

The Sociability of Gaming

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This paper is the result of a first attempt to reason about the social aspects of games and gaming; the sociability of gaming. I aim at discussing an idea of how we can understand and study games and gaming in relation to social aspects, by using Johan Asplund's term social responsibility (1987). This I hope can open up the term "social" and give us the opportunity to study the roles that social games and gaming have in people's lives. How can we ontologically discuss the sociability of games/gaming and how can we study this? This is very much "work in progress" - highly preliminary work which will need to be further developed and expanded. All comments and suggestions on how to further develop and think about this are more than welcome.

The paper starts with a brief setting of the scene followed by an overview of earlier research. After that I discuss the term social responsibility and last give some example from a pilot study¹.

New technologies are increasingly important in our lives. Among these technologies, digital games² have left a definite mark in our consumption of entertainment. With the introduction of the personal computer and easy-to-use operating systems, gaming consoles and (later) with the introduction of the Internet, our gaming has gone through several changes. Playing computer based games is becoming something that many people do, young as well as old. In recent years a lot has changed on the gaming market, the new generation of console games are played online, eradicating the major difference between computer and console gaming³. New console machines play films and music as well as browse the web. However, console games are still played with the TV as screen and are more pure entertainment machines while the computer often doubles as a working tool. There is also gaming on handheld consoles that can be played on the bus for example and mobile phone games is another portable growing sector. In contrast to computer games that you buy from a retailer in a box there is a multitude of, quite often free, web browser based games available online, a market that has grown immensely in recent years.

The use of computer mediated communication is now something almost all Swedes use (Cooper et al., 2003; Internetbarometern, 2008). People's social networks have in a large degree moved to and been supplemented by computer mediated communication. Entertainment media surrounds us and is an important part of our lives. More and more of our social life happen with the aid of computers with applications as e-mail, social media (e.g.

¹ The pilot study is a focus group conducted in Stockholm, Sweden with 6 gamers in the autumn of 2008. The gamers played all kinds of games, where all newly examined from the university, around 30 years old. 2 were women and 4 were men.

² With digital games I refer to any type of game played with a screen see: Kerr (2006).

³ Play Station 3 by Sony, X-box 360 by Microsoft and Nintendo Wii by Nintendo. These consoles all support online gaming. There is also possible to download smaller games most often by paying a small amount. Players can also upload their scores from different games and compare them against friends

Facebook), chat and computer games. This makes it important to study people's social network and social relations today. What role do digital games play in this? Do games promote or limit social interaction and does it differ if its digital or AFK⁴? These are questions I will study in my ongoing PhD-work.

Ever since gaming moved from the arcades into the home (although most often into public places in the home see: Aarsand and Aronsson, 2007) the question whether gaming foster or hinder social relationship has been an issue and continued so through the development of game technology. Gaming has been described as a bedroom culture where isolated children sit in their bedrooms alone and play (Pasquier et al., 1998). On the other hand the social aspects of gaming have been highlighted and focused on in other game studies. The fact that people play online with or against others has somewhat changed the view of games as antisocial media. Online gaming is rapidly growing and mmorpg (massive multiplayer online role playing games) can be considered to constitute social spaces (see also Taylor, 2006) where human interaction is important. It has been said that online social spaces e.g. mmorpg's today are so advanced that they can be viewed as "a second living space" (Hwang, 2003) and that they cannot be separated from "normal" social life (Holme et.al., 2004). Mmorpg games constitute social spaces where a group, or individuals, takes part in different adventures. The games have inbuilt possibilities for social interaction (Ducheneaut, N. and Moore, 2004) and these social interactions is the key attraction for gamers to play the games (Williams, 2006). When gamers ranked the reasons they played (Seay, Jerome, Lee and Kraut, 2004) 39 % put the social aspect first.

Earlier research on the social aspects of gaming has shown that gamers appreciate gaming together with others, both online and offline. Jansz and Marten (2005) have studied visitors to LAN⁵ parties and what motivates people to be in them. Their results show that mostly the social aspects of the gatherings are what attract people. Other researchers have shown that gaming can strengthen social bonds within families (Durkin and Barber, 2002), lead to new relationships for youths within their own peer group (Orleans and Laney, 2000) or via the Internet by participating in online gaming (Griffiths et al., 2004). Generally, however, not much is written about what role (social) gaming play in people's lives and how they do "gaming" offline. Is it social or not, and what is the nature of gaming in people's everyday lives? Previous research has pointed to the fact that gaming is not an isolated activity; the myth of the isolated teenager boy sitting alone drinking jolt cola has been displayed as – a myth. However, previous research lacks a solid theoretical foundation on how we can understand and interpret the sociability of gaming. So **how** is gaming social, how can we describe and analyse the sociability of gaming? In what way is gaming a social / asocial activity? What is sociability and how can we understand it in relation to games and gaming?

Here I need to make a distinction. We can see social relations as consisting of (a), social integration, (b), social network structure and (c), relational content (House et al, 1988). The focus here is not on the network structure but rather on the existence of social relationship (a) and the nature and quality of these relationships (c). The network aspects of Internet as well as online gaming play an increasing role for the structure of people's social networks and this

⁴ AFK stands for "Away From Keyboard" and have replaced the earlier IRL "In Real Life" to separate what happens online from what happens offline. AFK takes into consideration that what happens online is as important and "real" as what happens offline.

