture at Whitby. This does not recognise that these cultures extend beyond specific times and places into people's everyday lives.

It was similar criticism that we levelled against magic circle, but we did so in a very cursory manner, rejecting the magic circle for its focus upon specific instances of play. This paper received a fairly warm, or at least not hostile reception here, but we developed this paper a bit further, before a few months later presenting this at the *[player]* conference at ITU Copenhagen, where it received a much more challenging reception.

Here the questioning was a lot less concerned with the crux of the paper's argument — the use of the concept of scene — but much more on the rather cursory criticisms we made of the magic circle.

We were told that we had made at least two fundamental errors. First, in assuming that video games were media, when they were clearly not, and second, that we had fallen into a common misinterpretation of the work of Johan Huizinga (where the concept of the magic circle originates), that the magic circle was a tightly bounded arena, separate from everyday life.

We attempted to answer these questions; however, this debate was inevitably cut short. But myself and one of our questioners, Jesper Juul, carried on this discussion for several weeks afterwards via email, and it was this debate that forms the impetus of this paper.

Though there have been many critiques of the magic circle before today, I do tend to agree with Jesper Juul, that often these have been based upon the assumption that this constitutes a clear divide from ordinary life and social practices. However, this is not my biggest problem with the concept. The problem for me, is the limitations of the magic circle, that this is a concept used only to understand play. While the magic circle can be used to understand what happens within it, it does not recognise, or have the capacity to understand that specific rules apply to all aspects of life. There is nothing particularly magic about the magic circle, it is, rather mundane.

Hence, it is my argument that we need to draw on more sociological theories in our understanding of gaming. That is to say, theories that provide a more comprehensive understanding of social life, and locate gaming and play as part of a much wider canvas.

Towards a Sociology of Video Games

There are sociologists who have provided significant insight into video games and gamers, such as Mary Chayko (1993), Graeme Kirkpatrick (such as Kirkpatrick 2004) and Jason Rutter (for example, Rutter and Bryce 2006), to name but a few. But more generally, the willingness of sociology to engage with this developing area has been rather underwhelming. Probably the most influential 'parent' disciplines to video games studies in the early days of this subject, was probably psychology, and this continues today to inform and shape many lines of discussion. Other disciplines have also provided theoretical tools to early games studies, such as literary and media studies. But video games studies, as a very young discipline, suffers from the dual pull often looking towards other disciplines to provide, at least the initial, tools of analysis, but in attempting to define its identity, many scholars have sought to distance game studies from those disciplines that preceded it.

Of course, there are those who have, and continue to, draw on sociological theory in their work on video games. However, this is yet to flourish into a fully developed sociology of video games. And (somewhat annoyingly) even when sociologists are used by game scholars, they are not always acknowledged as such. For instance, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) draw on both the work of Gary Alan Fine and Erving Goffman, but describe both of these professors of sociology as psychologists (p.454).

Hence, I would like to suggest here, that wider sociology debates potentially offers a very fruitful area, that has so far has been under-employed in the study of video games. This means that not only are video game scholars missing the opportunity to provide greater insight into certain aspects of gaming, and in particular, the sociable and everyday nature of gaming.

But in turn, video game analysis can teach sociology quite a lot. For, as Nieborg and Hermes (2008) argue, video games offer an important opportunity for developing our

understanding of areas of sociological interests, such as contemporary audience, consumer and production patterns.

The Magic Circle, Play, and Ludology

In video games studies the concept of the 'magic circle' has over recent years become one of, if not *the* single most, widely debated and contested ideas within contemporary video games studies.

For some, such as Juul (2005) and Castronova (2005) it has proved a useful tool for framing and understanding patterns of play and gamer interactions. While for others, it has become an 'unproductive orthodoxy' (Nieborg and Hermes 2008: 135), which tells us little about the social and cultural location and importance of gaming.

The origins of this concept can be found in work of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, and in particular his 1944 (first published in English in 1949) book *Homo Ludens*. For Huizinga, the magic circle is one example, within a list of others, of places where play takes place, which Huizinga outlines in this, now extensively quoted, passage:

> More striking even than the limitations as to time is the limitation as to space. 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 form 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 playgrounds 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 (Huizinga 1949: 10).

