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Shared Cooperative Activity, Shared Competitive Activity, and the Irresistibility of Something Like a Magic Circle

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Abstract

Necessity-and-sufficiency-based accounts of *shared cooperative activity* do not adequately capture the social and/or cultural dimensions of agonistic multiplayer games and play (*shared competitive activity*), as their primary concern is often what occurs solely at the level of action. In this paper, more qualitative, collectivist approaches to the analysis of shared activities are introduced to a hierarchical method for visualising episodes of competitive play, and it is submitted that the types of *commitment* that players make to one another are productive of different configurations of social *obligation*. The resulting view is offered in support of existing "soft" conceptions of game studies' ever-contested magic circle, whereby the players of agonistic games—digital or otherwise—make plans and play *qua* different social–cognitive frames. These frames, often invoked in parallel, determine the extent to which extra-lusory and ludic concerns alike can be said to structure and influence in-game decision-making.

Introduction

John Searle (1990) and Michael Bratman (1992; 1993; 2014) have both observed that competitive activities—including, when agonistic, games and gameplay—subsist within structures of coordinated, shared intentions in favour of rivalry. Almost every form of conflict, writes Searle, necessitates "sophisticated higher level[s] of cooperation" (1990: 104). From two-player *Pokémon* battles to lawsuits, then, contests may only be characterised as such because they foreground and make public the conflicting intentions of their participants. These conflicting intentions often appeal to the very frameworks (usually comprising constitutive rules, laws, and social norms or customs) within which they are to be resolved. With Bratman assenting to Searle's brief commentary on shared competitive activity (Bratman, 2014: 55–56), the subject of intentional conflict within cooperative frameworks has enjoyed considerably less coverage in recent years. It seems as though (for some analytic philosophers) competitive or inherently agonistic[1] multiplayer games such as chess or, say, *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014) are easily sketched as shared *intentional* activities, motivated as they are by agents' common desire to playfully compete. Yet they fall short of qualifying as "fully" shared cooperative activities, per Bratman's rigid account, since the intentions held by the

[1] The claim that certain (computer) games are inherently agonstic (i.e., prescribing that players aggress by design, with little or no alternative) will be substantiated in due course.

respective human players stipulate that sub-plans only mesh "down" to a certain "level"[2] (1992; 2014). Of course, playful competition should not undermine the cooperative framework within which it occurs. Thus the minimal accounts of shared *competitive* activity offered to-date[3] might enjoy substantiation with insights from game studies. Indeed, as Mia Consalvo writes (2009: 415), "[w]e cannot understand gameplay by limiting ourselves to only seeing actions and not investigating reasons, contexts, justifications, limitations, and the like." However, in contrast with Consalvo's (2009) wider argument, the present paper also suggests that evoking something like a magic circle does not necessarily presuppose structuralist assumptions vis-à-vis game(play) ontology that privilege form over function. That is to say, not all readings or versions of the magic circle obfuscate the role of social and cultural context. On the contrary; incorporating something like a magic circle-type boundary into accounts of multiplayer gameplay as shared activity would permit Bratman, for one, to differentiate "real-world" conflicting plans and goals from those which may only *superficially* conflict by virtue of an activity's agonistic constitutive rules, or a simulation's absolute laws.

