

“Blackout!”: Unpacking the ‘Black Box’ of Game

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ABSTRACT

“When many elements are made to act as one, this is what I will now call a black box”.
(Latour 1988: 131)

In this paper we propose an ontology for games, negotiating both Latourian Actor-Network Theory and Erving Goffman's frame analysis. In doing so we hope to offer a robust, minimal and flexible framework for the analyst (and perhaps designer), that clearly illustrates the network of objects within the 'black box' of game and how each object (from player to memory card to sunlight) may move between three levels of the game event: ‘social world’, ‘configured world’ and ‘game world’.

Keywords

Ontology, Frame Analysis, Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology

GAME STUDIES’ EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: FRAMING ANTS

“Blackout!” announces psychic villain Psycho Mantis; the user’s television screen turns black with green text, ‘HIDEO’, glowing in the upper-right. This is a boss-battle taking place within *Metal Gear Solid*. Under the pretext of Psycho Mantis’ psychic powers, all sorts of objects (the PlayStation 1 memory card, the DualShock controller’s vibration motors, the television) are brought into the game world.

The encounter is noted as a famous example of how the digital game medium can break the fourth wall: an opaque acknowledgment of the often transparent network of objects that come together in generating the black box we frequently summarise as simply ‘video game’.

In this moment the television becomes an alien object, suddenly obtrusive, filling the user’s intentionality. Similarly *Metal Gear Solid*’s creator, Hideo Kojima, demands

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deference as the network's ultimate owner. Yet, is this really disrupting the user's immersion in the fiction of the game world? Is it actually breaking the frame, the suspension of disbelief, as when the actor on stage 'breaks character' and speaks directly to the audience?

We argue that instead the opposite occurs: through conspicuous manipulation of the network of objects within the video game black box, the world of *Metal Gear Solid* becomes more encompassing, more persuasive to the user. Indeed, we argue it is characteristic of the medium of games to be conspicuous in adjusting, reorienting, or as we borrow from Goffman (1986), *keying* the network of objects that act as one when coming together as 'game'.

To this end we propose a new ontology for games, designed to be flexible, robust and concise. Drawing on Latour's (1988) Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and its explicit advocacy of a flat ontology, we present a framework which allows a specific level of agency to any object (material or ideal) that generates difference in the game frame: *Solid Snake*, water, screen resolution, RAM, sunlight, chalk, onlookers, user skill, a football, a couch. All are granted reality if agency can be attributed, though of course the level of agency may vary between moments in the game event.

To account for this we define three layers of existence that may be present within the moment of play, from most to least fundamental: the 'social world', the 'configured world', and the 'game world'. As we are ultimately concerned in this analysis with the relationship between (human) player and the network of (non-human) objects that generates game, we divide these three layers between two sides, the player side and the world side.

Thus we position the 'social-actor' within the social world, the 'player-operator' within the configured world, and the 'player-character' within the game world. Leveraging Goffman's concept of *upkeying* and *downkeying*, any object, human or non-human, may potentially move between these worlds at any time.

In the opening example, the television, previously existing on the level of the social world, is upkeyed by Psycho Mantis into the game world. During this famous boss-battle Psycho Mantis will also upkey the DualShock controller, the memory card, and even the controller ports (the user will have to switch from controller port 1 to port 2 so that Psycho Mantis cannot 'read the mind' of the user and dodge all attacks).

