Chapter 9: Exploring Gaming Communities
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Abstract

All kinds of play have close ties with social interaction, as social play behaviours are very common, not only among people, but with some animals alike. When social play extends further into the arenas of social and cultural organisation in a society, gaming communities emerge as an important element to consider. Communities have been defined in various ways, which are introduced in this chapter, after which the evolution and characteristics of games related communities are discussed. As gaming communities relate to a variety of very different games, with players who range from casual to very passionate, the character, behaviour and consequences of gaming communities also diverge much.

Introduction

It is obvious that digital games and game playing in general carries various meanings in the lives of many millions of people. For some, games are at the periphery of their lives, perhaps just providing momentary escape from daily routines. For others, games can a focus on intense interests, with regular investments of time and energy. As such interests become shared, they enter the social sphere, possibly leading to the formation of human relationships that are motivated or catalysed by gaming activities or interests.

This chapter has its focus on the social networks and communities of digital game players. The concept of community is discussed, and its specific relations to games elaborated: are games capable of supporting true communities, or should we address the social dimensions of gaming and people with games related interests in different terms? A second issue this chapter explores are the consequences of such gaming communities or social formations: how does the organization of gaming communities affect game playing (game-internal consequences), or has it possibly some consequences to the lives of game players, outside of the gaming reality?

Particular emphasis is in this chapter placed on the potential for gaming networks (offline and online) to promote communication, social networking and peer support. In order to provide the necessary background, important community and network studies will be linked to both classic and more recent work in social gaming research. The evolving social phenomena of digital gaming will be highlighted through the dual perspectives opened up by general community studies on the other hand, and by the specific studies of game playing and gaming communities.

Communities, or 'social capital' have been associated with both physical health and subjective well-being.[1] In this chapter the complex character of gaming communities will be introduced and interpreted, on the basis of existing research. It is important to note that in the games industry and new media business, it is common to see communities being discussed as something that is produced, and even sold. This kind of perspective that is focused on the commercial design of "community as a service" mostly falls outside of the

scope of this chapter. Here, the perspective is primarily on communities as performance, or as social facts. Gaming communities are seen as something that game players do, and their belonging to a community is dependent on their choices and actions, and also defined by the associated sense of belonging to a community. In the public debate surrounding communities there are often conflicting views between what are considered as genuine or true communities and non-genuine or artificial or insubstantial ones. This is a long-standing argument, which is also affecting how gaming communities are discussed and perceived. On the one side is the classic perception of community as something that is fundamental to all human life, and "true community" as something that is essential and highly beneficial to all human sociability. Against such background, the "interest communities" such as gaming communities as emerge as novel, borderline phenomena – or as non-essential, optional forms of sociability, not worthy of name 'community'.

This chapter will aim to respond to key questions such as: are contemporary online or virtual communities similar to offline social communities? How does sociability relate to play and games? What is the nature, character and possible benefits that game players gain from their gaming communities?

Defining "Community"

"Community" is one of the key concepts in sociology and in human sciences in general. It is also a contested concept, and one that will invariably lead the researchers also to political debates about the standards of "good life", or about what constitutes an "ideal society", or into discussions about what is wrong with the contemporary societal developments. As video games are a similarly contested phenomenon, the discussion of 'gaming communities' emerges as a topic ridden by tensions into several dimensions.

The debates about the character of community and society and their developments can be traced far into history. In antiquity, poets like Hesiod and Virgil wrote about the Golden Age, the age of abundance, which was the mythic era dominated by primitive community and communism – the fruits of the nature were all peacefully shared among the people and private property was unknown.[2(p42)] The ancient conceptions of original community were also tightly linked with the idea of degeneration: in Hesiod's version, the Golden Age was followed first by the Silver Age, then by Bronze Age, each one worse than the previous one. Approaching contemporary reality of social life also meant that the conflicts and ills of society appeared into closer focus. The classic conceptions of community are thus built upon distinctive foundation of romantic nostalgia for the past time of happiness, and pessimism about the direction of social development.

