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Metagaming and Multiactivity:

How Board Game Players Deal with Progressivity

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in

Complexity of interaction: Studies in multimodal conversation analysis

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Abstract

Games are ostensibly a special mode of interaction in which the ordinary rules and expectations of everyday life are temporarily put on hold. However, little research has examined how players themselves treat actions as being inside or outside of the game during their actual gameplay. This paper presents an analysis of face-to-face gameplay interactions in order to theorize, from players' perspectives, a basis for categorizing activities as "outside"/"inside" the game, and what players treat as "metagaming" in situ. We use conversation analysis to inspect the multimodal ways in which gamers manage the complexities of multiple activities in the interactive context of tabletop board games. We show how players orient to the game's ongoing progress while managing other concurrent activities.

Keywords

Board games, metagame, multiactivity, magic circle, conversation analysis

Introduction

Games are ostensibly a special context for social interaction. Game researchers propose that when one enters into gameplay, they step into a virtual world—what some call the “magic circle” (Klabbers 2009)—a somewhat different mode from the rest of ordinary life that requires one to adopt a lusory attitude (Bergström 2010) in which normal rules and expectations may be suspended or transformed. Game-focused literature continues to describe aspects of gaming as more or less inside/outside the game, based on theory or interviewee opinion, despite numerous challenges to this view (e.g., Consalvo 2009). Moreover, very little research has examined closely how players treat certain actions as part of a game or not during the course of gameplay. How do players make sense of actions as relevant (or not relevant) to the game, or to any other concurrent activities? In this paper, we present an inductive analysis of actual gameplay interaction to theorize, from players’ perspectives, a typology of activities that are “outside” the game, what have sometimes been called “metagame” activities (Bergström 2010). As an alternative to the idea of the magic circle, we propose taking a conversation analytic approach that treats game/nongame distinctions as matters of multiactivity (Haddington et al. 2014); in the course of progressing the game overall, players organize the ‘byplay’ (M.H. Goodwin, 1997) of competing activities that spontaneously arise and dissolve over the course of a game. By examining how players manage real,

complex moments where multiple concurrent activities come into conflict, we develop a situated account of “metagaming” as a player’s concern, and how multiactivity is treated as morally accountable.

Games, Metagames, and the “Magic Circle”

When engrossed in a game, a player “lives” in a different phenomenological context: for example, role-playing involves simulation of people and activities unfamiliar to one’s everyday life (Fine 1981). Engrossment in games is part of what produces games as “fun”; and although research has demonstrated many of the instrumental benefits of gameplay (e.g., learning and education, Abdul Jabbar and Felicia 2015; therapies, Navarro-Newball et al. 2014 etc.), that games are fun is generally seen as a sufficient reason for playing them (Goffman 1961).

While engrossed in a game, participants are sometimes said to be inside what’s called the “magic circle”: an abstract space where new worlds and rules are created. The circle boundary is theorized as fairly strict according to Salen and Zimmerman (2004), but research has shown flexibility for different kinds of games and situations (see Consalvo 2009; Moore 2011). Pargman and Jakobssen’s (2008) participants did not describe a boundary at all, instead framing games as a mundane part of everyday life. This range supports the “weak boundary” model proposed by Juul (2008: 62), who argued that “game

scholarship should be about analyzing the conventions of this boundary, and how and when this boundary is negotiated.” In light of this call, we examine how participants themselves attribute and negotiate activity as game or not game through interactional resources. We will question whether and how participants orient to game and not-game as thoroughly separate activities, and show how the players manage their multiple engagements in situated gameplay.

In considering shifting in or out of modes of play, one example of a temporary game suspension (which would pause or cross the idea of magic circle) is conversation about the game itself, often for the purpose of “understanding of the game in terms of how the game is to be played, their role in the game and the culture around the game” (Jakobsson, Pargman, and Rambusch 2007: 158). In most games, talk organizes forms of expertise in the course of handling the game (including physical components such as video-game controller manipulation, sequential components such as order of gameplay, rules and allowable exceptions, etc.), but does not constitute gameplay itself. These out-of-game aspects are part of what is called the “metagame”: “the relationship between the game and outside elements,” which also includes “everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts in which the game is played” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 481). Donaldson (2017: 440) describes metagame expertise as “the awareness of and ability to negotiate the game around the game”. Note

that these descriptions of “metagame” differ, suggesting it is not always clear what constitutes “metagaming”, let alone whether metagaming is “in” or “out of” the game and ostensible magic circle. Neuenschwander (2008) attributes the need for metagaming to the fact that explicit game rules are incomplete for actually structuring players’ actions (as Liberman 2013 also demonstrates in instances of actual play); and the metagame is rarely indicated in instructions at all. Thus, the implicit rules of a game must also be managed through actions or talk that are not themselves gameplay.

The term “metagaming” is also used by board gamers. In a study of the implicit rules of gaming, based on interviews with gamers, Bergström (2010) describes several categories of implicit rules involved in gameplay, including committing to completing a game from start to finish, no “unacceptable whining” or “gloating” (see also Hofstetter and Robles 2019), and relevantly, “no metagaming”. Bergström specifies metagaming (p.90) as “allowing undue outside influences”, which is claimed to always be seen by gamers as problematic. However, while a logical organization of interview data and conscious reflection from gamers, the categories do not consistently correspond to how players actually act during games. Players label actions as metagaming that Bergström categorizes differently (see Example 1 below, which Bergström’s structure calls “between game memory”), but moreover, players do not treat these rules as universally applicable or consistently defined. In other

words, the “consensus exception” that Bergström notes, wherein any action can be acceptable if mutually agreed to be so, is applied extensively, rather than as an unusual exception. Furthermore, as Liberman (2013) has discussed, the methods by which players “agree” to rule alterations is not (typically) through active consensus making, but through post-hoc ratification of rule breaches. The interactional environment in which rule adherence unfolds is thus critical to investigate and account for, if we are to investigate how the rules of the game activity are managed. For example, in situ, the *word* “metagaming” can be used to sanction conduct deemed unacceptable—that is, to pronounce something as metagaming is to label it as morally unacceptable play, and to suggest the conduct in question should be halted or ignored. This occurs in the following example. Here players are suggesting various targets to be “killed” or knocked out of the round; Dave is suggested (L1, 4; “coup”-ing is this game’s term for eliminating a player), and Gerry is suggested (L6). Garth dismisses the whole discussion as “metagame” (L13).