When we play, we adopt a lusory attitude (Suits, 1978), and, therefore, actions subsumable under the adopted *role* of a player are not always necessarily or absolutely self-determined. Rules delimit agency: We may make decisions in gameplay (or some other shared activity) purely because possible actions have been prescribed for us; our extra-lusory conscience may not necessarily identify fully with our in-game actions. Players' subjectivities have been described as being "given over" to a game and its rules (Malpas, 2014: §2.3), meaning that we relinquish partial control over our actions in rule-bound play and are, to some degree, "swept along" with it (Barthold, 2014: §3a). It is for this reason that something like a magic circle—some kind of social and/or psychic boundary between in-game action(s) and "real life"—remains both analytically irresistible and epistemologically indispensable. In combining elements of formal accounts of shared cooperative/competitive activity (e.g. Bratman) with ideas from more flexible, socially-oriented perspectives on the same phenomenon (e.g. Gilbert and Clarke), the original contribution of this paper is to introduce a hierarchical framework for analysing possible social contexts that may prelude, constrain, and ordain the playing of agonistic games. By positing *commitments* and *obligations* between players as determining of whether conflict in gameplay is serious or non-serious, I hope to show that the analysis of agonistic games as shared activities is most revealingly conducted at the level of participants' (joint) intentions. Describing competitive gameplay only in terms of physical or virtual action fails, as mentioned, to capture the innumerable ways in which social and cultural context can modulate agents' intentional states, overlooking the "gestaltist" collectivism vital to the conceptions of shared agency advanced by the likes of Margaret Gilbert and Herbert H. Clark.

[2] "Down" and "level" are in scare quotes because of the insolubility implicit in Bratman's choice of spatial analogy. As will be shown, players "come out the other side" of agonistic gameplay irrespective of in-game conflict; they do not cooperate "down" to a certain "level," only to grind to a halt when conflict arises. In other words, agonistic social gameplay will be shown as potentially subsumable under an extra-lusory, non-competitive shared primary goal.

[3] Bratman's detailed *necessity-and-sufficiency*-based account will not be recited in this paper. Suffice to say that fails to distinguish between "real" conflict and that which presupposed in and by the ludic activity. He has acknowledged (1993: 107) that a "modest modification" to his shared intention thesis is necessary to accommodate playful competition, but has, to the best of my knowledge (also Preston, 2013: 70), so far declined to revisit the original account.

Sketching the Argument

The paper proceeds by first reiterating ideas from Clark's *Social Actions, Social Commitments* (2006) and some other key concepts. Clark's notion of *commitment types* is employed in outlining how different tacit or explicit agreements between agents are productive of different primary and sub-goals, different obligations and, consequently, variable hierarchies of action and variable *ways of playing*. (For instance, playing seriously or non-seriously; earnestly or listlessly and arbitrarily.) Examining two contrasting commitment types shows that individual primary goals are linked to solitary ambitions (which do not warrant discussion in the parlance of shared intention). Conversely, participatory commitments are articulated as binding agents to a common primary goal (i.e., to simply play *x* together), disposing players to proceed sociably, and entitling them to rebuke one another for any subversion of the shared activity (Gilbert, 1990). From there, it will be shown that certain agonistic (esp. turn-based) multiplayer games effectively prescribe that players aggress by design; that their sub-goals *must* conflict. In games such as computerised chess (which would be the quintessential example), *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014), or a classic *Pokémon* title played over Game Link Cable (Nintendo, 1996), players may find themselves in a situation in which it is impossible *not* to aggress. Therefore, one can argue that certain gameplay contexts effectively *force* players' sub-plans and sub-goals[4] to clash. This is consequential because it highlights the point at which Bratman's insistence that the analysis of shared activities be conducted at the level of action—disregarding whether or not agents *identify* with those actions outside of the context the game—becomes an indefensible position in relation to games and other "artificial" contests. Finally, it will be suggested that the different levels of a shared (game/play) activity that become evident when visualised hierarchically correlate significantly with certain readings of the magic circle as concentric social–cognitive frames. Inversely, directing these conclusions back towards philosophy of action shows that permitting a (permeable or violable) magic circle or lusory frame goes some way to circumventing the problem that Bratman and Searle have so far declined to resolve, while simultaneously illustrating that something like a magic circle need not be seen as automatically at odds with more qualitative or socio-phenomenological analyses of games and play (cf. Consalvo, 2009).