In the modern scholarship, the German sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies is generally credited as introducing the concept of 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*), by differentiating it from 'society' (*Gesellschaft*). In his classic work, Tönnies writes:

> All intimate, private and exclusive living together, so we discover, is understood as life in Gemeinschaft (community). Gesellschaft (society) is public life – it is the world itself. In Gemeinschaft with one's family, one lives from birth on, bound to it in weal and woe. One goes to Gesellschaft as one goes into a strange country. A young man is warned against bad Gesellschaft, but the expression bad Gemeinschaft violates the meaning of the word.[3]

From a contemporary perspective, the main contribution of Tönnies was the analytical emphasis and perspective he opened into the ongoing societal changes: in the nineteenth century, the traditional, "organic" ways of people connecting with each other were being reframed and reorganized in modernization processes that involved urbanization, industrialization and increasing mobility in many areas of life. Tönnies wrote about "natural will" (*Wesenwille*) as the force that bounds people together in a community, whereas the society is more "artificially" based on laws and contracts of various kinds. Another classic of sociology, Emile Durkheim, turned the tables, and argued that it is actually the modern society where more "organic", voluntary and flexible solidarity is possible between individuals, whereas traditional villages and other small groups of people partake in "mechanical" solidarity, where everyone is tightly bound to do the same things.[4(p126-131)] The increases in the heterogeneity and in the degree of individual freedom that characterizes modern societies had, however also its downsides, as pointed out by Durkheim's study on suicide. While individuals may suffer in traditional communities of the excessive pressures to conform, in the modern society it "is everlastingly repeated that it is man's nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, towards an indefinite goal".[5(p257)] Durkheim analyzed available statistical data and suggested that it is particularly those who are economically and intellectually free to express their individual desires who are in danger of suicide out of anomie, feelings of emptiness. The individual freedom available in modern society can thus also translate into the lack of community feeling, and feelings of loneliness.

While community has remained a key concept in research for more than a century, there is little agreement on what the defining characteristics of communities are, or on what communities are at their heart. Already by mid-1950s, George Hillery[6] quoted 94 different definitions for 'community'. Steven Brint[7(p3-4)] has provided a useful summary of the community concept theorization, and suggested that there are six key criteria for tight "Gemeinschaft style" communities that emerge from research in this area; such social formations have: (1) dense and demanding social ties, (2) social attachments to and involvement in institutions, (3) ritual occasions, and (4) small group size. Additionally, they are characterized by (5) perceptions of similarity (e.g. in physical characteristics, expressive style, way of life, on in historical experience with others), and (6) by common beliefs in an idea system, moral order, institution, or a group.

Looking at this list, it is immediately clear that most contemporary gaming communities – social gatherings or groupings of varyingly obligating or non-obligating character – do not fill all such tight criteria for 'community'. It actually appears that many important contemporary social aggregates fail to meet all these criteria, raising the question whether "true communities" are in decline, or whether it is should be better to revise our definitions of community to fit with the changing social realities. Brint considers that the community concept needs to be applied in a more flexible manner to meet the core, relevant social phenomena. He decides first to divide the existential basis of relationship ties into two main groups, geographic and choice-based. These are then further divided on the primary reason for interaction (activity-based or belief-based), and these are then further split on the basis of how frequent the interaction between members is, or whether the interaction is primarily face-to-face or mediated by character. Such an approach has the benefit of rejecting the monolithic Gemeinschaft community concept Tönnies introduced, and

helping to identify the several distinctive forms that community is capable of taking. Brint's analysis identifies eight such general sub-types of communities, providing a useful starting point for further research and discussion: (1) communities of place, (2) communes and collectives, (3) localized friendship networks, (4) dispersed friendship networks, (5) activity-based elective communities, (6) belief-based elective communities, (7) imagined communities, and (8) virtual communities.[7(p10-11)] There is no reason why games or game playing could not be relevant element in any or all of these community subtypes.

From Social Play to Culturally Constructed Gaming Communities

The existing research suggests that various forms of play are ancient, and inseparably related to social interactions and significances. The studies of animal play point out that there is plenty of evidence of both locomotor, and object play, as well as of social play behaviours among mammals, reptiles, as well as many other animals.[8] Since social play requires complex interplays of communication, interpretations of intention, role playing and cooperation, many researchers have suggested that the evolutionary and adaptive, or learning benefits of social play explain its popularity.[9(p98)] Many mammals who engage in social play use specific signals to convey their playful intention, thereby engaging in what Gregory Bateson[10] has called metacommunication. The levels of cooperation in advanced social play go beyond simple evolutionary arguments, however, and require more comprehensive appreciation of how consciousness, intentionality, representation and communication relate to each other.[9(p109)] As humans engage with social game play, such activities are also culturally mediated and contextualized.

The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga has been perhaps the most important nineteenth century scholar to argue for a cultural interpretation of games and play. In his *Homo Ludens* he also explicitly linked play with formation of communities:

> Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means.[11(p13)]

Huizinga aimed to identify the nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon, and consequently emphasized the role of examples, which clearly differentiate play and games from everyday life. Like "magic circle", another important boundary concept for Huizinga's project, the secret "social groupings" that he discusses contribute to the establishment of play-world as somehow separate and distinctive from common life. There are particular temporal, spatial and social conditions that make play phenomena stand out most clearly and it is those Huizinga is most interested in. In case of game play communities, Huizinga first discusses the challenges presented by the "cheat" and the "spoil-sport", who present different threats to play. While the cheater pretends to play the game, Huizinga argues, it is the spoil-sport who "threatens the existence of the play-community". As a spoil-sport does not respect the rules and the illusion of play-world,

he must be cast out, if the magic world of play is intended to continue to exist. The socially constructed character of game play is in Huizinga's view intimately linked with the social contracts and groupings that are required to guarantee its continuity. He continues to argue that a "play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over".[11(p12)] The relationships between the game of football and the football clubs, or chess and chess clubs are good examples of this.

The cultural history of gaming communities is usefully approached through traditional examples such as (physical) sports and board games, as the institutional roles in such fields have substantial and long histories. Many ancient societies had sports elevated in central places in the society, as witnessed by such institutions as ancient Greek Olympic Games, or Roman gladiator games. There has been different forms for the social organization of sports among the aristocracy and the peasants in the Middle Ages, and the Modern Era marked the rise in the popularity of team sports, supported by increases in wealth, leisure time, and mass media that supported developments in spectator sports.[11(p44-70)] Similarly, a board game like chess is the product of a long history in the methods as well as means of play, including both the material objects used for game play, as well as the social and cultural conditions that had an effect on who were capable of playing, when, and where. Chess clubs and written rulebooks, for example, are a rather recent development, rising in popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There is nevertheless evidence of long-standing gaming communities forming around chess from many parts of the world.[13]

Expanding Games: Gaming in Social Life

The social character of gaming, and gaming as a perspective into social life, have been discussed in relation to each other by several scholars, most notably by sociologist Erving Goffman. In his major work *Frame Analysis*,[14] Goffman utilized his interest in theatre, arts and games to discuss the various "social games" that people engage in to organize their social lives. As in his earlier work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,[15] Goffman argues that as we as humans encounter each other, we also perform as social actors, who are conscious of the various contexts that frame our social interactions. In *Frame Analysis*, he discusses how multiple such organizing frames can overlap or conflict in different ways, and how individuals engage in "keying" or managing such frames in their everyday lives. As such social frames are based on rules, like games are, Goffman suggests that the "meaningfulness of everyday life is similarly dependent on a closed, finite set of rules", and that "explication of [such rules] would give one a powerful means of analyzing social life".[14(p5)] The degree of formality of such rules is nevertheless distinctively different in several everyday "play situations" as contrasted with actual games. As Goffman writes:

> There seems to be a continuum between playfulness, whereby some utilitarian act is caught up and employed in a transformed way for fun, and both [in] sports and games. In any case, whereas in playfulness the playful reconstitution of some individual into a "plaything" is quite temporary, never fully established, in organized games and sports this reconstitution is institutionalized – stabilized, as it were – just as the arena of action is fixed by the formal rules of the activity.[14(p57)]

The social formations that organize participation in game play can be called 'gaming communities', and they can be discussed as a specific phenomenon, while being situated within the social dimensions of play, or "social games" in that take place in the society in more general terms. While not completely separate from the surrounding society, such games focused forms of social life have nevertheless grown into a notable aspect of late modern, network societies.[16,17] In Brint's terms, such formations are primarily 'elective communities', as they are based on a choice, rather than on such facts as occupation or on living on a certain village or suburb, for example. Often discussed as 'communities of interest', such social forms have increased in popularity particularly along the increasing use of Internet and its forums for online communication, where the concept 'virtual community' is often preferred.[18,19] With the increases in ubiquity of personal computers, video gaming consoles, smartphones and other connected digital devices, there are more, and more multiform opportunities for communication and thus also for social contact than in the past. The playfulness that Goffman discusses also finds its avenues and new forms of expression in the contemporary communication environment. In contemporary services such as photo sharing site Flickr, social network services Twitter and Facebook, as well as in location-based services such as Foursquare, it is easy to find evidence that people are using them both for sharing information in utilitarian sense, as well as simply "for fun" – and that such online humour and play is actually a central element in the popularity and use motivations of such services.[20] In addition, large online services like Facebook have grown into important game publishing platforms on their own right, while also providing group discussion areas for people who share a common interest in a particular game.

There are multiple benefits that research has connected with games, play and playfulness, social or not. Playfulness as a personality trait and as an attitude towards everyday encounters has been liked with an increased capability to recover from anxiety or depression, for example, and playfulness is also noted to promote friendship formation – play acts as a social catalyst.[21-24] As social play and playful communication increases interpersonal exchanges, and as the online environment for such interplay is also rather often international and multilingual by nature, there are reports of language learning, competence building and socialization into sophisticated communicative practices in online games and Internet forums alike.[25]

The social nature of play is not necessarily always obvious in contemporary digitally augmented or mediated, online and offline play situations. There are multiple ways how social interaction may or may not take place in relation to game play, and even contemporary "social games" are not necessarily intensely social by character, despite their name. In a research article published in 2011 we set forward a model aimed at clarifying how players' social and games-related relationships can be broadly categorized into certain key classes. The five such fundamental play situations we discussed all take place within social sphere, but there are different degrees of contact between individual players, those interactions are framed differently, and also the interaction in terms of actual game play varies greatly (see below, Figure 1).

Players	Players' Relationship	Description
▮ Single Player	Reflective, Competitive*	• Knowledge of others playing the same game makes the game more social • Social media have made single player gaming more transparent • Play increases gaming capital, made visible through reward mechanisms such as achievements and trophies • Single player gaming can be strongly performative
▮▮ Two Players	Reflective, Competitive, Collaborative	• Two-player gaming has many forms in relation to time, place and system • Communication channels include face-to-face, in-game channel(s) or 3rd party channel(s) • Competition is often tiered
▮▮▮ Multiplayer	Reflective, Competitive, Co-operative, Collaborative	• All players have direct effect on each others • Numerous communication channels (e.g. global, team, zone, one-on-one) • External communication channels such as discussion forums and wikis
▮▮▮▮▮ Massively Multiplayer	Reflective, Competitive, Co-operative, Collaborative, Neutral	• Macro-communities, micro-communities, friends • Complex communication channel hierarchy (e.g. global, groups, sub-groups, one-on-one) • Neutral players, players as tokens or props, playing "alone together"
▮▮▮▮▮ Massive Single Player	Reflective, Competitive, Co-operative, (Collaborative,) Neutral	• Content sharing between players • Little or no real in-game interaction between players

*Single-player competes only via mechanics that are not part of the core game play experience.

Figure 1: Player relations.[26]

If we adapt this categorization to the maintenance of more permanent social relations, that are necessary for communities to emerge, it can also help us to identify the various dimensions and forms of gaming communities. In the case of single player games, there is obviously no real-time, co-located community present that would be focused on playing the game together. However, many single player computer or video games have active fans who connect with each other particularly in online discussions. For example, the most popular discussion forums dedicated to the *Civilization* series of single-player strategy games are running well over one million messages in numbers.[27] The more "off-topic" areas in such forums feature discussions that deal with real-life concerns such as politics or mental health, in addition to the more tightly games focused debates, highlighting the breadth and depth of human contact such gaming communities can serve for their users. The contact and communication between the players of single player games

nevertheless remain mostly mediated and not co-located. There are elements like sharing the top-score lists and other achievements online or in the game client that sometimes frame the play experience, and make even the solitary game player part of a social or communal framework.

Two-player and other multiplayer game players, however, need to have some way to get in more direct contact with each other in order to have an effect on the shared game states. A classic example is chess, when played with the help of mail (correspondence chess): even physically remote individuals can engage in prolonged chess matches by passing the information of their moves via posted letters. The game itself does not presuppose a more binding social relationship to exist between players, or existence of a more extensive community of players – even two casual chess acquaintances can play together. The shared interest, and in some cases even passion, in a game can nevertheless explain why gaming communities have grown around popular games for centuries. In the case of play-by-mail chess, for example, the first chess club dedicated solely to postal chess was established in 1870, and numerous correspondence chess tournaments, rating systems, correspondence chess magazines and other socially based institutions have been formed around postal chess.[28] Today, correspondence chess commonly involves computer-assisted gaming, there are correspondence chess servers that register and transmit the moves, and there is also increase in popularity of mobile correspondence chess, where players use smartphone apps to submit their moves. The emergent communities of correspondence chess players are served by formal organisations, such as Correspondence Chess League of America, which organises official postal chess tournaments, as well as by online discussion boards in sites like Chess.com.

Changing Forms of Gaming Communication and Gaming Community

Community and communication are closely related phenomena. There are scholars who view communication as a crucial element for society to function as a democratic and somehow cohesive whole; Lewis A. Friedland, for example, has applied Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action to propose the concept of "communicatively integrated community" as a way of understanding the central role of communication in producing community.[29] The roles and forms that gaming communities have taken historically, have changed, as the technologies and cultures of communication have continued evolving. Consequently, the exclusive gaming clubs of the past with their closely-knit communicative practices are very different phenomena from the massive online forums dedicated to some of the most popular digital games today. While the rise of online communication and the expansion of related mediated social networks have been recognized as major forces transforming the societal sphere, the exact role of Internet has been subject of debate as well. In the connection of gaming, communication and communities, it is important to take into consideration both how changes in communication practices affect the social formations surrounding gaming, and on the other hand, how games promote certain types of communication – or even, whether game play in itself can be considered as a particular, ludic form of communication.

From the social historical perspective, technologies and cultures of communication have undergone both "revolutions" while also being engaged in processes that suppress or slow down spread of technological innovations.[30] Any process of rapid technological change that is connected with societal and cultural changes is also likely to provoke negative reactions – in the case of media, "media panic" has been a consistent cultural reaction that involves moral issues and power struggles, before "new media" eventually has been domesticated into a more neutral, everyday phenomena.[30] In late 1990s, social critiques related to the rise of video games and Internet were starting to appear, probably most notably captured in the book *Bowling Alone* by Robert D. