

3 Beyond the Magic Circle

“We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness,” opened play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith in his 1997 book on the ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith 1997, 1). According to Sutton-Smith, this silliness is the result of the ambiguity of play.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, role-play in *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is indeed characterized by ambiguity, as it is not only a matter of online, in-game, and in-character behavior. The role-play experience is negotiated across the constructed boundaries of real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline. Sutton-Smith argued that not only play itself has many paradoxical qualities, the research on games and play is very diverse as well. After distinguishing seven “rhetorics of play,”²⁷ and discussing how each rhetoric addresses a specific ludic form and has its own ideological and disciplinary underpinnings, Sutton-Smith states that what binds these scholars together is a concern about the ambiguity of play. In order to illustrate this, he quotes a number of experts, such as Mihail Spariosu, the classical scholar who called play “amphibolous,” which means that it goes in two directions at once and is not clear (1969). He goes on further to name anthropologist Victor Turner, who described play as “liminal” or “liminoid” meaning that it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality (1969), and Gregory Bateson, also an anthropologist, who suggested that play is a paradox as it both is and is not what it appears to be (1955). Sutton-Smith himself concludes that variability is the key to play, as play is characterized by “quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 229). Instead of focusing on play forms and their normative rules, he urges game researchers and play theorists to give detailed study to the variations in play.

My research into online Fantasy role-play can be understood as one such deep exploration of the variability in play as Sutton-Smith proposed. However, silliness is lurking just around the corner, as

²⁷ The seven rhetorics of play that Sutton-Smith distinguishes between are the rhetorics of progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self, and frivolity (Sutton-Smith 1997).

within the new field of digital game studies, there is still a struggle going on to deal with the ambiguity of play. Discussing the “betweenness” of play, T.L. Taylor noted in her ethnography of the online role-playing game *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) that there is a prevalent idea of (re)constituting the boundaries between real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline (Taylor 2006, 151). The icon of this notion is the concept of the “magic circle,” which is used to bracket off the game experience. However, this is not the only boundary that should tame ambiguity: the “ivory tower” is another strong metaphor within the field of digital game and play research.

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical understanding of the ambiguity of role-play. I will show the implications of bracketing off the game experience and academic game research by the use of the metaphors of the magic circle and the ivory tower. In order to deal productively with ambiguity, I claim that we need to understand games and play from a network perspective.

The Magic Circle and the Ivory Tower

Game designers and researchers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman adopted the term “magic circle” as one of the core concepts they use to define the game experience in their excellent book on game design fundamentals, *Rules of Play* (2004).

To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. [...] The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins [...] Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 95-96)

Salen and Zimmerman borrowed the term “magic circle” from the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, who argued in *Homo Ludens* (1938) that play “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (Huizinga 1938, ed. 1955, 13). Referring to this quality of play, he compared the playground to similar arenas such as “[...] 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” (Huizinga 1938, ed. 1955, 10). The artificiality of games, captured in an appealing way by Salen and Zimmerman with the (re)introduction of the term magic circle, led to a perception of games as safe havens of imagination and experimentation that are separated from “real” or “ordinary” life. The game space is understood as a “special space,” a “fun space,” because players enter into it voluntarily and are temporarily freed of work. This concept of game-play has led to the question of whether in-game behavior can be transferred beyond the boundaries of the game and vice versa. De-

pending on the type of game and the type of behavior, the magic circle is considered to be either closed (in the case of unwanted behavior such as violence) or highly permeable (in the case of desirable goals such as education).

The magic circle that supposedly surrounds the game experience is not the only form of boundary construction that can be found in game research. In the context of organizing the first conference of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003, I discussed how creating a new autonomous discipline such as game studies mainly involves constructing boundaries on different levels:

[...] doing game studies, creating a new discipline, means constructing boundaries on content, researcher and institutional level and therefore participating in a process of inclusion and exclusion, of constructing the other ("othering") in order to construct oneself. (Copier 2003, 405)

This process of inclusion and exclusion revolves around which games, forms of play, and players should be studied, how they should be studied, by whom, and why. One of the boundary constructions I discussed was between game researchers, designers, and players, which continued to be an important issue over the last few years.

Following up on Espen Aarseth's advice to understand games through the ethnographic method of "self-play" (Aarseth 2003), researchers often flaunt their player's identity, while at the same time asserting their authority as a researcher. Game researchers make use of the work of designers and players who are theorizing games, while simultaneously defining them as "others" theorize from an applied design perspective, instead of for an academic perspective. Between 2003 and 2005, game researchers presented their work in the "Ivory Tower" column that is published at the International Game Developers' Association website: "Rather than an iconic barrier, this "Ivory Tower" will serve as a bridge among game developers and academic game researchers. The aim is to focus on fundamental game research issues, tying them to concrete examples and game development questions."²⁸ And, while during the 2006-2007 *Game Developers' Conference* game researchers presented "The Game Studies Download: Top 10 Research Findings," according to John Hopson, most commercial game designers are still not listening to what academic game researchers have to say (Hopson 2006). Academic game researchers are simultaneously opening and closing the boundaries of the ivory tower. At the same time, game designers and players are "othering" academics as "theory snobs."

Another boundary that game scholars continually (re)constitute is one between digital games and "analogue" games and forms of play. Although it has been claimed that digital games should be understood in the context of analogue play and research (Aarseth 2003, Frasca 1999 and 2003, Juul 2000), the new field of game studies mainly focuses on research into digital games. As a result, cross-medial research that includes both digital and analogue play is still in its infancy. On role-play speci-

28 http://www.igda.org/columns/ivorytower/ivory_archive.php

cally, game researcher Frans Mäyrä noted, for instance, that “The media-independent research into tabletop RPG and larp in its multiple important forms is still lagging behind in the academic world” (Mäyrä 2004, ix). At the same time, computer-mediated role-playing games are a favorite object of study across a wide variety of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, and economics. In chapter 1, I have shown how helpful cross-medial research into Fantasy role-playing games is in understanding the contested relationship between instrumental play and role-play in WoW. I argued that it is crucial to have a cross-medial understanding of role-play in order to come to terms with the MMORPG role-play processes and experiences.

Furthermore, most researchers of computer-mediated role-playing games (MUDs and MMORPGs) focus on the instrumental play that the PvE and PvP modes offer: doing quests, fighting monsters, chatting, trading, gaining experience, learning skills, and advancing levels or fighting other players (Castronova 2006, Taylor 2006). Only a few scholars discuss role-play, often focusing on role-play as a form of interactive storytelling (Aarseth 1997, Klastrup 2003, Mortensen 2003, Murray 1997, Schaap 2001, Yee 2006) or identity play (Bruckman 1992, Turkle 1997). However, as of late, some RPG researchers are studying role-play as a cross-medial phenomenon, tying their work into the knowledge networks on PnP RPGs and LARP both inside and outside academia (Montola 2005, 2006 and 2007, Tyhsen et al. 2005 and 2006, Vallius et al. 2006). These are examples of boundary actors who link across boundaries.

In what follows, I offer a reassembling of the ways in which game researchers as well as designers and players have theorized both analogue and digital Fantasy role-play. In order to provide an understanding of the ways in which role-play in Fantasy role-playing games has been theorized, I used the network perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT).