Commitment Types

In *Social Actions, Social Commitments* (2006), Clark aims to stress the relevance of commitments in joint undertakings motivated by a common goal. He invokes the notion of commitment types to demonstrate how coordinated activities are *more than* or *different from* the mere product of two agents working "around" one another. The paper speaks of how commitments accumulate or "stack up" (Clark, 2006: 137) the further into the activity participants get. As is common in cognitive psychology (see Calleja, 2011: 153 for examples), hierarchies can thus be used as an instructive way of describing—in this instance, *visualising*—the structure of goals and plans, and can help demonstrate how unforeseen conditions and situations may emerge in the course of an activity, demanding joint reneging or (re)negotiation. Before delving into hierarchies, however, it is worth describing the two commitment types suggested as relevant to the main ways in which multiple human agents (most lucidly, two) can jointly play an agonistic game (the "purest" example of which is probably chess).

[4] In the context of shared cooperative/competitive activity as play, the "sub-" prefix can be read as "in-game."

Simple other-commitments (Clark, 2006: 130) are relatable to activities in which one agent openly commits *to* another that they will *perform* an activity or a series of actions (as opposed to *playing their part in it*). This public but non-collaborative commitment type, I suggest, is typified in and by serious or highly competitive contests—ones in which agents' *respective* primary goals are to attain victory; to see their counterparts fail. Here, in the context of, say, *Sid Meier's CivNet* (MicroProse, 1995), a simple other-commitment binds us to playing what is essentially *Civilization* (MicroProse, 1991) online, *against* one another, and stops short of obliging us to *assist* one another in gameplay. If we are truly competing in earnest (say, for money), we will offer neither advice nor assistance. In a competitive simple other-commitment type *CivNet* game, I play *CivNet against* you, with the individual, non-cooperative primary goal of attaining personal victory. I might sit silently and watch in keen anticipation as you make a series of disastrous early moves that will end the round prematurely, resulting in my personal victory. Owing to our circumspect and equivocal commitment type, I have offered only the bare minimum of assistance needed in order to facilitate the play activity (e.g. joining your game/lobby when prompted). Here, playing an enjoyable or exciting game of *CivNet/Civilization* is not of concern to us. We have not made commitments to undertake the activity amicably; it is common knowledge between us that each other's main aim is to win, and *not* to play an all-round satisfying, enjoyable, or pleasant game.

Participatory commitments (Clark, 2006: 130), on the other hand, can be interpreted as more sociable and collaboratively binding. Like Margaret Gilbert's "walking together" (1990), Clark's participatory commitments suggest the entitlement of one party to reprimand the other if any subversion of the joint action occurs. Participatory commitments imply the presence of common knowledge underlying a disposition to mutual support, as with Bratman's shared cooperative action (1992). The present paper proceeds on the basis that if we make participatory commitments to one another to play a companionable game of *Pokémon* over Game Link Cable, we jointly create the primary shared goal of *playing Pokémon together.* Importantly, we cannot (and do not) share or individually hold a primary goal of personal victory. This means, for instance, that if you deploy your hideously overpowered Lv. 100 *Charizard* against my feeble army of low-level grass-type Pokémon, I will have the right to rebuke you for having flouted our commitment to enjoy a nice game of *Pokémon* together. This is directly analogous to Gilbert's example of one person having the right to rebuke another for walking too quickly when the two have agreed to walk *together* (Gilbert, 1990). Here, in contrast to simple other-commitments, the game's agonistic substrate is a secondary consideration in our shared intention to play *x* together. With participatory commitments, *x* might not be an agonistic game of player-versus-player (PvP) *Pokémon* to begin with: We might agree to do something—*anything*—sociable together (*x*), and then only afterwards realise that the one game available to us is *Pokémon*, and that our abilities are mismatched, but that this fact can be easily and affably remedied by agreeing to a handicap (e.g. you only choose Pokémon of an equivalent level to mine).