(1) (GN_Coup_35.30)

01 GER: Take Dave out for that move.
 02 (0.7)
 03 DAV: #Whatever.#
 04 GER: Coup `im.
 05 (0.8)
 06 DAV: Take Gerry out.
 07 GER: [↑What! (0.2) I was ↑First out in the ↑last game.
 08 ?: [()
 09 (0.5)
 10 DAV: And you'll be second out in this one.=
 11 GER: =[(h)e[h(h)a:h
 12 JAM: [(Dave does-) ((to Tina))
 13 GAR: [Metagame:. [Metagame:. [Metagame:.
 14 JAM: [Dave- [Dave does have a
 15 [lot of money.
 16 DAV: [You're improving,
 17 TIN: mhh
 18 (0.4)
 19 GAR: °°(maybe we'll go with)°° °Metagame° ((whispered))
 20 DAV: But I can't coup.

Garth's sanction arrives just after Gerry and Dave argue about the acceptability of being eliminated early two games in a row (L7-10). Gerry's complaint has an ostensibly "out-of-game" premise, namely that his experience in another (just prior) playthrough of the game should have bearing on *this* ongoing game. Garth's sanction also overlaps James' speaking turn extensively (L12-14). Typically, one or other speaker would drop out in such extended overlap (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Jefferson 1986), but Garth continues to reinforce his sanction, even though he is simply repeating it. He thereby treats the sanction as both legitimate and important to put on record. James proposes an ostensibly in-game reason for picking Dave as the one to eliminate (strategically removing the player who is "ahead" with a lot of

money), potentially motivating his repeated attempts to take a turn at talk, since his utterance will provide a way for the group to stop metagaming.

The above example gives some insight into ways that players can use the term and concept of “metagaming” to do action in live gameplay. This paper considers how the member’s term compares with an analytic account of how players actively navigate and organize action as in or out of gameplay. In other words, metagaming as a members’ category serves as our inspiration for investigating evidence for or against the magic circle, in actual gameplay. When trying to map specific game actions that occur in natural recordings of games, Bergström’s categories do not provide much that resonates with the actual in-progress production of gameplay, as the categories are organized based on self-reflection rather than observation (see Pomerantz 2012), and since the “consensus exception” is more of a universally applied component of achieving rules in situ than an exception to rule adherence. The natural ecology of interaction in gameplay is more complex, with all its competing activities and relational demands. Therefore, we suggest taking an interactional approach that situates metagaming within the actions that participants take during gameplay, rather than based on theory or on participants’ elicited reflections. An interactional approach would provide a more systematic, ecologically valid account. By looking at how participants treat game/non-game distinctions *in situ*, we will re-analyze the concepts of metagaming and the magic circle from

an emic perspective. In examining the multiactivity engagements that metagaming entails, we aim to contribute to our understanding of how participants both organize complex environments (board games with co-occurring socializing and background distractions) and manage the accountability of constantly shifting activity foci (see Vatanen, this volume).

Insights from interactional studies on gaming activities

Few interactional studies to date look at games, and those that do have focused mostly on video games or sports (see e.g., Baldaulf-Quilliatre & Carvajal 2020, 2021ab, this issue; Mondada 2012; Piirainen–Marsh and Tainio 2009; Tekin and Reeves 2017; see Evans and Fitzgerald 2016 for basketball). Although board games are regularly used as a convenient source of data collection (Betz and Deppermann 2018; Kendrick and Drew 2016; Rossi 2015; Viney 2015), moments of game play are rarely analyzed (Drew and Kendrick 2018; Sutinen 2014 show some game play; and to our knowledge, only Hofstetter and Robles 2019; Hofstetter 2020b, 2020a, 2021; Liberman 2013; and Sterphone, 2022 analyze actual board game play as a phenomenon). One particularly relevant subset of interactional research has explored instances when participants engage in multiple activities or “multitasking” (Haddington et al. 2014). For example, Sutinen (2014) analyzed how players in a role-playing game transitioned back into gameplay, after interruption or lapse of

activity (see also Helisten 2019). Through stepwise coordination, all players eventually resume joint attention on the game. The general interactional orientation towards maintaining progressivity (Stivers and Robinson 2006) is particularly relevant in complex activities such as gaming, and players seem especially sensitive to ensuring they display that they are moving the game forward (Hofstetter 2021).

Players distinguish whether the actions are progressing the *game* as compared to some other activity; in another game-focused study, Mondada (2012) has examined how players of video games manage spatial resources to display being “in the game” and “out of the game”. Our paper expands this analysis by examining board games, rather than video games, in addressing issues of the magic circle and the participants’ category of “metagaming”; and in a focus on progressivity rather than spatiality. The spatiality of board games is also quite different than video games: it involves only non-digital objects and interlocutors; it lacks a screen and a digital “space” for manipulation of game objects; and therefore being “out of” the game is a qualitatively different process, since addressing co-participants in the non-digital space, and gazing away from the board, do not entail non-game activity in the same way. While video game players can be said to “switch between one interactional space and another” (Mondada 2012: 239), board game players cannot—the medium itself does not afford the same spatial or temporal distinctions between “in-game”

play and “out-of-game” talk. Furthermore, Mondada analyzes players’ reactions to or discussion of the video game as retrospective, “out-of-game” moments, whereas this is not the case in board game interaction, where such talk is part of the progressivity of the game itself. The video game medium provides specific rest moments for talk that does not hinder the progressivity of the game (e.g. during a replay video), whereas board game players must use moments when other players are taking their game turn to do non-game activities. This means board games have different contingencies for metagaming, and that board game structure may make metagaming more problematic or accountable.

Finally, we have evidence that players treat potential shifts between game-specific categories and personal or situational categories as relevant for doing moral work. Sterphone (2022) has shown that in interaction over wargaming, attribution of action to game-specific categories (e.g. players’ roles) is a means of downgrading complaints about action and providing a justification for complainable action within the activity. By invoking categories that make the game relevant, rather than individual or general properties, participants can manage the trajectory of a complaint. In doing these different invocations between game and beyond-game categories, players also orient to the different activity layers available in the interaction, a practice we further investigate below.

Data and Methods

This article presents an analysis of 43.5 hours of video-recorded board game interactions among 56 different adults, 20 different gaming sessions, and 17 different games (generally involving three-four players per game), with 78 cases. Three games were collaborative (all players work together against the game), and the remaining 14 were competitive (all players compete to be a single victor). Games were collected by the first author among gaming groups and at board game cafes, where the author had been doing fieldwork for approximately two years, as well as games uploaded to the internet to board gaming specialist websites (e.g. Boardgamegeek.com). The latter were not “teaching” videos, but playthroughs of the game. Although these are potentially recorded with an audience in mind, they are unscripted, and still must deal with the natural contingencies of board game play. Transcripts are formatted according to Jefferson (2004) and Mondada (2018) conventions (with the exception that embodied conduct receives a line referent, see Appendix A). For space limitations, we present only a few examples; each situation we show below should be understood as the clearest (often shortest) example of a pattern across the data.

Given the interest in “metagaming” in the board game community (as seen in Bergström 2010), both authors examined the data for instances where players orient to interaction or game moves as inside or outside the game (the

“magic circle”), but not as themselves legitimate or illegitimate actions or moves (i.e., excluding instances where following the game rules was at issue). The data were not coded as instances of in-or-out-of-game, but instead the authors inductively searched for instances where the relevance of some action or move to the game (vs. to other concurrent activities) were made relevant. These instances involved an element of multiactivity, but more precisely instances where the member-assigned status of something *as* multiactivity for local purposes was being negotiated.

With respect to the members’ term “metagaming”, the examples here would not necessarily be explicitly labelled as metagaming in situ or in reflection (e.g. in an interview). “Metagaming” as a term in the data often occurs in moments where fairness or acceptability was at issue (see also Hofstetter and Robles 2019), such as partners giving each other preferential treatment instead of competing fairly. The analysis below instead questions how elements of the magic circle, including metagaming, are negotiated by players for relevance and acceptability at this particular moment in gameplay. The analysis draws on conversation analysis (CA) in that it uncovers the emic procedures participants use to accomplish social actions and tasks, and relies on the participant orientations seen in the data alone (as displayed in their unfolding actions and turns at talk) as the determiner of the validity of findings.

It should be noted that in CA, one generally avoids looking for or applying terminology that has been theorized before the data—what are called analysts’ terms—and should instead approach the data unmotivatedly and only describe actions that can be shown to be demonstrably oriented to as such by the participants themselves (see Sidnell and Stivers 2013). Our analysis is unusual in seeking instances that may address a theoretical question that already exists, concerning the magic circle. However, CA is the method that best grounds findings in emic, situated practices, and has the highest ecological validity, which thus will best answer Juul’s (2008) call to uncover how the magic circle is negotiated in actual instances of gameplay. Therefore, our analysis will not attempt to apply a priori definitions of metagaming to code behaviours. Instead, we conceptualize orientations towards the magic circle as instances of both identifying and negotiating the acceptability of multiactivity. We distinguish between action (with the voice or body) that *itself* progresses or supports progressivity of the game; and action that does not do so. The validity of this distinction is shown in whether and how participants orient to those actions as progressing the game, or not. We show that one way to conceptualize metagaming and the magic circle, emically, is to use these participant orientations to multiactivity and progressivity; and that any given action could be treated as along the spectrum of metagaming behaviors based on those orientations.

Analysis

There are a number of activities people routinely engage in during gaming that do not, in and of themselves, constitute a game-move. In this section, we show how participants navigate (and sometimes police) the boundaries of game activities (see also Vatanen, this volume). While multiactivity—accomplishing various activities simultaneously—is a recurrent feature of everyday human interaction (Haddington et al. 2014), players’ prioritizing of the game over other involvements, or vice versa, can become morally accountable (see also Kamunen 2019). Goffman (1963) suggested that participants organize their actions as addressing “main” and “side” involvements (the former claiming the majority of attention, the latter existing sustainably alongside the former without overtaking it), and as “dominate” or “subordinate” (the latter being deferred to the former). Game players are typically accountable to the game as the main and dominate involvement; however, we deviate from this point onwards with Goffman by highlighting the fluidity and non-exclusiveness of involvements. While multiactivity as a concept better describes the participants’ constant navigation of multiple focuses of attention, Goffman’s involvements remind us that a game provides a participation framework (Goodwin 2007) with very specific accountable priorities.

Multiactivity and game vs. other involvements

Before examining different orientations to the acceptability of multiple involvements, we will first show an example to demonstrate when multiactivity becomes relevant and how it impacts the progressivity of the ongoing game. At the start of the example, talk runs concurrently to the game without delaying it but also without progressing it; and at the end of the example, players maximally attend progressing the game, demonstrating no further attention to alternate involvements.

During gameplay, participants navigate any number of activities simultaneously that do not require suspension of the game and are not treated as “interruptions”; gameplay is constantly layered with this kind of complexity. In Example 2, three participants are playing a game characterized by long silences; behind them in the frame (Fig. 1), another participant (Tara) is cooking something in the kitchen (see Baldauf-Quilliatre & Ursi, this volume, on spatiality and participation frameworks). Tara has come home long after the others ate dinner, not being part of the original expected gathering of players, and is now taking advantage of the food leftovers.