What is significant here, is Huizinga does not explicitly state what he actually means by the term 'magic circle'. Nor how this is different to the arena, the card-table, the temple, the stage, the tennis-court or any other arenas of play. But this passage does tell us certain features of this, and other, places of play, such as being 'isolated' spots with 'special rules'.

However, the meaning and significance of Huizinga to game studies is not necessarily to be found in the original work of Huizinga himself. But most notably in how this has been applied within contemporary video game studies by Salen and Zimmerman (2004).

For Salen and Zimmerman (2004) the magic circle is a useful metaphor for understanding the space where gameplay takes place. It is a temporary place and time where the players of games establish, negotiate and maintain rules specific to that particular time, place and game — rules that do not necessarily apply outside of the circle.

A good (though, non-computational, and much more obviously physical) illustration of this is boxing. Once the opponents step into the boxing ring they agree to abide by certain rules that govern the sport, which would not apply to say, another sport or a street fight. And this is wholly dependent up the two opponents agreeing to conform to these rules.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 94) suggest that the boundaries between play and wider social life can at times be quite clear-cut, while at others, quite 'fuzzy and permeable'. The examples they give are of playing with a doll, which can be done in a very mundane everyday way, or playing tic-tac-toe, where participants are much more clearly playing a game with set rules and objectives. For Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 94) this appears to be one of the key features that distinguish 'games' from ordinary 'play'. In that, games involve greater engagement and clearer boundaries between the game and wider social life — it takes place within a 'magic circle'.

However, they are keen to indicate that this is always a negotiated and fragile boundary, established and maintained by participants. And, in particular, Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 98) suggest that it is this that makes the circle 'magical' — that games are created 'out of thin air' by their participants.

It is evident that many scholars have found useful the application of theories of play, and specifically the magic circle. For instance, Edward Castronova (2005) uses the magic circle to describe the membrane that encloses (what he terms) the 'synthetic worlds' of video games. For Castronova this membrane is like a shield 'protecting the fantasy [game] world from the outside world' (p.147).

However, Castronova is careful to point out that this is a porous membrane, as of course, a game cannot be completely sealed off from the outside world. And people will frequently move back and forth, and will bring with them into the game attributes from the outside world — and to some degree, vice versa.

However, for each author who utilises and supports the use of the magic circle, or similar theories of play, there seems an equal number who are keen to challenge these assumptions and their applicability to the study of video games.

Challenging the Magic Circle

One of the key criticisms levelled at the magic circle is concerning the divide between play and the wider social world. In particular, one of the most fervent criticisms of this has been offered by Pargman and Jakobsson (2008: 227) who suggest that the magic circle can be understood as a 'strong-boundary hypothesis' — that is to say, that this represents a clear boundary between gameplay and the world outside of it.

However, in countering these arguments Juul (2008) suggests that most of these criticisms are based upon a misreading of Salen and Zimmerman (and Huizinga). As it is clear these, and other advocates of the magic circle, recognise (if not emphasise) the social nature of this boundary, as well as its temporary and often permeable nature — therefore it can hardly be seen as a strong-boundary or anti-social hypothesis.

In particular, the very central tenet of Johan Huizinga's original argument is the centrality of play to modern social life. Hence, it is likely that many critics have been a little too disparaging of the magic circle, and in particular Salen and Zimmerman, in this respect.

However, it does have to be said that Salen and Zimmerman do themselves no favours in their use of language, often referring to the magic circle as 'a distinct place' 'separate' from 'the real world' (2004: 97). What they are guilty of, is providing, a rather vague definition of this term.

Furthermore, there are (at least) three other real problems with how Huizinga and other classic theories of play have been applied to video games studies. First, Huizinga and Caillois are rather odd choices to be fore-fathers of video games studies. In that, neither of these authors were specifically interested in defining what a game is, or setting out a

theoretical frameworks for understanding these. Rather, both Huizinga and Caillois provide more philosophical-based discussions of the general location and role of play within human history and culture (Liebe 2008: 326).