Clark (2006) also advocates the analysis of shared actions or activities in hierarchical terms. Visualising shared cooperative and/or competitive activities in this way emphasises the temporal and lateral tendency for action-sequences to branch out in terms of meta-actions that

are subsumable under *and coloured by* commitments to the shared primary goal. This is of significance not least because, in reality, certain considerations in joint undertakings may only become apparent as time passes and preliminary actions cement and determine future possibilities. For example, harking back to the closing sentences of the previous paragraph, we might agree to play a computer game casually together (i.e., in a non-competitive way) and only later discover after some collaborative searching that *Pokémon* is the only game available to us. That we resort to playing PvP *Pokémon* does not modify our preordained primary and prelusory goal of doing something collaboratively, as opposed to competitively. The use of hierarchical analyses will show that competitive actions and intentions in agonistic gameplay are in some sense isolable to the level of their unfolding; to their frame of reference.

It has been suggested that agents making simple other-commitments to play *CivNet* will base their subsequent actions on separate, individually-held intentions to attain personal victory. For these agents, the playing of *CivNet*—a cooperatively loaded activity—is a means to an end. For each agent with the individual primary goal of winning a round of *CivNet*, the condition of their victory is mutually exclusive with that of their opponent(s). We might term this "serious" *CivNet*, or *CivNet* played competitively. Serious *CivNet* cannot be effectively discussed in terms of shared intentions since, as mentioned, we cannot *share* the primary goal of beating one another. For such players, victory is paramount: The game's collaborative setup, the mutual observance of its rules or norms (e.g. not hacking), etc. are mere formalities. By contrast, non-serious *CivNet* (i.e., *CivNet* played in a friendly or casual way) is motivated and informed by participatory commitments and the shared primary goal of playing together. This could plausibly fall within a wider action-sequence of jointly intending to do *anything* sociable together. Here, the playing of *CivNet* is also a means to an end, but the primary, prelusory goal is constitutive of (and resultant from) a shared *participatory* commitment to do something enjoyable together; to pass the time in each other's company. (Indeed, in a friendly or casual game of *CivNet*, I might use hacks without telling you and still not be deemed to have transgressed or ruined our game, since we both still got a laugh out of it.) That our commitments pertain to the mutual reciprocity of our intentions means that jointly undertaking an activity—any activity—is of primary concern to us. *CivNet* and its typically agonistic format are of secondary importance. For these players, collaborative action is paramount: The game's agonistic design and encouraged or prescribed play-style are incidental, and do not impinge upon the pursuit of a shared primary goal: to play a nice, fun game of *CivNet* together.

Stepwise formalisations of shared competitive activities have generally neglected to consider the obligations that stem from participants' motivating commitments. The preceding paragraphs have shown that different commitment types are productive of (some of the) different ways of approaching *CivNet* (or chess, or *Hearthstone*, or PvP *Pokémon*) as an activity. To recap, many computer games can be approached either competitively or companionably; either seriously or non-seriously. The two contrasting primary goal types discussed are productive of very different types of action hierarchy. The commitment type dictates whether either agent has the right to rebuke their counterpart for antisocial or counterproductive play. In serious competitive play (simple other-commitments), agents are obliged to play earnestly; to the best of their abilities. Conversely, in sociable, casual, or

leisurely play (i.e., with participatory commitments), agents are *paradoxically obligated* to play (an inherently agonistic game) without annihilating or otherwise humiliating their partner. Per the rules of chess, one must seemingly play competitively—but not *too* well, lest one curtails the leisurely undertaking, or commits the faux pas of embarrassing one's acquaintance by making them look like a noob.

Hierarchies and Their Levels

Following Clark, and in light of the previous page's claims about the two main ways an agonistic game can be approached by multiple human players, this section illustrates that shared activities can be fruitfully visualised and analysed in terms of hierarchies. In what follows, it is first shown why *competitive* chess cannot be effectively discussed as a *shared* activity. A friendly chess match will then be articulated in hierarchical terms, crowned by the paratelic, prelusory, shared primary goal of playing just for the sake of playing, as it were.

The following hierarchy describes a serious or competitive game of chess facilitated by simple other-commitments. The primary goal will be held separately by each agent involved in the game, but cannot be shared by both, as it is an individual (mutually exclusive), lusory goal.