Figure 1: View of the Game *Skull*, L-R: Kat, Tara, John, Adam



Example 2 below begins with six seconds of silence during which the game is in-play; it is Adam's game turn. The numbers being announced are bets (L1, L20, L31). Tara, who is in the kitchen and not playing, initiates a sequence with John that is unrelated to the game.

(2) (BG 160712 Skulls_12:05)

```

01 JOH: #Three.
      #Fig.1
02      +(0.3) +(1.3)*(0.5)+(1.0)+(.)*(0.4)+
03 joh      +gaze@kat+gaze@ad----+ +gaze@ad--
04 adm      *counts cards---*
05      +(.)$(1.6)+
06 joh      +gaze@kat-+
07 kat      $point/counting cards-->
08 TAR: John did you want a little bit too *or are yo#tu:*,
09 kat      -->$
10 adm      *opens mouth-*turns head-->
11 joh      †...-->
      #Fig.2
12      (0.4)
13 TAR: [#Really, (.)$ I don't really $know what I need *here.*
14 JOH: [#Uh:m*,
15 joh      -->†twisting body to tar-->
      #Fig.3
16 adm      -->*head turned to tar-----*,,,,,,*
17 kat      $.....$head turned to tar-->
18 JOH: eh[h] eh(h) eh(h) eh(h) ihh]
19 TAR: [Very weird me†lan$]:g[e of thting+s.
20 ADM: [Four:.
21 kat      -->$ $gaze@ad-->
22 joh      -->†,,,,,,†
23 JOH: It smells nice.
24      (.)$(0.5)
25 kat      -->$gaze down-->
26 TAR: Well +that's your +†pesto+ °°(that you're [smelling)°°
27 JOH: [Oo:.
28 joh      +gaze@ad----+gaze@kat+gaze@table-->
29      (2.7)+(0.7) +(0.5)
30 joh      -->+gaze@kat+
31 KAT: Five.

```

First, let us describe the sequence of events. In line 8, Tara makes an offer to John, presumably of what she is cooking. She formulates the offer in a way that anticipates refusal, preemptively opening a refusal based option, *or are you:::*. John's *uh:m:* (L14) may indeed project a refusal, though John abandons further response. Tara shifts to professing some difficulty or uncertainty with her activity (L13), to which John responds with laughter at line 18. In overlap with Tara, Adam takes his turn at the game: *four* (L20). This overlap shows Adam is not attending Tara, but attending the game; indeed,

Tara's question (L8) specifically addressed John and not Adam or Kat, not including them in the discussion of food. Though visibly facing and attentive to the game, John responds to Tara's comment with a counter-compliment, *it smells nice* (L23), and in line 26 Tara responds to this with a counter that attributes the compliment to John's pesto (that he made). John receipts this compliment with a response-cry of appreciation (L27). Another silence follows as the game continues, in which John checks on the progress of Kat's game turn (L28, L30).

During this interaction, John's conversation with Tara is not part of the game: those involved in the game do not treat what he says as relevant to what they are doing; and John and the other players mostly remain in bodily orientation to the game (the table, the cards, and his fellow game players) (except lines 11-22, see Fig. 2-3). His contributions to the conversation with Tara are maintainable without disrupting the progress of the game; his laughter (L18) does not promote continuing the sequence with Tara (and allows him to return his attention to the game), and his comment on Tara's activity with the food is based on a sense (smell) that he can have without disrupting his visual and bodily attention to the game. Only when Tara initially addresses John is there some micro-level negotiation of what this moment might mean to the game-in-progress and how to sustain the complex multiple engagements: as Tara is completing her utterance (L8), John begins to turn his head to look over

his shoulder toward her (L11), and Adam's eye gaze shifts toward Tara as well (Fig. 2). Subsequently, as John completes his *uh:m:* in line 14, he also shifts his shoulders and torques his upper body toward Tara, and Kat's face direction and gaze tracks this motion and also visually orients to Tara (Fig. 3) (see Schegloff 1998; Kamunen 2019 on how body torque maintains multiple engagements).

Figure 2: Attention Shift to Tara



Figure 3: Orientation to Tara



During this moment, there is a momentary shift of the participation framework to accommodate the non-player and the non-game activity. As soon as Tara shifts from offer to commentary (L13), one by one each participant shifts attention back to the game, in order of who must play next first Adam, whose game turn it is, and who is most responsible for making the next move, then Kat, and finally John, who shifts his body and gaze back to the game. John thereafter restricts his participation with Tara in a way that lets him also attend the game (L22-27). Thus, at the start of this sequence, John manages dual involvements (Raymond and Lerner 2014)—one in the game, one out of it—and in coordination with his other game-players, indicates that the game is his primary involvement (Schegloff 1998). The interaction comes off so that the parallel sequence between John and Tara, while garnering the attention of Kat and Adam, does not disrupt or notably slow the progress of the game. John's

contributions are likewise designed to maximize his ability to monitor the game's progress and make a timely contribution when it is his game turn. At the end of this exchange (L28-31), the participants orient wholly to progressing the game. They barely talk except to perform game moves (L31), and their actions are directly related to progressing the game; multiactivity is no longer relevant.

What we find is that, overwhelmingly, people treat instances of non-gameplay that are simultaneous with gameplay unproblematically, as long as the gameplay itself can continue to progress. Although we are distinguishing as analysts between action that progresses the game, and action that does not (Vatanen, this volume), the members sustain and orient these complex multiple orientations through multiactivity. Where the multiactivity is sustainable is where both (or however many) activities can progress without hindering the progressivity of other simultaneous activities. There is no evidence in this example any magic circle is broken. The players organize Tara's speaking turns as nongame activity, by virtue of their orientation to Tara's speaking turns as *not* relevant to the game, but also as activity that is sustainable with the game and non-invasive, as they do not sanction John or Tara for interrupting, distraction, or delay. This is very much consistent with the preference for progressivity in conversation itself: as conversation analytic research has shown, participants do not sanction simultaneous behavior as "interruptive" or "not paying attention" unless there is a normative reason to do so. In order to

comply with this expectation, participants will usually provide accounts when their simultaneous multiple activities might infringe upon the primary involvement. For example, so-called common sense and self-reports suggest that people find co-present use of mobile phones “rude”; however, actual observations (e.g. Ling 2008) challenge this; and analysis of mobiles in interaction demonstrates that participants tend to orient to mobile phones at interactionally-appropriate moments, for example, when one is not the currently-addressed recipient in a three-party conversation (e.g. DiDomenico, Raclaw, and Robles 2020).