It is also possible to take a rather cynical interpretation of this approach to video game studies, which Pargman and Jakobsson (2008) at least allude to. Ludology in its attempt to distance itself from media studies and establish itself as a distinct and emerging field, runs the real risk of having no theoretical foundations on which to establish its academic credibility. And, the philosophical writings of authors such as Huizinga and Caillois do certainly provide video games studies with a very respectable pre-history and a certain gravitas.

Second, the argument that people step into a magic circle, and out of 'normal' social activities and relations, does appear increasingly difficult to sustain when one considers the changing nature, and in particular, the increasingly mundane nature of gaming.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue that what defines and distinguishes a 'game' from 'play', is that games involve greater engagement and clearer boundaries between the game and wider social life. However, changes in gaming technology make gaming much more pervasive — such as the popularity of mobile gaming devices like the Nintendo DS and advances in mobile telephone technologies, such as the Apple iPhone — which means that many more people are playing video games in a much more common and mundane way.

Third, the fundamental assumption that video games are *games* and *not media* is problematic in a number of ways. Let us take the first part of that assumption; that video games are fundamentally *games*. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) purposefully do not draw a distinction between traditional (non-computational-based) games and video games. To them 'computer hardware and software are merely the materials of which the game is composed' and argue that 'digital games are systems, just like every other game' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 86).

However, Liebe (2008: 329-330) convincingly argues that the nature of playing a video game is quiet different to playing other game forms. The concept of the magic circle describes the establishment and maintenance of rules *by the participants*. However, this

is not wholly possible with video games, as (at least some) of the rules of play have already been pre-determined within the video game and its programming. The game does not need to be magically created 'out of thin air' by the players, because it already exists.

Liebe (2008) probably stretches this argument a little too far. However, this does illustrate an important point, in that, video games are in many respects different to non-computational games — video games are not, as Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 86) argue 'just like every other game'.

The second part of this assumption, that games are *not like media* is also problematic. Here, the argument, first made within early video games studies (such as by Chris Crawford 1984) but frequently repeated, is that video games are 'interactive' systems compared with the 'passivity' of 'non-interactive' media, like books and films. However, numerous authors (such as Palmer 2003 — cited in Crawford 2006) highlight the overuse of terms such as 'interactivity' and 'user-control' when describing video games.

For Palmer, this is simply scholars buying-into the sales' rhetoric of the technology industry, which frequently uses the language of increased interactivity and user-control to sell products. But of course, video gamers will always have restricted options — restrictions defined by the limitations of technologies, the aims of the game designers, and also the ideologies behind these.

Furthermore, the assumption that the audiences of (other) media forms are passive is fundamentally flawed. In particular, this assumption neglects a whole history of literature ranging from Walter Benjamin (1931), to Stuart Hall (1980), to Michel de Certeau (1984), which highlights the active role of the reader or viewer of media texts in creating their meanings. For instance, de Certeau suggests that texts are like a city, which, though they provide only certain avenues (a 'map'), each individual can actively seek out and define their own path (or 'tour') through this, and hence, find their own meanings.

Of course, a reader of *Pride and Prejudice* cannot change the words on the page and make Elizabeth Bennet not fall in love with Mr Darcy. But, no more so can the player of *Gears of War* dig themselves a trench system to avoid the fire of the oncoming Horde.

Of course, you may say, video games can be hacked, modified or re-written to include new possibilities, plus it is always possible to find bugs and glitches in programmes that allow eventualities that the game designer did not intend. But there is a much longer and well established history of fans of literature writing alternative versions of stories, or simply through their own imagination (or even misreading) finding new avenues or interpretations ('tours', to use de Certeau's language) within the text.

Moreover, media audiences' engagement with texts will often live on beyond the screen or page — just as video games do — such as in conversations with friends and relatives, in attendance at conventions and fairs, in creating their own related media or simply in their imaginations and day-dreams — none of which is in anyway passive.

Hence, while it is important to recognise that video games are different to traditional media forms such as television, cinema, radio and so forth, it is crucial that we do not seek to overemphasise this distinction. As Kline *at al.* (2003: 19) write:

> There is a real difference, of course, between interactive gaming and the flow of television programming…But the interactive enthusiasts need to take a closer look at the degree and kind of "active" participation of young audiences in the construction of their "own" digital culture. Choosing a corridor, character or weapon — a rail gun or a chainsaw in a *Quake* death match — can be very absorbing. But it is hardly a matter of radical openness or deep decision about the content of play.