1 **Win at chess**
- 1.1 Set up game
  - 1.1.1 Acquire board
  - 1.1.2 Find a place to play
  - 1.1.3 Set up pieces
    - 1.1.3.1 Acquire pieces
    - 1.1.3.2 Sort pieces
    - 1.1.3.3 Check setup
      - 1.1.3.3.1 Ask opponent to correct mistake in layout
- 1.2 Choose a colour
  - 1.2.1 Toss a coin
  - 1.2.2 Rotate board if necessary
- 1.3 Settle other practicalities
  - 1.3.1 Agree conditions for stalemate
  - 1.3.2 Agree turn duration
    - 1.3.2.1 Acquire chess clock if necessary
- 1.4 Commence play
  - 1.4.1 [Gameplay unfolds]

. . .

Etc.

Fig. 1: Chess as competitive; played under simple other-commitments

The activity spelled out as above may still *contain* shared intentions (sub-goals such as finding a chessboard), and, of course, instances of mutual responsiveness (such as moving one's king having been placed in check) that Bratman posits as a necessary condition of shared cooperative activity. Crucially, however, attainment of the primary goal—to win the game—

cannot be shared. The following hierarchy, by contrast, describes a friendly or non-serious game of chess, based on mutual, participatory commitments. The primary, prelusory goal will be shared by agents because the desired outcome of the activity is not only mutually *attainable*, but cooperatively *loaded*—it *must* be attained together, and falls outside of (i.e., comes after; results from) gameplay.

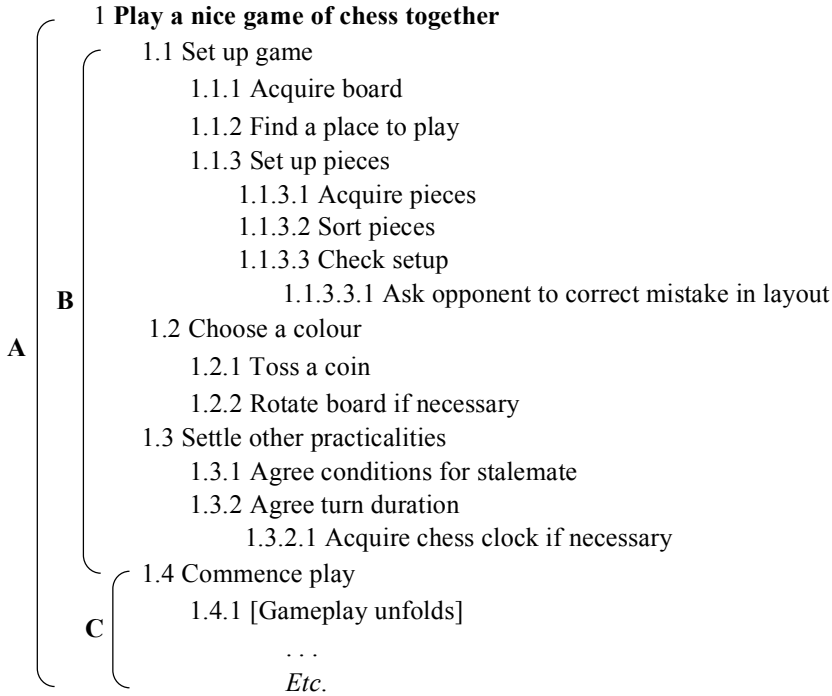

Fig. 2: Chess as leisurely; played under participatory commitments

Note that the different levels (signified by brackets **A**, **B**, and **C**) in the above hierarchy afford different possibilities for cooperation and competition. This is consistent with Bratman's brief analyses, which suggest that setting up the game is a cooperative level, whereas everything "beyond" that (i.e., gameplay) constitutes a competitive level. Sure enough, agents cannot compete in setting up a chessboard (1.1.3); this must be done cooperatively. Inversely, they cannot, strictly speaking, cooperate in gameplay; they must adopt chess' paradigmatically agonistic lusory attitude (Suits, 1978), and in so doing *adopt the roles* of fierce opponents. But the agents may not in actuality *be* fierce opponents; they may be playing for the social bonding experience. For these agents, the feigned conflict of chess' gameplay does not, as Bratman implies, result in irredeemably conflicting plans or goals. How do we separate in-game plans and actions from extra-lusory concerns? This is where the utility of something like a magic circle becomes undeniable, and the many, fraught readings of the concept must be outlined, so to later show how a hierarchical breakdown of shared cooperative and competitive activities supports several similar conceptualisations of the magic circle as concentric social–cognitive frames in particular (Arsenault & Perron, 2008; Juul, 2008; Stenros, 2012).