From this perspective, one can see that the knowledge network on Fantasy role-playing games is comprised of a collection of smaller networks, tiny clusters in which each human or nonhuman actor is connected to all other nodes within the cluster by strong ties (for example collaborations). Weak ties (for example, a meeting during a conference) connect the members of these clusters to other clusters who have strong ties in their own circles (Grannovetter 1973). These clusters revolve, for example, around academic disciplines, research or design associations, companies, certain games, or ways of play. I distinguished between two large knowledge clusters that are continually bracketed off from and encapsulate many other knowledge networks: “inside academia” and “outside academia.” “Inside academia” is understood as research and theorization that is disseminated within an academic context. The main goal of this work is descriptive and analytical academic theorization, while the secondary goal can be design oriented. “Outside academia” means that the theorist can still be an academic, however, the work is being disseminated through non-academic channels, such as design publications, forums, and weblogs. The main goal is applied theorization, the means to enhance the design and play of role-playing. The theory of boundary work and the concept of a boundary actor is used to examine critically when, how, and to what end the boundaries between the different knowledge networks as well as around the magic circle of play are drawn and defended (Gieryn 1983, 1999, and 2002).

First I present research into PnP RPGs and LARP as it has been done “inside academia.” These studies deal with the ambiguity of role-play by framing the experience in different frames or spheres. Next, I discuss the concept of the magic circle in relation to the framing of the role-play experience.

Framing the Role-Play Experience

Sociologist Gary Alan Fine is a pioneer when it comes to theorizing the cultural dynamics of role-play (*Shared Fantasy*, 1983). Living in Minneapolis, the area where D&D was conceived, Fine learned about Fantasy role-playing games through an informal conversation with a colleague in 1977.

Because he knew that I was interested in the sociology of culture, he mentioned that his son was an active war gamer, and had recently been talking about a new type of gaming, similar to war games, which he called role-play gaming. He mentioned that recently an article had been published in the Minneapolis Tribune about these games (Kern 1977). I had some interest in war games in high school, and I obtained a copy of the article. Although the article was specific, it did describe the local gaming club and indicated the location of its meetings. I decided that I would attend one Friday evening. (Fine 1983, 243-244)

Between 1977 and 1978, Fine role-played in the Minneapolis-based Golden Brigade Club and later in two private gaming groups, both as a player and as a gamemaster. We have to understand Fine’s work

in the context of the early years of PnP RPGs, when a multitude of D&D clones were being published. *The games that Fine played were Traveler (1977), Chivalry & Sorcery (1977), and Empire of the Petal Throne (1975).* Compared to D&D, these games had more detailed world descriptions and focused social simulation (which includes both instrumental play and role-play) instead of dungeon crawling. From a social interactionist perspective, Fine analyzed PnP RPGs as a contemporary "urban leisure subculture" (Fine and Kleinman 1979). He understood Fantasy game culture as a "shared fantasy," a (micro)cultural system or "idioculture" (Fine 1979), and explored the processes by which players generated meanings and identities through engrossment and identification with their characters. Fine argued that Fantasy role-playing games illustrated the dynamics of cultural creation, which may be similar among many different groups in society.

Performance researcher Daniel Mackay defined PnP RPGs in 2001 as an "imaginary entertainment environment" (Mackay 2001). He set out to consider role-play as a performance art, contextualizing the activity in its reciprocal relationship to popular culture. Like Fine, Mackay built on his experience as both role-player and gamemaster, and his book was the result of a "longtime desire to write about the art of role-playing games" (Mackay 2001, xi). One of the games that Mackay played and analyzed was *Everway (1995)*, a dice-less role-playing game with an emphasis on role-play. According to Mackay, the RPG functions as a framework that facilitates the performance of both the gamemaster and the players. Therefore his main focus was on the aesthetics of the role-play performance. He considered the ontology of the role-played performance and the kind of subject that role-playing games texts and processes construct. Mackay considered Fantasy role-playing games to be examples of the means by which recreational communities (subcultures) are formed.

Not only is the relation between the real and imaginary in the role-play experience an important subject to the work of Fine and Mackay, it's also important to the handful of other academic work on PnP RPGs and LARP. In order to understand the construction of the different layers of the role-play experience, Fine made use of Erving Goffman's "frame analysis," while Mackay referred to Richard Schechner's theories on "performance spheres" (Goffman 1974, Schechner 1988).

In *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life (1959)*, sociologist Goffman took Shakespeare's famous line "all the world's a stage" to heart and formulated social interaction in terms of drama. Using theater as a metaphor, Goffman argued that we are all actors playing a variety of roles. We adjust these roles continually in order to create a coherent social interaction in a specific setting. In his 1974 book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Goffman expanded on his ideas of social interaction by adding the concept of "framing," which focused on how individuals make sense of "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of an ongoing activity" (Goffman 1974, 10). These "strips of activity" (simply the moment of social interaction that the researcher decides to study) can have various interpretations, depending on the frame that is used. Goffman described frames as cognitive structures or interpretation schemes that guide perception and representation of activities. Frame analysis builds on the concept of "primary frameworks" which are the elemental interpretative frames

through which we make sense of the world. The frameworks can be transformed by “keys” or “fabrications.” A game is, for instance, a keyed frame because all participants are aware that an activity that already has meaning in the primary framework has a different meaning in the keyed frame. In the case of a fabrication, the individual is unaware that this keying has occurred (for instance, being part of a game without knowing it) (Greg 2006). Frame analysis was widely discussed during the time in which Fine was writing his analysis of Fantasy role-playing games.

Fine argued that games are particularly appropriate for the application of frame analysis as they represent a keyed frame consisting of a bounded set of social conventions that induce engrossment. Goffman’s 1961 essay, “*Fun in games*,” with its concern for the boundaries of play and experience, can be understood as the precursor to frame analysis. Building on Goffman, Fine distinguished between the primary framework (conventions of daily life), the game framework (conventions of the game), and the character framework (conventions of the character).

Primary Framework	The common sense understandings that people have of the real world.
Game Framework	Referring to the conventions of the game.
Character Framework	In which the players are not manipulating their characters (game framework) but in which they are their characters: “The character identity is separate from the player identity.”

Table 1: Frames of meaning in Fantasy role-playing games (Fine 1983, 186).

Mackay’s taxonomy of the role-playing game is based on work by the pioneer of performance studies, Richard Schechner. He aimed to situate role-playing games in a context that included other performances, both theatrical and anthropological. The categories that Mackay borrowed from Schechner and applied to role-playing performance are: drama, script, theater, and performance, all of which are part of the larger performance domain Schechner called “ritual.” According to Mackay, the category of drama is the role-playing game rulebook, while the script is both the game system as well as the fantasy world as it is defined by both the rulebooks and the participants. In turn, the drama and the script inform the categories of theater and performance, which consist of the actual role-play performance. Furthermore, Mackay expands Fine’s categorization into five frames of meaning: the primary or social framework inhabited by the person, the game framework inhabited by the player, the narrative frame which is inhabited by players narrating their characters’ actions in third person, the constative frame, in which the gamemaster describes the setting of the game both in first and second person, and, finally, the performative frame in which the players act out their character in first person.

Primary frame	Inhabited by the person. Referring to the common sense understanding that people have of the real world.
Game frame	Inhabited by the player. Referring to the conventions of the game.
Narrative frame	Inhabited by the raconteur. Players narrating their character’s actions in third person.
Constative frame	Inhabited by the addresser. Gamemaster describes settings and situations to the players in-character (NPCs) and in the second person.
Performative frame	Inhabited by the character. Players doing first-person in-character talk.

Table 2: Frames of meaning in Fantasy role-playing games (Mackay 2001, 56).