The remainder of this chapter aims to investigate when and how multiactivity during gameplay is treated as morally sanctionable and unacceptable, and how players organize the “interruptability” of the magic circle. We will suggest that the basis of this organization is maintenance of progressivity, and that players only orient to a magic circle as a thing to be maintained when progressivity is threatened. In the next sections, we will look at the different types of action that can occur during game play that ostensibly might delay progressivity. We discuss (1) in-game talk that directly progresses the game (such that the delay is relevant), (2) in-game talk that orients to but does not directly progress the game, (3) in-game talk/activity that cannot be sustained with gameplay.

Metagaming and Progressivity

In this examination, we will see how players still demonstrate orientation to their accountability for maintaining progressivity, and how they manage the delays and “distractions”. These results offer a different way to think about interaction around what counts as gameplay (vs. additional layers of complex activity organization) from participants’ situated actions, offering a new way to address conversations about both magic circles and metagaming, and contributing to sociological understandings of how gamers manage multiactivity in the progress of their gameplay.

Talk about the game, during the game, that promotes progressivity of the game

In this section, we will show talk that occurs during game play that does not hinder progressivity, but in fact promotes it. The existence of this talk demonstrates that not all talk in game play is automatically oriented to as metagaming or outside the magic circle, contra findings that rely on players’ conscious reflections (e.g., Bergström 2010; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

In the following example, the player “Bird” is completing his move in the game *Dominant Species*, in which animal classes compete for survival. Bird is able to place cubes on three tiles. He picks a tile where Spider already has cubes. The players are competing for who has the most cubes on certain tiles, so this move increases the competition between these players.

(3) (160908_DominantSpecies_pt1_14.25)

```
01 BIR: >Kay I'm gonna pick< (.) that one there I think,  
02 MAM: Yeah,  
03 REP: Kay.  
04 BIR: >I'm gonna pick that one there:< So uh::  
05 four on here:, (0.2) +↑↑H[i::  
06 bir .....+puts cubes down  
07 MAM: [Yeah,  
08 (0.5)  
09 SPI: ##Wah:## (k) hh=
```

Bird announces his choice for how to play his game turn (L1) which is ratified by the other players (L2-3). He then begins to narrate the action that constitutes his game turn, of *four on here:* (L4-5), as he places the cubes. All of these actions so far support the progressivity of the game; announcing his choice and narrating what his choice entails makes his game turn available for other players, allows other players to comment on the move for its validity, and to keep track of the game changes. Spider then makes a moaning complaint sound (L9), drawing on conventional crying “wah” sounds (see Hofstetter, 2020), which demonstrates his dislike of Bird’s move but also ratifies it as valid and complete. All the players have now shown orientation to the unfolding of Bird’s game turn, and helped progress it forward through ratification of the move, so that the game turn can now be completed. We will address Bird’s *Hi* (L5) in the next section.

Thus at least some talk and action during game play supports the progressivity of the game. Such “announcements” of game events, although not

game actions themselves, are ubiquitous in the data and appear in most game turns, in every recording. The following examples focus on disruptions to progressivity.

Talk about the game, during the game, that does not promote progressivity of the game

In this section, we will discuss examples of talk or action that are ostensibly ‘on topic’, but which do not promote progressivity or show orientation to it directly. We suggest these instances are moments of multiactivity and are treated as part of the game. First, we return to the example just seen in the prior section (Example 3). If we show the events that occur subsequently, we see that talk arises that does not itself promote progressivity.

(4) (3 continued)

```
01 BIR: >Kay I'm gonna pick< (.) that one there I think,
02 MAM: Yeah,
03 REP: Kay.
04 BIR: >I'm gonna pick that one there:< So uh::
05 four on here:, (0.2) +↑↑H[i::
06 bir .....+puts cubes down
07 MAM: [Yeah,
08 (0.5)
09 SPI: ##Wah:##(k)hh=
10 BIR: =>↑↑Hi::=Just joining you=#wah:#(h).hh[hh
11 SPI: [~No[:. Please ~no:.
12 BIR: [Uh : : : one
13 on tundra one on tundra.
14 MAM: Yep;
```

We see again Bird announcing his game turn, which makes it available for others to ratify and react. However, then Bird temporarily suspends the

narration of his actions and shifts his footing (Goffman 1981). He addresses Spider with *Hi:* (L5), and claims to be joining Spider. The extreme high pitch associated with his speech suggests Bird is embodying his character, i.e. the “bird” cubes that he is placing are greeting the “spider” cubes (see Klewitz and Couper-Kuhlen 1999 on how prosody can function to enact different voices). Spider responds with a sound conventionally associated with whining (L9), *wah:*. Bird repeats his greeting, and then narrates his action in a way that both continues the characterization of his action as a “greeting” and also downgrades the competitiveness of his move—he is “just joining” Spider (rather than taking over the tile with more cubes). Spider uses a cartoony-like wobbly voice, possibly also voicing his “character”, protesting Bird’s move (L11). Bird then returns to narrating in a normal voice as he chooses two other tiles to play on (L12-13). This prosodically unusual interlude still concerns the game, even if it does not progress the game—it narrates the events in a playful manner, helping to index and enact the playful nature of the game context (Bateson 2006). This is precisely the kind of talk-in-interaction one might expect to *support* the “magic circle” or lusory agreement, rather than detract from it or be problematic the way that metagaming and action “outside” the magic circle is reported to be. In situ, the players display no indication that it is a problematic exchange, but instead ratify and align with the playfulness (and competitiveness) together. Furthermore, Bird seamlessly joins talk that does not

progress his game turn to talk that *does* progress his game turn and promote the overall progressivity of the game. The interlude above also does not suspend or hinder Bird's bodily actions, and Bird continues placing tokens and thus progressing the game. Although the players mark the distinction between talk that narrates and talk that makes available Bird's game moves (particularly through pitch, vocal quality) indicating a shift in footing, they do not treat either as accountable or inappropriate. In summary, this example demonstrates how ostensibly out-of-game talk (talk which does not itself produce or progress game action) is both integrated into the game activity, and treated as an acceptable, indeed *fun*, contribution.

In the next example, from the same game, it is Bird's turn to play. While Bird displays actions showing the ongoing progression of his game turn, the other players discuss the game itself.

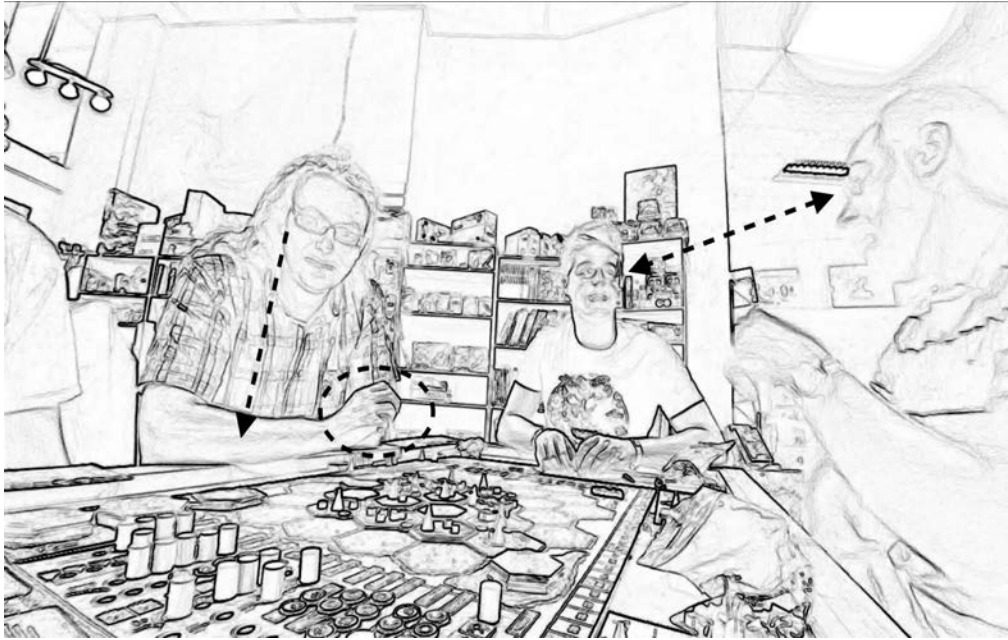
(5) (160908_DominantSpecies_pt1_1.04.13)

```

01  BIR:  Uh:::n (   move four) <or *tundra> right# it goes like tha::
02  bir   >>gazing@own area-----*gaze around board, holding token>>
                                           #Fig4
03      (duh duh [da: fa reachin'])
04  REP:  [>One of the things< I like about this game though
05      is that- you can keep planning? so you never feel
06      bored between turns?
07  BIR:  Mm:.
08  REP:  So >it's the fact that-< two and a half hours of gameplay went
09      by:, I'm- didn't [really feel like it.
10  SPI:  [Right.=re-
11  SPI:  No:.
12      (0.9)
13  SPI:  You're constantly planning and then e:very turn it's
14      [like- (.) Aw:: that's just- (0.2) buggered.=Right.=
15  REP:  [Yeah:.
16  SPI:  =N(h)ehxt [plan,
17  MAM:  [Yeah::

```

Figure 4: Bird thinking, others talking



Bird's talk (L1-3) is designed as "self-talk" (Keevallik 2018), in that the vocal quality and content do not encourage responses from the other players. The non-lexical sounds in particular (L3) are not clearly articulated as actual words. The other players take Bird to be speaking in a way that does not require a response, given that Reptile speaks over Bird's talk (L4). In this way, the players treat Bird's game turn as ongoing, but not complete, and Bird's talk as supporting the continuation of his own game turn, rather than as discussion inviting response (see Hofstetter 2020a for a fuller discussion of this kind of self-talk with co-occurring side talk). Bird also maintains his gaze at the board, excluding gaze from the other players, even when responding to Reptile (L7). Reptile's talk, however, does not progress the game. Reptile assesses the game

experience so far, and why he likes the particular game they are playing (L4-9), and Spider ratifies the assessment of the game as something that involves constantly planning. Meta-comments about the game, like Reptile's, are also not especially common, but always involve a similar interplay of assessments, and occur at moments when they do not hinder the game's progressivity; they are instances of concurrent multiactivity. All three players are locally managing multiactivity by orienting to dual involvements during the game, such as when Bird's vocalization attends to the discussion of the game (L7) while bodily orienting to progressing game play (L2 onwards). In this sense, the game play is the main involvement (in Goffman 1963's terms), as its progressivity is prioritized (see also Example 5).

The talk above is unquestionably *about* the game, since it assesses the experience of the game itself. Furthermore, it is produced at a moment when the game turns cannot progress beyond Bird. Bird's game turn may itself be progressing, and visible as such through Bird's displays, but it is not possible for other participants to play yet. By positioning the assessment at this moment, Reptile prevents such talk from hindering progressivity at some other point—for instance, instead of initiating this talk while other players waited for Reptile to begin and take his own game turn. Reptile has topicalized the game and made it part of the explicit discussion, which does not itself promote progressivity, but he does it in a way that is sensitive to the context of

progressing game turns. Players may thus be able to accomplish a great deal of action concurrent to the game without hindering its progressivity, and without receiving sanctions from other players, as long as they are sensitive to the progression of the game and organize the action with respect to progressivity. In actual gameplay, then, players do not treat all co-occurring action that does not progress the game as somehow problematic, nor as irrelevant to their ongoing social activity, contrary to prior discussions of the magic circle and metagaming. There appears to be the possibility, in situ, of doing action that is not strictly gameplay without sanction or trouble, as long as it does not hinder the progressivity of the game. These multiactivity complexities are sustainable and even methods for being sociable and affiliative. We will show further examples that are even less directly associated with the game itself in the next section.