A real problem with video game studies is that many scholars tend to consider video gaming in (relative) social isolation (Pargman and Jakobsson 2008). There is sometimes a cursory recognition that 'the social' has an impact upon gaming, and similarly that gaming patterns can have wider social consequences. However, there is rarely much consideration of what this actually means. One cause of this is the adherence to ideas like the magic circle.

Though several authors are keen to emphasis the magic circle as permeable, and a social construct, a great deal of video games research still focuses primarily, if not solely, on what happens within this perceived circle. The fundamental reason being, because what occurs within this circle is seen to be different from the social world outside.

Though gaming does involve particular social norms and rules, which include those imposed by the game, and those devised and maintained by the participants, so do most, if not all, aspects of social life — from playing sport, to getting married, to attending a class, or simply having a conversation with a friend (Nielsen *et al.* 2008; Gosling and Crawford, in print). As Nielsen *et al.* (2008: 24) write:

> Games are special contexts where particular rules apply, but we can apply this definition to a wide array of utterly different activities: work, family life, university classes, weddings, the nightlife of a big city. All of these situations are governed by special rules and norms that do not always…apply to other contexts

Much of video game scholarship seems to be located within a paradigm of research similar to early (media) audience research (Pargman and Jakobsson 2008; Gosling and Crawford, in print) — which focused primarily on the interactions of audiences with a particular media text.

However, much of audience research has in recent years sought to move beyond a limited focus on how audiences interact with media texts, towards a wider understanding of how media are used and located in patterns of everyday life. And it is the assertion of several writers on video game culture, such as Crawford (2006), Pargman and Jakobsson (2008) and Nielsen *et al.* (2008), that the location and importance of video gaming within everyday life is still a massively under researched area.

Video game studies' lack of detailed consideration of the location of gaming within everyday life seems to be, certainly to some degree, due to its adherence to the concept of the magic circle and similar ideas — which perceive gaming to be a unique, and to a greater or lesser extent, socially isolated phenomenon. And even defenders of this term, such as Jesper Juul have started to look elsewhere for less contested concepts.

For instance, Juul in 2008 proposes the replacement of the magic circle with the metaphor of the 'puzzle piece'. This metaphor, he suggest, more clearly sees gaming as fitting (like a jigsaw puzzle piece) into a wider social setting and context. Though this might be preferable to the magic circle in some respects, we do not necessarily have to look outside the existing literature of game studies or start inventing new concepts.

Though the magic circle would appear to be the most popular idea taken up from their work, it is not the only theoretical framework highlighted by Salen and Zimmerman

(2004). A body of work they also consider is Gary Alan Fine's (1983) application of Erving Goffman's 'frame analysis'. In particular, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) frequently refer to the magic circle as a 'frame', and I would suggest, understood as one example of a 'frame' the magic circle starts to make more sense — as frame analysis can locate patterns of play within a wider social and theoretical context.

Frame Analysis

The idea of frame analysis as a way forward for video game studies is proposed, by amongst others, Pargman and Jakobsson (2008). Pargman and Jakobsson's main argument here is that the magic circle represents, what they refer to as, a 'strong-boundary hypothesis', while frame analysis is a 'weak-boundary hypothesis'.

That is to say, the former tends to view gameplay as taking place in (relative) social isolation, while the latter more clearly locates this within a wider social context. However, this assertion misplaces the distinctions between the magic circle and frame analysis. For, as we have already argued, it is probably a little unfair to suggest that magic circle constitutes a strong and clear distinction between play and wider social life. And if you were so inclined, it would be quite simple to find similar examples in the work of Goffman and Fine to argue that this too constitutes a strong-boundary thesis.

The real usefulness of frame analysis, is that this theoretical tool, unlike the magic circle, puzzle piece or similar ideas, locates debate within a wider sociological framework. Advocates of the magic circle may argue that it is social, but the magic circle does not provide us with the tools for understanding *how* this is social, and how it is located within, and interacts with, a wider social context.