Next to the work of Fine and Mackay, only a handful of articles on PnP role-play can be found in academic publications. A recent ethnographic study on the ways in which role-players negotiate symbolic boundaries has been conducted by Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust (Waskul and Lust 2004, Waskul 2006). Referring to the work of Fine, Mackay, Goffman, and Huizinga, Waskul and Lust set out to analyze how players negotiate between the categories of persona (the Fantasy character), player (the one who plays the Fantasy character), and person (other roles that a player takes up in daily life such as student, researcher, etc.). These categories match with Fine’s character framework (character), game framework (player), and primary framework (person).

Compared to the academic research on PnP role-playing games, scientific publications on live action role-play (LARP) are even rarer. However, it is remarkable how much work has been done in Northern Europe. Much of this work has been conducted by students and has been written in non-English-language publications. One of the few academic works on LARP in English is Geir Tore Brenne’s Master’s thesis, *Making and Maintaining Frames. A Study of Meta Communication in laiv Play* (2005). Brenne theorized Norwegian LARP or *laiv*, as it is called in Norway. He used Goffman’s frame analysis in order to understand how *laiv* players make and maintain the framing of their play situation. He distinguished between the same three frames as Fine, plus a level of subframes within the character frame. Brenne argued how the process of defining a situation in *laiv* can be understood as a demonstration of social constructionism, in which social reality as a whole is perceived as “constructed” (Berger and Luckman 1966).

Level	Frame	Role
micro	Subframes within the playframe	Character’s role as brother, mother, enemy, lover etc to other characters within play
meso-1	Playframe in a play	Character
meso-2	Laiv key, the subculture of laiv	Laiv player
macro	Oslo city culture	Young adult

Table 3: The levels, frames and roles of *laiv* play (Brenne 2005, 34).

Beyond the Magic Circle of Role-Play

Even though the term magic circle might seem to be especially fitting for research into Fantasy role-playing games, I have argued, along with others, that the concept is very problematic (Castronova 2006, Copier 2005, Lammes 2006, Nieuwdorp 2005, Taylor 2006, Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). The problem is twofold. Conceptually, the magic circle refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space, which creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary that hides the complexity of actual games and play. The metaphor makes the boundary between "game" and "non-game" even stronger because it represents the game space as an isolated magical wonderland which seems to be almost impossible to grasp rationally.

In their book *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman open the chapter in which they present the magic circle with a picture of a chalk circle drawn on the pavement. In this chapter they discuss the "artificial" quality of games, which is one of the key concepts in their definition of games:

*A game is a system in which players engage in **artificial** conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 80, emphasis by me)*

In discussing this further Salen and Zimmerman define artificial as: "Games maintain a boundary from the so-called "real life" in both time and space. Although games obviously occur within the real world, artificiality is one of their defining features." (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 80) In order to express this important feature of games, they borrowed Huizinga's term magic circle and assert that two important features of concept are that it is closed and magical:

As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. [...] The term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 95)

Salen and Zimmerman instilled the artificiality of games and play with no less than three strong metaphors: the magic circle, the chalk circle, and the clock. While Huizinga referred to the magic circle as an example of a playground, Salen and Zimmerman interpret circle as "magical" in terms of giving a feeling of enchantment. The chalk circle, which reminds one of children's games, visualizes the idea that the magic circle is literally bracketed off from the "real world." Their description of game time in terms of a clock that is both limited and limitless makes the image of a magical wonderland complete. This representation of the magic circle is problematic because it creates a strong dichotomy of "inside" versus "outside." The metaphors generate the idea of an innocent imaginary space that exists within its own boundaries of space and time, seemingly untouched by social reality, work, and power.

In order to discuss the relation between fantasy and reality, scholars have opted for a counter-rhetoric that includes breaking or blurring the boundaries between the inside and outside of a game. Markus Montola, for instance, defined pervasive games, that is games that use the physical world and multiple media as a platform (such as *I Love Bees*, 42 Entertainment 2004) as games that deliberately expand the social, spatial, and temporal boundaries of the magic circle (Montola 2005). MMORPG researchers have argued that the magic circle of MMORPGs becomes porous when we consider, for example, the sale of virtual items and gold on eBay (Castronova 2006, Taylor 2006). Counter to the image that they created with their metaphor of the magic circle, Salen and Zimmerman themselves have also argued that the boundary between playing and not playing is often fuzzy and permeable.

Beyond the metaphor of the magic circle

In order to understand this paradox of the magic circle, in which games can both be open and closed, we have to engage more critically with Huizinga's *Homo ludens* and Salen and Zimmerman's work.

Huizinga wrote his definition of play in relation to his overarching argument that culture is *sub specie ludi*: civilization arises and unfolds in and as play. He set out not only to better understand the play element in culture, but mainly to understand the play element of culture; how culture itself is formed through the process of play.²⁹ Therefore he argued that "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration." At the same time, Huizinga wrote, it is an important part of daily life: "[...] play presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives. As a regularly recurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the compliment, in fact an integral part of life in general" (Huizinga 1938, ed. 1955, 9). He assumed that game-play generates experiences and memories that influence not only future play but also help to shape all other aspects of culture.

Building on Huizinga's idea that games are "temporary worlds within the ordinary world," Salen and Zimmerman argued that games can be open or closed systems depending on the perspective that we choose. They distinguished between three primary perspectives: rules (formal perspective), play (experiential perspective), and culture (cultural perspective). Salen and Zimmerman claimed that the formal systems of games are closed, whereas if we consider games as play, the magic circle can be either open or closed and considered as culture; games are extremely open systems.

29 Most of the misinterpretation of *Homo Ludens* might be due to the fact that, against Huizinga's will, the English subtitle of his book became "A Study of the Play Element in Culture" instead of "of Culture," thus hiding the nature of his overarching argument.

rules	The essential logical and mathematical structures of a game.	Games considered as rules are closed systems. Considering games as formal systems means considering them as systems of rules prior to the actual involvement of players.
play	The players participation with the game and with other players.	Considered as play games can be either closed systems or open systems. Framed as the experience of play, it is possible to restrict our focus and look at just those play behaviors that are intrinsic to the game, ignoring all others. At the same time, players bring a great deal in from the outside world: their expectations, their likes and dislikes, social relationships, and so on.
culture	Larger cultural contexts in which games are designed and played.	Considered as culture, games are extremely open systems. In this case, the internal functioning of the game is not emphasized ; instead, as a cultural system the focus is on the way the games exchanges meaning with culture at large.

Table 4: Games as rules, play and culture (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 6, 96-97).

Salen and Zimmerman argued that the study of game phenomena that cross the borders of the magic circle (such as computer-mediated and analogue role-playing games, player-generated mods and hacks, level editors and tools designed for players, games created as open-source systems, games that are played within and across multiple platforms, and self-organizing social networks) are essential for the future of innovative game development. However, even after discussing a few of these examples, Salen and Zimmerman still maintain their use of the magic circle, stating that: "[...] although the magic circle blurred, shifted, and blended in with its environment, it still in some way remained intact" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 28). In trying to find a way around the "magic" and the "strong boundaries" of the metaphor of the magic circle in order to express how they can both be open and closed, a few game researchers reformulated the magic circle. In discussing pervasive games, Eva Nieuwdorp (2005) chose to adapt Goffman's metaphor of the "screen" which he presented in the aforementioned essay, "Fun in games": "[...] the screen not only selects but also transforms what is passed through it" (Goffman 1961, 33). In his economical analysis of MMORPGs, Edward Castronova opted for the term "porous membrane": "[...] people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioral assumptions and attitudes with them. As a result, the valuation of things in cyberspace becomes enmeshed in the valuation of things outside cyberspace" (Castronova 2006, 150). In her ethnography of *Everquest* (EQ), T.L. Taylor defined MMORPG play as "play between worlds": "Playing EQ is about playing between worlds – playing back, and forth, across the boundaries of the game and the game world, and the "real" or nonliteral game space" (Taylor 2006, 17).

Building on these modifications of the magic circle, Daniel Pargman and Peter Jakobsson proposed a "weak-boundary hypothesis" (Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). In order to adopt a more flexible idea of the boundaries of play, they (re)introduced Goffman's concept of "frames" and Fine's idea of "frames-within-frames," which suggests that, inside the primary framework (which is the basis for everything we do), we establish roles and subframes that redefine the situation. Pargman and Jakobsson argued that gaming creates a specific set of roles or subframes. Thus, they replaced the magic circle with the porous or weak boundaries of the game framework, which holds the conventions of the game. In line with the work of Goffman and Fine they state that "There is nothing magical about switching between roles. It is something we do all the time and can literally be done at the blink of an eye" (Pargman and Jakobsson 2006).

Beyond the concept of the magic circle

Even though the magic circle between the real and the imaginary can be blurred, shifted, and blended, Salen and Zimmerman argued that it will always be there. A way of circumventing the magic circle is leaving the idea that game-play happens separately from ordinary life out of the definition. Not only Salen and Zimmerman but also game researcher Jesper Juul formulated a definition of games based on an analysis of previous conceptions of games and play (Juul 2003 and 2005). If we look at the definitions they use, we can distinguish two positions with regard to the play experience. On the one hand, there are researchers and designers who set games and play apart from the ordinary experience, while on the other hand, others maintain that continuity exists between play and daily life. While Salen and Zimmerman chose to include the separation between games and ordinary life in terms of artificially and the magic circle, Juul left this aspect out of his "classical game model" as the boundaries between play and nonplay are "fuzzy and under constant negotiation" (Juul 2003, 34). As a result, Juul presents the following definition of a game:

A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (Juul 2003, 35)

He considers PnP RPGs to be borderline cases of games as their rules are not fixed. Leaving the concept of artificiality a step away from the magic circle, however, it does not necessarily encourage an understanding of the ambiguity of game-play. I believe that the primary problem is not artificiality, but the fact that Salen and Zimmerman use the magic circle to define artificiality as a boundary in time and space that separates games from ordinary life. Instead, they could have used the literal meaning of artificiality which refers to something that is "humanly contrived, often of a human model," or something which is "caused or produced by a human and especially social or political agency" (Merriam-Webster). This way of defining artificiality brings the game model of Salen and Zimmerman sud-

denly very close to the conventions of the game, as they can be described by a keyed game framework (Goffman 1974, Fine 1983, Pargman and Jakobsson 2006). From this perspective, artificiality is not a preexisting quality, but a schemata of interpretation that is negotiated and (re)constructed in relation to primary frameworks. Agreements on time and space are but two of the variabilities in this framework, which, as Fine, Mackay, Waskul and Lust, and Brenne have shown, can also consist of a variety of other keyed frames.

In the article "Connecting Worlds" (2005), in which I pointed out the problems with both the concept and the metaphor the magic circle, I suggested shifting our focus from a study of games in culture to a study of game-play as one of the play elements and producers of culture. Thus, I aimed to break away both from defining "what is" and "what is not" a game and from separating digital and analogue role-play. Instead, I set out to understand the activity of role-play as it takes place within the context of a variety of role-playing games and the heterogeneous Fantasy game culture. A crucial aspect of this approach is of course the fact that role-playing games are multi-player games that not only revolve around the relation between the player and the game, but between players and the game as well. A shift from games to the behavior of players in relation to others and the game is also what differentiates the work of Fine, Mackay, Waskul and Lust, and Brenne from most recent scholarship on digital games. They understand game-play from a sociocultural perspective: social interactionist (Fine, Waskul and Lust), performative (Mackay), and social constructivist (Brenne). By building on the work of Goffman and Fine, Pargman and Jakobsson's "weak-boundary hypothesis" also focuses on play instead of games, which separates their alternative from, for instance, the "porous membrane" (Castronova). A focus on play as social interaction within a specific context opens up possibilities to discuss the ambiguity and variability of game-play, for instance with regard to the relation between real and the imaginary, not in terms of a "closed" and "magical" circle, but as constructs, that are, like Juul mentioned, under constant negotiation. Rules are also one part of these constructs that can be negotiated and (re)constructed. An approach to understanding these constructs is Goffman's concept of "frames" and Schechner's "spheres." In using these concepts, Fine, Mackay, Waskul and Lust, and Brenne all concluded that the role-play experience is shaped by (re)constructions and negotiations between various real and imaginary frames, between what I called the "code and culture" of the game in chapter 1.

Fine took Goffman's argument further by specifying two components of frame analysis: 1) the relationship among identities generated in the primary-, game-, and character frameworks, and 2) the stability of frames. Conceiving of players as collections of selves, he argued that these identities are simultaneously activated; the frames are porous and players are constantly shifting between them. Furthermore, he stated that even though engrossment takes place, players are very aware of the relationships between frames, as part of the game is a conscious playing with the different awareness contexts (Fine 1983, 181-204). Building on the work of Schechner, Mackay stated that because frames are porous we should not think of these levels of experience as frames, but as "spheres" that come together in a network:

If one needs a metaphor to localize and (temporarily) stabilize playing, "frame" is the wrong one – it's too stiff, too impermeable, too "on/off", "inside/ outside." "Net" is better: a porous, flexible gatherer; a three-dimensional, dynamic flow-through container. (Schechner 1993, 41, as cited by Mackay 2001, 63)

He argued that the player-character can be articulated within each of the spheres and that behavior in all the penetrating layers together creates the performance (Mackay 2001, 64). In a similar fashion, Waskul and Lust concluded that during play the conceptual boundaries between the layers implode, "[...] as person, player, and persona blend and blur into an experience that necessarily involves all three" (Waskul and Lust 2004, 351). Brenne, who studied the role of meta-communication in making and maintaining the play situation, argued that this involves both general conventions and particular knowledge of and habits in a situation that are learned and rehearsed in advance, and the active use of techniques to shape and maintain the situation when acting during play (Brenne 2005, 127-131).

To recapitulate, the concept of the magic circle refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space that, combined with the strong metaphor, creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary which hides the ambiguity, variability, and complexity of actual games and play. Building on the above analysis of framing in role-playing games, I posit that even rules alone do not create a preexisting artificiality. Games need to be played, and players actively influence each other as well as what the system of the game becomes. Thus the game-play experience is always the result of the interplay between different cognitive frameworks on rules, play, and culture.

The network perspective

In this thesis I propose to go beyond the magic circle by using a network perspective in order to understand this interplay between game rules, play, and culture, which is, according to Salen and Zimmerman, crucial for innovative game research and design. They already made the first step towards a network perspective by defining games as systems: "a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 55). However, as I have shown, the magic circle prevents their model of games and play from being used for a deeper understanding of the ambiguity and variability that are essential to play.

Recently there have been more scholars who set out to understand games or role-playing games from a network perspective. However, I understand games to be more than "magic nodes" in the networks of society, as game researcher Sybille Lammes proposed in her critique on the magic circle (Lammes 2006),³⁰ rather, I perceive games as complex networks in themselves (in a similar way as Salazar 2005, Bruun et al. 2007).³¹ This allows me to understand how online role-playing games as networks of human and nonhuman actors are simultaneously tied in with other networks of production, power, and experience. Together, these networks make up what Manuel Castells called the network society (Castells 2000).

Besides an understanding of how the rules, play, and culture are intertwined, the network perspective also allows us to go beyond the concept of the ivory tower. The ivory tower refers to a preexisting status of academia, which, combined with the strong metaphor of a space that is disconnected from daily reality, creates a dichotomy between "inside" and "outside" academia that hides the complexity of the actual relationship between researchers, designers, and players. It hides, for example, how game researchers and their work are always part of the networks they study. The different roles and frames of players, designers, and researchers are deeply intertwined while at the same time being negotiated and contested. However, from these interrelations, innovative research, design, and play can grow. This is crucial if we consider the fact that governments are now funding game research in which different academic and design disciplines are brought together for the context-driven purpose of boosting both the local entertainment game industry and the development of game applications for education and

³⁰ I find it problematic that Lammes continued to use the concept of "magical": "I find this an apt term to both capture the intensity of playing a game as well as the (fictitious) enchantment that games can bring about" (Lammes 2006, 13). Holding on to this metaphor renders invisible the ways in which "intensity" and "enchantment" are paradoxical and negotiated experiences.

³¹ Javier Salazar considered virtual worlds and MMORPGs as complex systems (Salazar 2005) and The Danish Larp Network Group, consisting of a group of natural sciences students, uses the theory of complex networks to evaluate and design LARP scenarios. They consider the nodes to be players, characters, or roles and the ties the relations between them. "Who knows who in real life, who is supposed to know who before the game starts, and how does this translate to the whole game? How does the network of the larp evolve during a game?" (Bruun et al. 2007, 116).

training. Knowledge and innovation cannot be found in one node or hub but in the interrelations of the network as a whole.

Understanding role-play from a network perspective

From the network perspective, role-play is especially interesting. As I have shown in chapter 1, role-play is a contested and negotiated style of play, which makes it useful to uncover the rules, play, and culture that are constructed through online role-playing games. Additionally, because role-players consciously engage in the process of constructing and negotiating roles and frames, it becomes very visible how, through MMORPG play, preexisting roles and frames are negotiated and (re)constructed, while at the same time new roles and frames are being constructed. These roles and frames can simultaneously be related to what we consider to be real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline.

For various situations we construct different roles and cognitive frames, however, these identities and frames exist simultaneously, they are porous and never fixed. These roles and frames can never be fixed because they are continually being negotiated and (re)constructed, as both Huizinga and Goffman suggested, often through play-like processes. Games are merely one of the settings in which these processes take place. From this, it follows that my goal is not a mapping of frames. Frame analysis after Goffman has been heavily criticized for being too much focused on bracketing off frames while it is difficult to empirically identify the different, unconsciously constructed, and quickly shifting frames (Gamson 1975, Benford, 1997). This is precisely why Schechner redefined frames into spheres, so he could describe the flexibility of the process. Instead of discussing the properties of frames or spheres, my focus is on the process of (re)constructing and negotiating cognitive frames.

In chapter 1 I already presented a cross-medial working definition to describe the power process that shapes up the process of playing a role-playing game. I believe that this is the process that binds together the three important “invisible rules” that role-play theorist Markus Montola defined as the foundation for role-play interaction. These rules establish that a role-playing game needs a process of defining an imaginary world (world rule) and it needs a power structure (power rule) with several player-characters (character rule) who are controlling this process (Montola 2007, 94). Conflict and negotiation are the aspects that set these foundations of the role-play interaction in motion.

In a role-playing game-player-characters engage in conflict and (re)construct and negotiate networks of individual and shared cognitive frames by means of formal and informal rules.

In role-playing games player-characters thus (re)construct networks of individual and shared cognitive frames that relate not only to game and character frameworks, but also to primary frameworks. The type of conflict depends on the goal and the style of conflict negotiation (style of play). In role-play, the primary goal is the construction of a coherent shared fantasy (shared cognitive frame) through enacting the character and dramatic conflict (in chapter 4 I distinguish between improvised and story-driven dramatic conflict). As I have shown in the previous two chapters, role-play in WoW is always negotiated against instrumental play, in which the primary goal is progression of the character through instrumental conflict with the game and/or other players. Below I give a further explanation of the aspects that make up my working definition of the role-play process.

1 Network: A network is an enduring pattern of interaction among heterogeneous human and nonhuman actors who define one another (identity). They coordinate themselves on the basis of common protocols, values, and goals (process). A network reacts nondeterministically to self-selected external influences, thus not simply representing the environment but actively creating it (interdependence). Key properties of a network emerge from these processes and unfold over time, rather than being determined by any of its elements (emergence). The network of the game is tied in to the other networks of which society is made up (based on Stalder 2006, 180).

2 Player-characters: A player-character is one of the actors in the network of the game. Player-characters negotiate conflict with each other. The player can use the character as a pawn or enact the character's role, or anything in between. Players rapidly switch between these stances depending on the goal and style of play (based on Edwards 2004).

3 Conflict: Conflict is a contest of powers. Conflict between player-characters can take many forms, from cooperation to competition, from solo instrumental conflict with a game system to multiplayer dramatic conflict. Conflict can both be generated by the game and by players (based on Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Edwards 2004).

4 Negotiation: Player-characters negotiate conflict with one another and the game. Thus player-characters continually participate in a process of constructing and re-constructing individual and shared cognitive frames. Goals and play styles consist of different negotiation processes.

5 Formal and informal rules: The means by which players negotiate during play, including formal rules embedded in the code of the game, guidelines, and informal rules as defined by designers and players. Examples of informal rules are: the fictional setting, character creation, resolution of imaginary events, reward procedures, and even social conventions such as "ar-

iving on time." Formal and informal rules are not fixed but can be understood as cognitive frames that are continually negotiated (based on Kim 1997, Edwards 2004).

6 Cognitive frames: Individual and shared cognitive frames are definitions of a situation which are continually (re)constructed and negotiated in accordance with principles of formal and informal rules which govern conflict and the subjective involvement of player-characters in them. Cognitive frames can relate to the real or the imaginary or both. Frames exist within frames; they can exist simultaneously and are porous (based on Goffman 1974).

These definitions are based both on the work of academics as well as on the work of role-players, designers, and researchers of PnP RPGs and LARPs "outside" academia. In what follows I present these knowledge networks and their contents, as they consist of a thirty-year-old tradition of mixing play, design, and research. This tradition can be the basis for further developing a network perspective for computer-mediated role-playing games.

Play, Design, and Research

The RPG theorization that takes place "outside academia" is applied theorization; it is meant to enhance play and design. As I have shown in chapter 1, practically oriented discussion on Fantasy role-playing started directly after the publication of *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974. Wargaming magazines, as well as fanzines and newsletters dedicated to PnP RPGs, became a place for designers, gamemasters, and players to reflect on their play experiences. The same happened with the emergence of LARP in the early 1980s. Designers, gamemasters, and players alike started to analyze their play experience in order to improve it. Today, this theorization mainly takes place online on forums, blogs, and wikis, while LARP theorization also takes place during the *Knutepunkt* conferences and its published proceedings. While the theorization of PnP RPGs and LARP seems to be an "underground" world inhabited by independent designers and avant-garde players, the theorization of computer-mediated RPGs, especially MMORPGs, is part of this commercial industry itself.