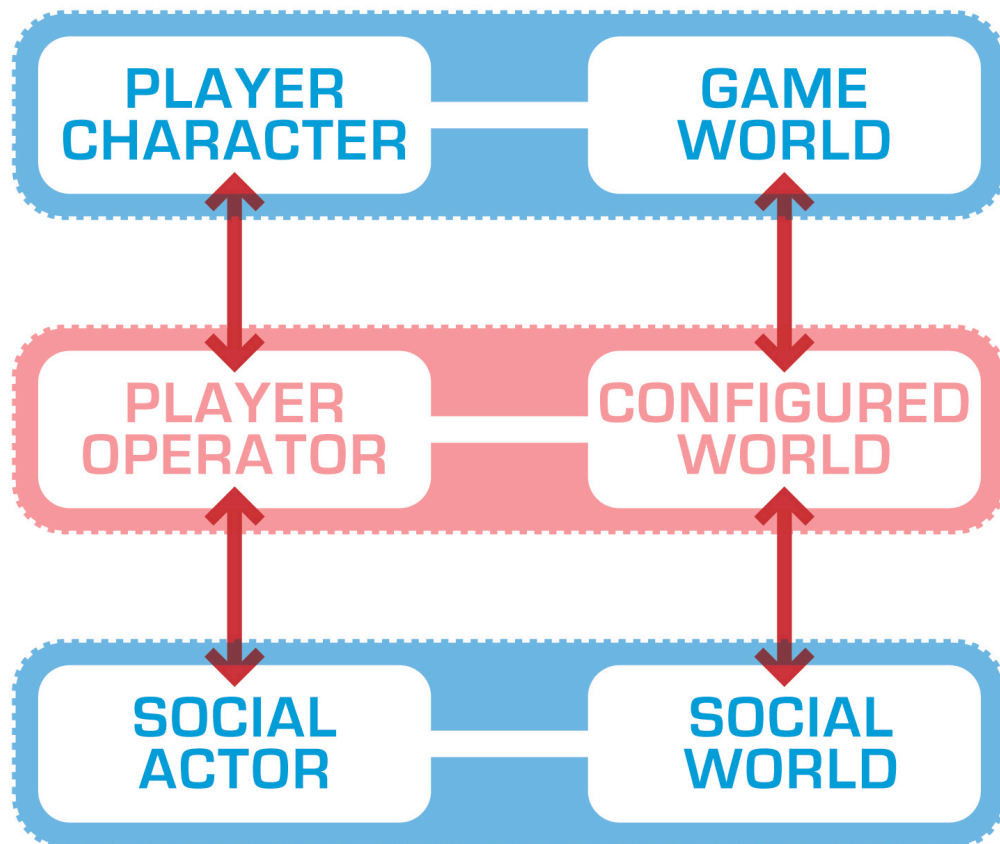
As mentioned, we combine this approach with Erving Goffman's (1986) Frame Analysis, building upon previous applications, such as Mia Consalvo's (2009), Sebastian Deterding's (2009), Gary Alan Fine's (1983), Mike Skolnik's (2014) and Sarah Wanenchak's (2010). Whilst these authors highlight the intrusion of the everyday into the game, and rightly call for an understanding of the game event as more nuanced, complex and dynamic, the non-human is still relegated to the status of passive equipment, 'in-order-to' in the Heideggerian sense.

By adding Latour's ANT to Goffman's frames, we account for the substantive agency the non-human often has within spaces of play, from tennis shoes to chirping birds to one's knowledge of *Indiana Jones*. In doing so we grant the non-human a palpable existence ignored by Goffman, and describe how this reality is defined within the game event.

Examples illustrating downkeying abound: when the referee in sport sanctions a player (e.g. with a red card, a timeout), that person is downkeyed from player-operator (or in certain games, player-character) to social-actor. The same is true of a battery dying in a game controller, a video game crashing, or indeed a literal blackout occurring in one's neighbourhood.

In the other direction, a child may upkey a plastic bottle from social world to configured world when she decides it is now the football in a schoolyard game of soccer. The same is true when a group plays 'the floor is lava', and the concrete pavement of the social world is upkeyed as the lava of the game world.

One of our central points, evident in such examples, is this: the human is not the sole agent in deciding where and how he or she exists in a game, but that this is constantly negotiated and translated in relation to the network of objects that constitute the game black box. Furthermore, that these non-human objects do not exist solely on the level of the social or technical, but also may be visibly upkeyed to exist within the fiction of the game world.



BIOS

Dr Steven Conway is co-convenor of the Games and Interactivity course at Swinburne University of Technology. His research interests focus upon the philosophy and aesthetics of modern digital game design. Recently Steven's work has focused upon the socio-cultural implications of consumer-oriented models of commercial video game

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Andrew Trevillian is a lecturer in Games and Interactivity and PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. His research is focused on the neurological and psychological functions of metaphor in player experience. Andrew was a Game Designer and Level Design Lead at Bluetongue Entertainment where he worked on award winning console titles including *deBlob* (THQ! 2008) and *deBlob2* (THQ! 2011).

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