Frame Analysis is a theoretical and methodological tool, first introduced by the Chicagoan sociologist Erving Goffman, and developed most clearly in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis*. However, the use of frames is, significantly for our purposes, first introduced by Goffman in 1961 in his essay 'Fun in Games'.

Put simply, a frame is what allows the participants in any particular situation to understand 'what is going on here?' — it is the rules, the norms, the expectations, the

possible roles, and so forth, which are available to the social actors to make sense of any given situation or encounter.

Though one may assume that *anything* is possible within a given social encounter, Goffman argues that this is not the case. Social interaction works on the basis of shared expectations, accepted roles, patterns of behaviour, codes of interaction and so forth — they are quite clearly structured. Social actors are like players of a card game, drawing from an already set and ordered deck of options (Goffman 1961: 25).

'Fun in Games' (1961) then provides a useful example of gameplay for understanding how frames operate and can be used as a tool of social analysis. However, unlike the magic circle, play is not seen as specifically different to other aspects of social life (Chayko 1993). It is merely one frame within a social order that is saturated with other, often multilayered, frames.

Goffman (1961) describes the boundaries of each frame as a 'membrane' or a 'screen', while Gary Alan Fine (1983) finds it useful to describe a frame as 'bracketed off'. This is, of course, similar language to that used by many games scholars to describe the magic circle. But the key here, is that Goffman is always emphasising, and never missing out, other frames and the interplays between them.

A key difference between frame analysis and game specific concepts, such as the magic circle, is precisely the interplay between frames evident in the work of Goffman. For instance, Fine (1983: 183) in his consideration of table-top role playing games, indicates that though this fantasy may be 'bracketed' off, 'all events are grounded in the physical world'. As Goffman wrote 'fanciful words can speak about make-believe places, but these words can only be spoken *in* the real world (1974: 247, emphasis in original, cited in Fine 1983: 183).

The fact that frames are everywhere, highlights the particular usefulness of Goffman to games studies. As this locates gameplay within a wider social context, and understands this as just one form of social encounter. And hence, the membrane around gaming, becomes truly permeable, as we understand what is outside of it —and we can therefore look for similarities, differences and influences relating to other social frames, which we have the tools to similarly understand.

Gary Alan Fine (1983) takes Goffman's ideas and specifically applies these to the study of table-top role playing games and their players. Fine clearly demonstrates how fantasy gamers employ (at least) three frameworks. These are, a primary ('commonsense') understanding of themselves and their situation in a wider social context. A secondary frame, which identifies them as players of a game. And a third frame, which locates them as fantasy characters within a game. With, each level governed by particular rules and appropriate patterns of behaviour.

For Fine, though the game world may (to some degree) be bracketed from wider social frameworks, it is not separate, but rather *embedded* within them. For example, Fine highlights that it is impossible to escape the fact that the fantasy world of role-playing games is one structured and understood through the gamers' contemporary western knowledge, morals, language and so forth. It is a bracketed world, but one constructed from the building blocks of the social and natural world in which it is located.

Of course, Goffman and frame analysis is not without its limitations. For instance, Goffman does not see frames as created by specific social actors, but rather as pre-existing schema which they simply employ. This is largely due to Goffman's interest in more micro-level social phenomenon such as social interactions. Hence, Goffman needs to be applied *in context*, and with an understanding of what his focus and aims were.

Frame analysis can be used to locate gaming within a wider social context, and it is certainly a *more* social and better equipped theory than the magic circle. However, a 'fully social theory' (Taylor, Walton & Young 1973) and a comprehensive sociology of video gaming, would need to apply a variety of tools and ideas that allow us to understand the many intricacies of this phenomenon — and not get tied into any one orthodoxy.

This was the argument advocated by Taylor, Walton and Young (1973) in relation to early criminological theories. In that, what was needed to understand crime and associated institutions was a marrying together of sociological ideas and theories to provide a fuller picture. If we are truly to understand video games and gaming, we need to stretch our focus much wider, and draw on and combined a much greater range of

theories and ideas — and maybe this, will bring us closer towards a sociology of video games.

Acknowledgments

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