There are many books on the design of computer-mediated role-playing games available (for example: Alexander 2003 and 2005, Mulligan and Patrovsky 2003). These books focus on either programming or on previous design experiences. Their target audience is the MMORPG designer. An interesting exception to this is Richard Bartle's *Designing Virtual Worlds* (2003), which not only addressed designers but researchers and players as well: "This is a book for people who design virtual worlds. Because of this, it's also a book for people who implement, operate, study or play virtual worlds" (Bartle 2003, xix). Bartle gives an historical overview of virtual worlds and discusses the general design principles of these worlds with an emphasis on the experience of players. Based on a

long-lasting debate between MUD players on what they want to get out of their MUD experience, Bartle created a taxonomy of player types that consists of achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers.

achievers	players give themselves game-related goals, and vigorously set out to achieve them
explorers	players try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world
socialisers	players use the game's communicative facilities, and apply the role-playing that these engender
killers	players use the tools provided by the game to cause distress/ help to other players

Table 5: Richard Bartle's taxonomy of player types (1990, 1996 and 2003).

Whereas achievers and explorers act and interact with the virtual world, socializers and killers prefer acting and interacting with each other (Bartle 2003, 130-148). Bartle's taxonomy became widely used by designers, players, and researchers alike, making his work into a boundary actor. However, Bartle was not the first to construct such a categorization of players and play styles. The players and designers who theorized PnP RPGs and LARP also made similar categorizations before him.

Theorizing PnP RPGs

Early role-play theorists focused on defining what is and what is not a role-playing game (mainly to differ the activity from its precursor wargaming) and categorizing role-players (Mason 2003). Chaosium's *Different Worlds* magazine (1979-1987), for example, presented a professional forum for discussion of role-playing games. In the article "Aspects of Adventure Gaming" (1980), gamemaster Glenn Blacow was one of the first to introduce a taxonomy of ways to play RPGs, which we can consider to be the precursor to future categorizations of play styles such as the *Threefold Model* (Kim 1997) and the *GNS Model* (Edwards 2001).

power gaming	the main drive of the players is gaining power in levels and special abilities
role-playing	the most important element is the player character and his or her life
wargaming	everything evolves around the tactical abilities of the players and the gamemaster
storytelling	the tale is most important, the player characters act within the limits of the tale

Table 6: Glenn Blacow's taxonomy of RPG play styles (1980).

Blacow stated that every game contained the aspects of power gaming, role-playing, wargaming, and storytelling to a rudimentary degree, but often one aspect overruled the others.³² The goal of his analysis was practical; the idea was that, by identifying player preferences, misunderstandings between players could be avoided. However, in many cases players developed these categories further in order

32 After Blacow's article, three related articles were published in *Different Worlds* that developed the concept further: *The Fourfold Way of FRP* (Johnson 1981), *Personalities of Role-Playing Gamers* (Pulsipher 1981), and *Profiles from the Four-Fold Way* (Costikyan 1984).

to privilege their own approach. This underlines that we have to understand theorization as a process of framing that is done by researchers, designers, and players alike. Framing both generates knowledge and is also a tool to build like-minded communities.

During the 1990s, discussion on role-playing moved from magazines and newsletters with limited print-runs and distribution to the Internet. The result was that theorists from all over the world could easily participate in the same discussions, which in turn created an enormous growth in the theorization of role-play. Discussions started in newsgroups such as the rec.games.frp.advocacy and continued in web-based forums such as The Forge. The analysis and taxonomy of game and player styles, along with the description of play experiences continued to be of major interest.

The Threefold Model. The rec.games.frp.advocacy Usenet newsgroup was started in 1992 by role-players, many with an academic background, in order to discuss comparisons between different role-playing games and styles. Role-player John Kim, who wrote the “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) section for the newsgroup and now maintains a website on RPG theory, stated that the original intent of the newsgroup was for it to be a place for “flame wars” (heated debates) between advocates of the different games and styles of play:

However, in the process of hashing out differences, a set of contributors began to actually discuss core concepts of role-playing: what it is, how it works, what styles and techniques exist, how to do it better. I believe that the key development of the group was an acknowledgment that there are different valid styles of role-playing. Different role-playing games are not merely different methods to achieve the same goals, but actually different goals in themselves. (Kim 2007)

The theory that grew out of the heated debates of the newsgroup was the *Threefold Model* (Kim 1997), which distinguished between three paradigms of play, each of which have different goals: dramatist, gamist, and simulationist. The basis of the model was the ways in which decisions are made in a PnP group. The newsgroup coined the concept “group contract” to refer to the formal and informal agreements among players. These agreements include not only the formal rules of the game and the expected style of play but social conventions as well, such as “call in advance if you know you’ll be late.” The proposition is that systems and players often have more than one goal and thus mix the different techniques of social decision making (Kim 1997).

dramatist	is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline.
gamist	is the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the players
simulationist	is the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns to affect the decision.

Table 7: The Threefold Model (Kim 1997).

The GNS Model. The *Threefold Model* was the inspiration for GNS Model (2001) and later *The Big Model* (2004) articulated by Ron Edwards. In 2001, independent game designers Edwards and Clinton R. Nixon created The Forge website and forums, a community for independent developers of PnP RPGs. Between 2001 and 2005, Edwards moderated two Forge forums, titled GNS Model Discussion and RPG Theory, dedicated to the theorization of role-playing games. Here, the Forge community created their own role-play theory in the context of the creation and review of “indie games.” Based on the Threefold Model and these discussions, Edwards characterized playing a role-playing game as a social activity that revolves around the social interactions and creative priorities of the participants. This social context can be defined as “social contract”: “All interactions and relationships among the role-playing group, including emotional connections, logistic arrangements, and expectations” (Edwards 2004).

The essence of role-play is negotiating which situations or events can be part of the “shared imagined space” (SiS) that is collectively constructed according to both informal and formal agreements. According to Edwards, the SiS contains five components: character, setting, situation, system, and color.

Character	A fictional person or entity which may perform actions in the imaginary situation.
Setting	Elements described about a fictitious game world including period, locations, cultures, historical events, and characters, usually at a large scale relative to the presence of the player-characters.
Situation	Dynamic interaction between specific characters and small-scale setting elements; Situations are divided into scenes. Considered to be the “central node” linking Character and Setting, and which changes according to System.
System	The means by which imaginary events are established during play, including character creation, resolution of imaginary events, reward procedures, and more.
Color	Imagined details about any or all of System, Character, Setting, or Situation, added in such a way that does not change aspects of action or resolution in the imagined scene.

Table 8: The five components that shape the shared imagined space (SiS)(Edwards 2004).

The ways in which players negotiate the SiS differ greatly depending on their priorities. Edwards argued that the best chance for a gaming group to be fun on a sustained basis is when both the system’s “techniques” (GM tasks, character creation, resolution of conflict, reward system) and the “ephemera” (the moment-to-moment or sentence-to-sentence actions and statements during play such as in-character and out-of-character dialogue, referring to texts, sound effects, taking or referring to notes, kibitzing, laughing, praise, or disapproval) are coherent with a certain play paradigm or “shared creative agenda”. His GNS model distinguishes between the three creative agendas of gamism, narrativism, and simulationism.