Talk that cannot be sustained with an ongoing game

In this section, we examine moments when players treat some action as unsustainable with the ongoing game. Players attempt to reorient the action to be about the game again, treating the foregoing actions as no longer sufficiently addressing the progressivity of the game (see also Sutinen 2014 on the managed return to the activity of a role-playing game).

Below, Tina is taking her game turn and has been audibly debating her choices. James and Hal have been discussing whether some types of armies are better than other types of armies in this game (each “race” of armies has different special abilities). They continue to discuss as Tina places her armies on the board (L11-16). At the end of her game turn, Tina has the option to roll the dice to (hopefully) get a temporary, extra army, and she interrupts the other two players’ discussion to make this dice roll (L17).

(6) (GN_SmallWorld_28.50)

```

01          (0.9)+(0.4)*(0.2)
02 tin          -->+gaze@board-->
03 tin          *holding out hand with one piece-->
04 TIN:      This isn't that many guys,
05 HAL:      Well, [they're all specific.=
06 TIN:      [though,
07 HAL:      =They're ^all- (.) To me they're all: .hh^ (.) boards-
08 tin          ^wrinkles nose-----^
09          (0.3)
10 HAL:      they're all:- *gameplay specific so:, (.) a *lot *of,
11 tin          -->*.....*places army*,-->
12 TIN:      Three[: ,
13 HAL:      [A lot of what [makes a race,* (0.3) more or=
14 JAM:      [Mhm?
15 tin          -->*
16 HAL:      =*less att|ractive *than [another | #race,
17 TIN:      [I need to #roll the di*ce_
18 tin          *.....*waving dice in hal's face--*rolling-->
19 hal          |gaze@board-----|gaze@dice-->
                #Fig.5
20 HAL:      Okay,
21          (1.3)* (0.3) *(0.7)
22 tin          -->*dice roll*
23 TIN:      [Yeah*:*! [ < E x a c t ]ly , >
24 JAM:      [Ahhhw: [b' you got it]

```

Figure 5: Tina waving dice in Hal’s face



Hal and James discuss the types of “races” and their benefits (L5-16) while Tina gazes at the board (L2), and self-talks about her moves (L4, 6). Tina announces her moves as they occur (L12), although the others do not take the opportunity to comment. Their ongoing discussion is available to Tina, who can see that they are not displaying attention to her ongoing game turn (see also Example 5).

When it comes to rolling the dice, Tina requires the other players’ attention. Dice results are a witnessable event—that is, the witnessing of the event as it happens provides for its validity (e.g., the dice were rolled properly rather than “placed down”). As Tina picks up the dice, Hal’s gaze goes towards the board (L18-19), but Tina does not treat that as sufficient attention, and Hal

is still verbally continuing discussion of the “races”. Tina holds the dice in front of Hal’s face (L18), and states she needs to roll the dice (L17). At these two actions, Hal ceases his talk, leaving his utterance incomplete (L16). Tina’s claim to “need” to roll the dice is a sufficient account for Hal and James to provide undivided attention to the dice rolling and witness the event. James and Tina react to the result of the dice roll in tandem, in overlap, showing the mutual coordination of attention to the dice has resulted in simultaneous reactions. The reactions also provide evidence that the roll has been witnessed and is being treated as valid.

There are moments, then, when multiactivity is treated as unsustainable, and the game is given priority while other actions are suspended (see examples in Haddington et al. 2014; Vatanen, this volume). Dice rolls require witnessing to be legitimate, and so may be a site where concurrent talk is regularly unsustainable or avoided.

The reverse can also happen, where an activity that is not itself play can disrupt the ongoing course of play and cause it to be suspended temporarily. In the next example, Adam completes his move, and it becomes John’s game turn. However, at that moment, a token is heard dropping to the ground (L5). The play is suspended to deal with picking up the piece.

(7) (160716_TashKalar_pt2_22.52)

```

01          (0.3) |          (3.6) |*          (1.3) |
02 adm          |picks up pieces|places two pieces|
03 joh          *gaze@adm's pieces-->
04          +(0.2)          +^(.)          ^
05 tok          ^token drops^
06 kat          +puts down cards & leans back+
07 ADM: Go'head.
08          (1.1)
09 KAT: Something dropped.
10          (0.5) |*
11 adm          |looks under table-->
12 joh          *looks under table-->
13 KAT: It's one a mine. *Sorry it keeps sticking to my |arm.
14 joh          -->*picks up piece-->
15 adm          -->|
16 JOH:          *hhh(h)eh(h)eh(h)n(h)n*
17 joh          -->*puts piece on table--*
18          (3.1)
19 JOH: There's- |I think +this |table is #only #just big enough=
20 adm          |gaze@cards----|gaze@board-->
21 kat          +leans on elbows on table>>
22 kat          #gazez@joh#gaze@board>>
23 JOH: =°|for board |gam*ing.°
24 joh          *gaze@cards & board-->
25 adm          -->|gaze@joh--|gaze@board>>
26 ADM: Yeah. (0.2) B- it's actually a good size for that.
27          (0.4)
28 JOH: Yeah.
29          (0.5)
30 JOH: *It's cozy,
31 joh          -->*gaze@adm
32          (0.5) *
33 joh          -->*gaze@cards & board-->
34 KAT: I like just big enough.
35          (0.3)
36 ADM: Mhm[: ,
37 JOH: [Yeah,
38          (2.8)
39 JOH: Okay:hh. Uh:m:?

```

Just as Adam passes the game turn to John (L7), the token makes a sound as it drops. This is not attended until Kat observes that *something dropped* (L9), at which mention all players look to the ground—the noticing affects the multiactivity (Helisten 2019). Although John originally had begun showing attention to his cards and his game turn, once Kat observes the dropping, all players redirect their attention to the dropped item. It being closer

to John, he picks it up and returns it to Kat's play area (L13-15). Kat apologizes (L12), identifying the problem as the piece sticking to her arm and then dropping as she moved. She thereby claims responsibility not just for her piece and failure to keep it on the table, but also for disrupted the game. John describes the size of the table, which, being only just big enough to hold all their game boards and tokens, may have caused Kat to have to place her arms down on top of her tokens rather than in a free zone of table. It being John's table, he is in a sense accounting for its size. Kat shows some orientation to mitigating this potential accountability by claiming to like the size of the table (whatever difficulty it may have caused her) (L34). John explicitly marks the return of his focus to his game turn (L39).

The process of returning to the game after retrieving the piece is not straightforward (see Sutinen 2014). John's observation of the table is complicated by his ownership of it, making it relevant for the other two to counter any potential criticism. Play *could* have resumed after line 23, and John's gaze is largely focused on his cards and the board (L24, 33), but progress is interrupted by Adam and Kat's counterings of any criticism of the table. The interruption of game progressivity is thus prolonged, step by step, beyond the retrieval moment, and it is a live issue for them to solve how and when they will return to the game.

The literature definitions of the magic circle and metagaming might point to these examples as instances that show multiactivity during gameplay is unacceptable. However, as we have shown in the collection as a whole, what these examples demonstrate is that players use progressivity as basis for the appropriateness of multiactivity conduct. Example 7 reinforces that participants prioritize solving trouble that arises (the dropped game piece) over progressivity (see Kamunen 2019), while Example 6 emphasizes that players monitor each other's multiactivity engagements enough to be able to reorient them to a key gameplay moment as necessary (suspending talk for a dice roll).

Discussion

In this paper, we have taken up Juul's (2008) call to investigate game boundaries as they are negotiated and made relevant in actual circumstances. This has led to an emic, situated analysis of "metagaming", in the sense of action (including embodied movement and talk) that occurs during game play but is not itself a game action. Metagaming has been described as events "around" the game, which we conceptualize as multiactivity. We have shown several different types of this metagaming, but all are organized around a central principle: at all times, minimize the disruption to the progressivity of the game. Where an event forces one to suspend the progressivity, make that suspension as minimal as possible. Where players fail to uphold this principle,

they are vulnerable to sanction, and accountable for not supporting progressivity.

Our analysis of metagaming shows a very different perspective on the concept than prior work. Although players may consciously label non-game activity as problematic in interviews, during the game itself there are few circumstances that are actually oriented to as problematic, despite the complexities arising from multiple concurrent tasks. Instead, players manage games as sites of multiactivity (Haddington et al. 2014) without difficulty, skillfully displaying their attention at crucial moments in ways that support the ongoing collaboration of playing the game. The complexity of multiactivity does not pose difficulty for the participants, even while it *does* impose moral requirements on players for how to properly participate. Players do engage in practices to uphold at least some distinctions between “game” and “not-game”—their multiactivity orientations are *produced* (Raymond and Lerner 2014), and that display of activity distinction becomes a resource for demonstrating attention and engagement. For instance, players treat bodily orientation to the board and table as attention to the game, and take advantage of this resource to actively demonstrate attention elsewhere at times, and at other times to display multiple simultaneous activity involvements (e.g., Example 1).

All this raises questions about the relevance of the magic circle as an emic category. In orienting to some action as not progressing the game (or supporting the progression of the game), players treat that action as not part of the game itself; it is ostensibly metagame, outside the magic circle as the games literature defines. On the other hand, these actions are carefully interwoven into the game interaction: they could not exist in the same form were they not part of the game situation. Furthermore, since activities around the game are organized for their sustainability with play, they may actually support ongoing play. “Side talk” while a player debates their choices (Examples 5 and 6) permits the active player to delay their game turn, and reduces pressure to hurry (Hofstetter 2020a). Disrupting or suspending progressivity to solve trouble (Example 7) allows for the game to maintain its coherency (with all pieces, all rules, etc.). Assessing the game (Example 5) and joking about game moves (Example 3 and 4) provides opportunities for affiliation. All of these layers of complexity make the game more sociable in a colloquial sense, as well as more feasible to play in a practical sense.

As such, the magic circle may be less informative as a distinction between game and non-game and may be better treated as a resource for managing the local complexities of playing the game and players’ orientations to task-relevant issues. For example, using game-specific categories can be done to manage the accountability of complaints (Sterphone 2022), while

labelling action as ‘non-game’ can be a means for reasoning for its inappropriateness. This is an important alternative, because the role of progressivity in determining what is accountably “metagaming” or “out of game” in an actual game event demonstrates the way *non-game* norms (everyday interactional norms) permeate and facilitate *game* norms; categories of activity are resources for doing interactional work and facilitating reasoning about joint activity. A question to ask in future studies is whether non-habitual gamers, who have not been socialized into game norms, show the same orientations and/or how they learn such orientations to metagaming and progressivity. We may see then how board gamers police and teach the acceptable forms of metagaming and progressivity to newcomers, and how that structures a broader culture for board game play.

Beyond gaming, such a reinterpretation of metagaming and the magic circle has consequences for Goffmanian notions of context (e.g., 1963). Rather than seeing context as a governing force, the practices analyzed in this paper show how participants can use “activity” as a morally organizing principle, with which to do action, hold each other accountable, and facilitate progress of the activity at hand (Evans and Fitzgerald 2016; Evans 2013). The playing of a game may *necessitate* a multiactivity scenario, rather than exclude it via a magic circle, in order to draw on norms that come from everyday interaction, as well as to organize the game activity as a focus of progress.

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