Refiguring a Magic Circle

It should first be restated that the overall purpose of this argument is not to offer concrete support for *one* highly individuated conception of what the magic circle is, or may be. Similarly, offering an entirely original reading of something magic circle-like would only create further conceptual confusion. Rather, the purpose of linking commitment types, their resultant social obligations, and hierarchical analyses to something magic circle-like is, as mentioned, to offer further evidence in support of the idea that the magic circle remains "a handy metaphor that acts as intellectual shorthand for a more complex set of social relations" (Stenros, 2012: 1). Likewise, then, in showing that a hierarchical view of game-playing as shared activity is harmonious with the broad notion of magic-circle-as-social–cognitive-frames, I hope equally to help refute the somewhat polemical claim that "there is no magic circle" (Liebe, 2008; Consalvo, 2009), which is surely couched in too strong or too literal a (mis)reading[5] of Huizinga's original concept. Before discussing the magic circle as social–cognitive frames, then, it seems apt to address problematic readings of the concept.

In his 2008 paper, "*There is no Magic Circle: On the Difference between Computer Games and Traditional Games*," Michael Liebe argues that Huizinga's magic circle (1949) does not hold in the domain of digital games because the rules—the simulation's laws—are upheld by the computer, not the players. Per this logic, if no human effort is required, no "magic" is either required or produced. "The *magic circle*," he writes, "is based on solemnity, on an agreement between all participants to uphold the rules and dedicate their behavior to the possibilities artificially limited through the game setting" (2008: 332). The flipside of this conception of the magic circle in relation to digital games is of course that the simulation already accounts for "every possible action … even the boundaries of the virtual space itself" (Ibid.). The latter observation is true, but, rather than invalidating the utility of the magic circle, should encourage us to relocate and refine its applicability and scope. As Jaakko Stenros points out (2012); "[Liebe's] interpretation of magic circle is quite narrow. … [O]nly the agreement on constitutive rules … is relevant, leaving out interpretation of rules, extra-ludic motivations or consequences, player-created goals, et cetera" (Stenros, 2012: 4).

Mia Consalvo's scepticism towards the magic circle appears to hinge upon unfortunately-worded claims in early writings on games and play that imply that play is not "real life" (Huizinga, 1949: 8; Caillois, 1961: 6), and that play "creates" and indeed *is* an "order" of its own (Huizinga, 1949: 10; 13; Caillois, 1961: 6–7). This interpretation of what the magic circle *is* (or *could* be, or *should* be) is arguably exacerbated by Salen and Zimmerman when they write that, "the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world" (2004: 95). Such hyperbole effectively sets up an easy straw (wo)man (Stenros, 2012), and the aphorisms from Huizinga, Caillois, and Salen and Zimmerman are taken quite absolutely by Consalvo as an assertion that "the ordinary rules of life do not apply" in or during gameplay (2009: 408; 416). This makes it straightforward to present counterexamples, perhaps building upon the arguments of Castronova (2005) among others, in support of the idea that play can be permeated or corrupted by—or exists in tension with—macro-level forces such as politics,

[5] As posited by Juul (2008: 56).

economics, law, culture, sociality, or interpersonal issues such as consent[6] (or lack thereof). It seems fair to state, then, that some conceptualisations of the magic circle are untenable. But to claim that "there is no magic circle" is unhelpful. Moreover, to argue that it (uniformly?) "upholds structuralist definitions … of games … [and] emphasizes form at the cost of function, without attention to the context of actual gameplay," is to foreclose an avenue still ripe for refiguring. Consalvo is absolutely right that sociocultural context, player attitudes, and resultant meaning must inform our analyses of games and gameplay, lest like Bratman we become blinkered by the sometimes-uncompromising rigour of empiricism and deductive logic. But this need not come at the expense of doing away with something like a magic circle.