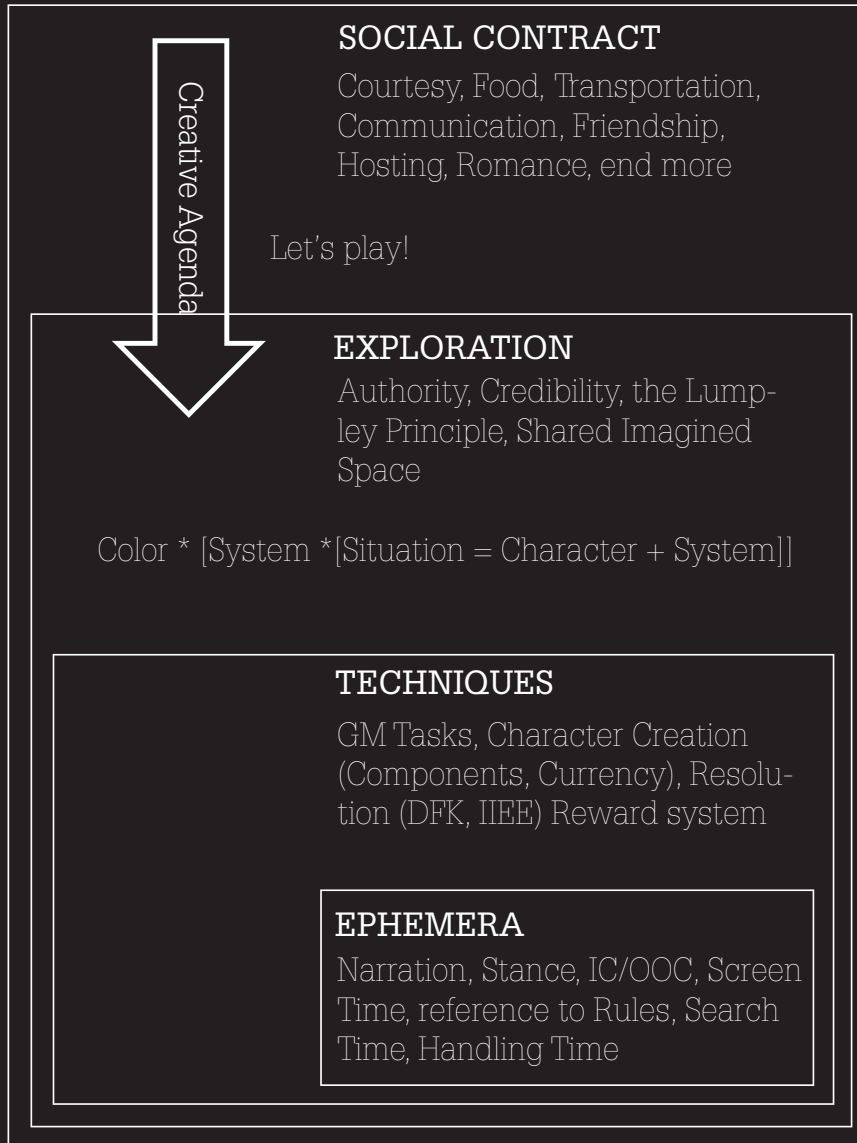


Figure 1: The Big Model. Contents within each box are considered to be expressions or specialized versions of the outer boxes which contain them (Edwards 2004).

Gamist	The players accept the challenges of the Shared Imagined Space, taking risks and showing performance (as players) and reaching or missing a certain goal. Sometimes all players may work together to a goal, sometimes they may compete.	Gamist players like to overcome obstacles, gain power or increased options, and 'win'.
Narrativist	The players engage in the moral and human issues of the Shared Imagined Space, taking a position (as players) and thereby making a statement about their characters/the game world/themselves.	Narrativists like to shape their role-playing sessions to create a good story or examine a dramatic theme.
Simulationist	The players experience the Shared Imagined Space as something worthwhile for its own sake, something which they do not fully control because it follows its own laws. Experiencing the Shared Imagined Space and contributing to it is part of any role-playing, but in this mode, it's the top priority.	Simulationists want their character's behavior and circumstances to follow a believable, consist, or 'realistic' logic.

Table 9: The three creative agendas, explanation based on Edwards (2001, 2004), Tarcikowski (2007), and Varney (2006).

Edwards also distinguished between three cognitive positions or "stances" a player can take towards his or her character. He argued that players can shift stances frequently, but specific stances are often used for certain creative agendas.

Actor	The person playing a character determines the character's decisions and actions using only knowledge and perceptions that the character would have. This stance does not necessarily include identifying with the character and feeling what he or she "feels," nor does it require in-character dialog.
Author	The person playing a character determines the character's decisions and actions based on the person's priorities, independently of the character's knowledge and perceptions. Author Stance may or may not include a retroactive "motivation" of the character to perform the actions. When it lacks this feature, it is called Pawn Stance.
Director	The person playing a character determines aspects of the environment relative to the character in some fashion, entirely separately from the character's knowledge or ability to influence events. Therefore the player has not only determined the character's actions, but the context, timing, and spatial circumstances of those actions, or even features of the world separate from the characters. Director Stance is often confused with narration of an in-game event, but the two concepts are not necessarily related.

Table 10: The three cognitive positions or "stances" a player can take towards his or her character (Edwards 2004).

Countless revisions, as well as new models and categorizations, have been formulated over the last ten years. Although each model gets more detailed, Bartle's MUD players' styles (1990), Blacow's taxonomy (1980), the *Threefold Model* (Kim 1997), and *The Big Model* (Edwards 2001 and 2004) show many similarities that I used to formulate my network perspective on Fantasy role-play. To recapitulate: playing a role-playing game is embedded in social interactions. The game revolves around negotiation in which events and situations can be part of the shared fantasy. This is done by both informal and formal rules, both related to the game and to daily life. There are different types of games and ways to play, ranging from highly instrumental to role-play. It is debated whether one game should cater to different styles or if a group of players can have different styles.

Actual play and design. In 2005 Edwards closed the Forge theory forums. He did so not because he felt there was no longer a need for theorization; instead, he argued, theorization should happen in the context of actual play experiences. Shortly before the closure of the Forge forums, academic role-play researcher Markus Montola argued that he regretted the fact that "Forge theory" was almost inaccessible to an outsider due to the fact that the knowledge is hidden in long discussion threads, with no references, written in sophisticated insider's lingo. To him, the solution was publication of the theorization from the Forge forums, to try to tie the knowledge network of The Forge in with an academic discourse. The differences between "inside academia" and "outside academia" are constructed around the following issues: 1) the language and terminology of the discourse, 2) dissemination of the discourse, and 3) the purpose and goal of the discourse.

Many Forge forum members have an academic background and refer to academic knowledge networks in their discussions. This means that the community developed its own, sophisticated discourse over time. The effect is that many new visitors to the forums feel overwhelmed by the theory and terminology and ask for clarification of terms and a history of the discussions. However, in reply to Montola, the Forge members argued that almost no one (except Edwards) felt the need or responsibility to write theoretical overviews. Timothy Kleinert explained how this was connected to the design-oriented goal of The Forge:

[...] the purpose of the Forge isn't to discuss & develop theory---it's to promote independent publishing. The theory is a by-product. As a community, we have no academic aspirations, publishing is our focus. We don't care if people learn the theory because theory isn't necessary for writing or playing games. It helps, but isn't necessary.³²

In practice, the closure of the theory forums meant that Edwards moved the theoretical discussion to another forum named Actual Play, in which designers, gamemasters, and players discuss what goes on in their actual role-play sessions and what they learn from those experiences. The more abstract theoretical discussions moved to "forge diaspora" such as personal websites and (shared) weblogs.

