The Game Frame: Systemizing a Goffmanian Approach to Video Game Theory
ABSTRACT
This paper offers a double systemization: On the one hand, it assembles the fragmented, bricolage-like uses made of sociologist Erving Goffman’s works in Game Studies into a coherent whole, putting those works in the larger context of Goffman’s major work Frame Analysis (1974). On the other, it purports that frame analysis and its associated concepts of brackets, keys and fabrications themselves provide a coherent theoretical model for and answer to many current findings and troubles in regard to the relation between games and real-life (the „magic circle“), and between games and play. In this, the paper connects to and partially takes issue with current anthropological and practice-theoretical approaches to games, specifically with Thomas Malaby’s (2007) recent „new approach to games“.

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 video games. The paper suggests to theorize video gaming as a culturally and situationally reproduced „frame“ or set of shared conventions, mutual expectations and practices that organize both the experience of and behavior in a given situation, with structured, explicit, preset rules, turns, elements and boundaries embedded into an at least partially digital artifact.

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 and revising the binary rigidity felt with Huizinga’s (1955) conceptual metaphor of the „magic circle“. For there is a growing consensus among scholars that this „boundary“ between games and real life is rather permeable and the product of an ongoing context-specific process of negotiation through enaction and (meta-)communication (Copier 2007, Juul 2008, Neitzel 2008). Therefore alternative metaphors to the circle - such as networks (Copier 2007) or puzzle pieces (Juul 2008) - have been suggested; among them, the metaphor of frames and specifically Goffman’s model of frame analysis have been drawn upon heavily in the study of pen-and-paper an live action roleplaying-games to conceptualize the process by which the game/non-game boundary is socially reproduced (Fine 1983, Brenne 2005, Copier 2007).

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 to 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 (Kücklich 2005) 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 (1983) expressly pointed out that the framing of a situation does not depend on shared face-to-face co-presence, but can be mediated through time and space over media and cultural memory within an individual. This makes frame analysis applicable to both solo games and all forms of mediated network games, in contrast to similar sociological approaches such as ethnomethodology.

Thirdly, frame analysis fits nicely with current anthropological and practice-theoretical descriptions of play and games as processual, self-reproducing cultural practices (Handelman 2001, Malaby 2007). 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, 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. Whereas he posits that play is a derived cultural subform of games specific to Western modernity, Goffman argues in tune with Bateson (1955) and current evolutionary psychology that games are a culturally derived upkeying of the pre-human frame of play.

Author Keywords
frame, frame analysis, magic circle, metacommunication, fiction, ARG, Serious Games, play, games, practice

REFERENCES