In a 2012 paper titled "*In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play*,"[7] Jaakko Stenros presents a thorough review of the concept's history. He follows Jesper Juul in pointing out how others have approached the magic circle as "the boundary that players negotiate" (2008: 64), who himself sees Huizinga's original magic circle not as obfuscating the role of the social, but, rather, as an inherently social boundary in and of itself (Juul, 2008: 57). Stenros also refers to previous writings with Montola and Waern, in which the magic circle is reified as a type of "ritualistic contract" (Montola, Stenros, & Waern, 2009: 11) which, importantly, is *intended* but not *guaranteed* to prevent players from tainting play with everyday foibles and concerns. Rather than being a structure that is instantiable *in vitro* or at will, then, the magic circle emerges in the very process of players making commitments to engage in shared cooperative or competitive activity together, and is inextricably bound to both "the personal mindset of the participant[s] and the socially negotiated and upheld contract that yields a site of play" (Stenros, 2012: 1).

From Hierarchical Levels to Social–Cognitive Frames

Stenros also points out that "[t]he psychological border set up by adopting a playful mindset and the border set up socially through negotiation often coincide, but they are two different things," (Stenros, 2012: 1; also Montola et.al., 2009, 257–278) adding that they should ideally be separated in the interest of analytical rigour. While the hierarchical framework offered in this paper falls short of disentangling the social and the cognitive aspects as described above, it can help us explore how players can occupy—often clandestinely—multiple "roles" (Stenros, 2012: 9). Players can think simultaneously via different cognitive frames that inform different aspects of the activity in order to play in a manner that is holistically appropriate to the situation.

Consider a mother, who is a grandmaster chess player, playing "against" her daughter, who, though only six years old, already displays a promising interest in the game. Also consider again the formalisation of such a situation on page 7. The leftmost bracket, **A**, encompasses the entire activity; the social situation preluding play. Since this particular match is friendly, casual, or non-serious, the primary goal—to "play a nice game of chess together"—is both shared and prelusory. The middle bracket, **B**, contains the cooperative steps necessary in setting up the

[6] Boluk and LeMieux (2016, following Anita Sarkeesian) point out that some toxic communities consider online hate to operate at the level of meta-game. Clearly there's no magic circle in the unilateral spewing of abuse.
[7] It is worth noting Stenros' use of "a" rather than "the."

game and enabling the resulting activity to take place *as* chess (if, say, the pieces are set up incorrectly, then arguably the pair will not be playing chess in the strictest sense). Finally, the innermost bracket, **C**, describes the point at which the lusory attitude (Suits, 1978) must be adopted by both players, also in order for the game to take shape *as* chess.

We've already established that any ludic conflict—any clashing of sub-plans and sub-goals (i.e., strategy and tactics)—that occurs within bracket **C** should *not* be said to negate the activity's (**A**'s) wider status as shared cooperative activity. But it now becomes clearer how players can switch back and forth between social–cognitive frames—between considerations relating to each different level—or plan and act through multiple frames simultaneously in relation to each game action. Let's say that early on in the mother–daughter chess game, the younger makes a blunder that leaves one of her bishops open to attack. The mother has no desire to hand down a devastating punishment to her daughter by playing to the best of her ability: The mother's *lusory* goal is to win, but only because chess dictates that this must be so in order to maintain the outward appearance of its status as an agonistic game. Let's also imagine that the mother has the ulterior motive of improving her daughter's chess game *without* betraying that the game and the individual moves that comprise it are didactic as opposed to recreational. What to do about the vulnerable bishop? The mother has noticed that she could spare the bishop if she instead wished to *mate-in-4* (moves; to inevitably win in four moves' time). But this would be both harsh and uninstructive for the daughter; it would quash the shared prelusory goal while also failing to satisfy the ulterior motive of teaching the daughter about openings. Instead, the mother takes the bishop and decides to intentionally lose later on, in the endgame, so to manage the social situation in an optimally benevolent and pedagogic manner. In declining to identify fully with the game's prescribed agonistic mindset or play-style, the mother preserves the social contract—the her and her daughter's commitments and obligations—by juggling her roles as opponent, joint referee, and parent–teacher.