Theorizing LARP

Most "outside academia" theorization on LARP is being done in the context of the Knutepunkt conferences that have been organized since 1997, each year in a different Northern European capital. *Knutepunkt* literally means "the point of a knot," a nodal point or meeting place: "Knutepunkts are very diverse events, shifting between the atmosphere of an academic conference to the mood of a crazy surrealist larp. Networking, partying, lectures, discussions and entertainment have always been core components of *Knutepunkt*" (Fatland 2005, 12). Not only in name, but also content-wise, the Knutepunkt conferences and the proceedings published from them are a hub of different knowledge networks. The participants of the *Knutepunkt* conferences often have an academic or artistic background (or both). Some contributors work at universities, sometimes within a related field (Fatland 2005, 18). Authors often refer to academic knowledge, thus placing their work in an academic context

both in content and in language. Additionally, the way in which the books from the conference are published – as proceedings – refers to academic forms of knowledge dissemination. Over the course of the last five *Knutepunkt* publications (2003-2007),³³ a major transformation occurred: the focus shifted from a group of role-players theorizing about LARP in order to be taken seriously in 2003 to a group of role-players actively building bridges between different knowledge networks in 2005 and then, in 2007, to a group of role-players that knows it consists of a blend of researchers, artists, and game designers who are aiming to inspire, in a serious manner, “without being boring.”

Bridge building. The proceedings *As Larp Grows Up* (Gade, Thorup, and Sander 2003) is firmly grounded in a knowledge network of LARP players and designers. This volume of proceedings covers “the modern classics of Knutepunkt” including: “The Three Way Model” (a revision of the Threefold Model), “The Dogma 99 Manifesto” (aimed at the development of LARP as an art form and a medium in itself), and “The Manifesto of the Turku School” (aimed at character immersion and society simulation). Furthermore, the book contains descriptions and analysis of LARP processes and interactions, hands-on methods to create betterLARPs, and a dictionary of Nordic LARP terminology. The purpose and goal of the discourse is applied theorization: “The aim is to help the Knutepunkt newbie up to date – as well as spawn creativity, innovation and ideas. There is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Gade, Thorup, and Sander 2003, 6).

In the next proceedings, *Beyond Role and Play* (Montola and Stenros 2004), analytical or descriptive theory takes up a more important part, but this is still done alongside the applied theorization. In the introduction, Frans Mäyrä placed the proceedings in the context of digital game studies. The editors argued that the academical approaches are varied, ranging from: “the point of view of semiotics, theatre studies, narratology, game studies, cultural text analysis, post-modern identity theory, communication studies, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy, and textual analysis” (Montola and Stenros 2004, xi). Another form of “bridge building” is taking place at the level of content. While *Knutepunkt* started out as a discussion on LARP, Montola and Stenros also included articles on PnP RPGs and computer-mediated role-play. The most descriptive article in the book is Merja Leppälahti’s “About the Community of Role-Players.” As a folklorist, she aims to offer a view from the “outside,” understanding the Finnish role-playing community as a subculture: “I do not play role-playing games myself, and my interest in them is purely academic” (Leppälahti 2004, 289). Leppälahti describes the community of role-players as a postmodern “neotribe” (Maffesoli 1995), which is organized on the basis of free will.

For *Dissecting Larp* (Bøckman and Hutchison 2005), the editors experimented with a “peer-review” process because of the many articles that were submitted. According to the editors themselves this was not a peer-review process according to scientific standards: “[...] there exists no set definition as to what makes one an expert on larp matters. Neither is there any larpers holding a doctorate

³³ The first Knutepunkt book was published in 2001, but is no longer available: Anette Alsvåg, Ingrid Storrø, Erlend Eidsem Hansen (eds.): *The Book. Knudepunkt 2001*. In 2002 there was no publication.

in larp. We have elected to let the writers them selves be each others peers, holding to what academic standard there is" (Bøckman and Hutchison 2005, 7-8).

The *Knutepunkt* conference and proceedings *Role, Play, Art* (Fritzon and Wrigstad 2006) was very deliberately aimed at "bridge building" between the different networks: "We want to bridge the gap between theorists and practitioners, role-playing theorists and established academia and the gap between the role-playing scene and the rest of the society including established academia."³⁴ In the latest publication, *Lifelike* (Donnis, Gade, and Thorop 2007), the editors Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup look back on their first *Knutepunkt* proceedings, *As Larp Grows Up* (2003), and note the difference between back then when they wanted to be taken seriously and now: "[...] these days plenty of people take larp serious – all over the Nordic countries, researchers are studying 'our' media" (Donnis, Gade, and Thorop 2007, 7). While it is remarkable how many of the authors are PhD students, sometimes even in the field of game research, the authors are simultaneously (re)constituting "inside" versus "outside" academia by talking about "our media" and stating that "*Lifelike* is serious – but hopefully without being boring."

Conclusions

"Inside" academia, MMORPGs are mainly studied as digital games and within the context of other digital games. Most scholars focus on the instrumental play that the PvE and PvP modes offer. Recently there has been a growing interest in role-play in MMORPGs. I believe that we need to understand online role-playing games in the context of analogue Fantasy RPGs such as PnP RPGs and LARP. Both "inside" and "outside" academia, analogue role-playing games are often understood from the perspective of social interaction and social construction. Many RPG theorists have shown how players negotiate meaning and identities between the real and the imaginary (Brenne 2005, Edwards 2004, Fine 1983, Kim 1997, Mackay 2001, Waskul and Lust 2004 and 2006).

Currently, game research is characterized by the (re)construction of contested boundaries of the "magic circle" of the game experience and the "ivory tower" of academic game research. I proposed to go beyond the concept of the magic circle because it refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space that, combined with the strong metaphor, creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary that hides the ambiguity and complexity of actual games and play. In a similar vein, I have shown that we also need to go beyond the concept of the ivory tower.

34 <http://jeepen.org/knutpunkt/>

Based on an analysis of the ways in which role-play in Fantasy role-playing games has been theorized, I claimed that it is not enough to open up the magic circle by reformulations in terms of “screen” (Nieuwdorp 2005) or “porous membrane” (Castronova 2006). Instead, I proposed to withdraw from the concept of the magic circle and instead work from a network perspective.

The network perspective contributes to the three goals I have formulated in the introduction: First, to understand computer-mediated RPGs in the context of analogue RPGs and the network society. Secondly, understanding WoW as a network forces us to deal with the fact that actual play experiences are continually negotiated over the constructed boundaries of dichotomies such as real and imaginary, game and nongame, online and offline. Third, the network perspective allows us to understand how the different roles of game researchers, designers, and players are simultaneously intertwined and contested but always situated in the same networks.

It is from an understanding of the relations between players, designers, and researchers, that innovative research, design, and play grows. This is crucial in a time in which governments are funding game research in which different academic and design disciplines are brought together for the context-driven purpose of boosting both the local entertainment game industry and the development of game applications for education and training. Knowledge and innovation cannot be found in one node or hub, but in the interrelations of the network as

a whole. As in role-play, this requires negotiation of conflict by means of formal and informal rules in order to arrive at shared cognitive frames.

In the next and last chapter, I show what it means to go beyond the magic circle. Herein I will use my working definition of the process of role-playing games to theorize conflict and negotiation as it takes place in and around the *Argent Dawn* RP server. Furthermore, I illustrate what it means to describe and analyze role-play from the network perspective in which the roles and frames of researchers and players are closely intertwined but contested.