⁵ LAN stands for "Local Area Network" and are gatherings of game players with the purpose of playing multiplayer games.

might have an influence on the nature of relationships. This I aim to look at further in the future.

To broaden our understanding of the subject I will below discuss the sociability of gaming. I propose that games in their basic form are in a way social, although different from when we play with others. Sociability I define as the inherent social aspect of something a skill or property of something or someone in terms of being sociable. My research concerns the social aspects of gaming in general and how we can understand what role gaming plays in people's lives. So far the data gathering has just begun. I conduct focus groups with different groups of people that play digital games where the nature of gaming and social aspects of gaming is discussed. Since the data gathering process isn't finished, my focus here will be on the preliminary theoretical framework that deals with social relations and gaming. My purpose is to empirically and theoretically understand if and if so how games and gaming are social and what that means for the people playing them. Livingstone (2002) says that to evaluate the change of the information revolution we must empirically research it. Look at the activities of real users and *“as they acquire, use and make sense of new media goods, particularly given the degree to which the ‘implied audience’ or implied users is presumed, imagined or mythologized in the discourse surrounding new media”* (p.18). Focus in this paper as mentioned is however on the theoretical part, how can we on an ontological, epistemological level understand and research the sociability of gaming? Here I talk more generally about games and gaming, the discussion is not limited to any specific types of games or any gaming situations. This is also not an attempt at defining what a game is or what constitutes a digital game. I try to use Asplund's concept social responsiveness for the purposes of my study of mmorpg gamers and gamers in general.

What does social mean then and how are we to define it in the context of games and gaming? According to the social psychologist Asplund (1987) humans are in their most basic form completely dependent on social relations, we are with Asplund's words socially responsive. In this elementary form we seek social response. Social responsiveness can also, in some way, be played out between an object and a person as well as between two or more persons. Asplund gives the example of flying a kite; the kite is imbued with human characteristics and responds to the command given to it. This social responsiveness happens between the kite and the person flying it and stems from that relationship. When we transfer this view to digital games we can understand them as somewhat socially responsive in themselves. When playing a game we interact with it and it responds to us. We have game characters to interact with and most often an avatar to identify with and these can be seen as important elements for social responsiveness. This could also explain some of the attraction that games and gaming hold for people. We can satisfy, while gaming, one of our most basic human needs, to be responded to. This is however not an attempt to say what games are or how we can define them; this is solely about social aspects of games. Games might be socially responsive but this is only something of what a game is or how we can understand gaming (See e.g. Juul on definition of games, 2005).

The sociability of games can then with Asplund's terms be the inert responsive aspect of games, as they are. If we are to interpret digital games as social we need finer tools than the word social to define and understand gamer's interaction with other people in the activity of gaming. We can distinguish between games and gaming and focus on the activity of gaming, something happening both on and off the screen (Sjöblom, 2008). The sociability of gaming then becomes something else, which deals more with the performance of gaming, something that of course depends heavily on the game itself. Here lan-parties, Internet café gaming, the

new party games etc. fit in. The social interaction that we can access in online games can also be sorted under this label. Social interaction online can move beyond this; we can interact with other players as well as the game, and both are constantly accessible. At any point during the day or week we can log into the game, interaction with other people is most often only a mouse click away. Social responsibility is for Asplund neither good nor bad. Griefing⁶ or killing opponents in Counter Strike is also socially responsive; it is elementary human behaviour. Our actions make someone, or something else respond, either by talking to us, killing us or any other action that is possible while gaming. Juul (2005) also talks about how these types of games offer context for interaction rather than being antisocial.

This is merely a first suggestion at how we can begin to think about the social aspects of gaming. To use the term social responsibility gives the opportunity to not only see that gamers play with other gamers and therefore games are social. But also to look at the structure of this interaction and see in what different ways different games offer opportunities for social interaction and how this interaction can stretch outside the game to the meta game and also beyond this. A Raid in World of Warcraft is normally played with at least 10 up to 25 people. This interaction can still be highly unsocial towards the others in the group. It is not necessary to talk to the others; you might not even have time to if the group moves fast. Raiding can be a highly routine business with minimal interaction or conversation between players. Is this interaction really socially responsive if we get no or minimal response from the other players? At the same time as the gamer retains the social responsibility from the game itself. Another example that also stems from the pilot study of the project is the fact that talking about gaming experiences with others that had the same experiences was something that expanded the pleasure of gaming and pleasure is something Asplund (1987) connects with social responsibility. The gamers saw this interaction with others as more pleasurable than other talk about media, because of their shared experience of something; they had done the same thing “*killed the same boss*”. The pilot study also showed that gaming was perceived as more rewarding than other media consumption, because you “*do something*” when gaming. Furthermore playing with others could heighten this feeling. This I believe could be linked to the aspect of social responsibility that games and gaming inhibit.

In conclusion the nature of the social interaction needs to be studied at as well as the fact that it exists to fully answer the question of the sociability of gaming.

⁶ Grievers are players whose objective in the game is to irritate or harass other players.

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