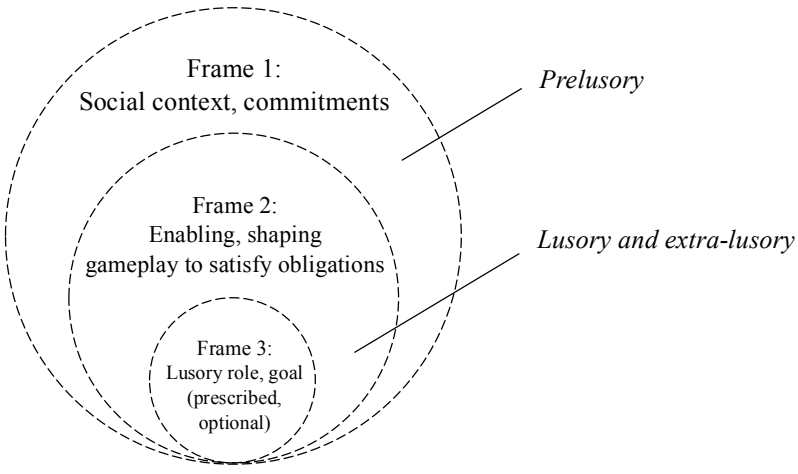

Fig. 3: (Adapted from Juul, 2008) ***Three Frames for Every Game Action***
Importantly, the numbering of the frames has been reversed to reflect the temporal order in which they are typically approached/adopted

In Closing

The account unpacked in this paper is very much in line with that offered by Juul (2008: 61), in which we can think of the social–cognitive frames that inform our gameplay experience as more or less concentric spaces of possibility that can be interrogated and employed in parallel or switched rapidly between. There is scant space here to discuss how this analysis dovetails with the numerous detailed and overlapping, Goffman-inspired theories of a magic circle as *keying* and *framing* (slightly different from "frames" as used here), and this should be pursued in future work. Similarly, considerable refinement of the ideas introduced in this paper will be necessary if they are offer what Stenros has flagged as the desirable ability to separate the "protective" psychological "bubble" of the lusory attitude from the social contract that "constitutes the action of playing a game [in a certain way]" (Stenros, 2012: 14). In order to achieve this, any iterations of the present perspective will need to engage in additional, seemingly unavoidable internal boundary work. For instance, we might interrogate what can be said of the validity or utility of the framework when the nature of players' commitments and obligations to the shared activity are unilaterally modified or subverted in the course of play. If we are playing a co-op game like *Portal 2* (Valve, 2011) and I start to challenge you to contests (player-created goals), what happens to the primary, once-prelusory crowning goal of our shared activity? Does it transmute from collaborative to competitive purely by virtue of my utterance; "let's race to that line over there"? How about by virtue of you accepting my challenge?

For now, it seems both plausible and sufficient that agonistic games can be figured into shared cooperative activity *without* denoting genuinely or irredeemably conflicting intentions *when* framed by prelusory, participatory commitments to a shared primary goal of playing together.

Games

CIVILIZATION. MicroProse; Windows, macOS, 1991.
CIVNET. MicroProse; Windows, macOS, 1995.
HEARTHSTONE. Blizzard; Windows, macOS, iOS, Android, 2002.
POKÉMON RED/BLUE. Nintendo; Game Boy, 1996
PORTAL 2. Valve Corporation; PC, macOS, Linux, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, 2011.

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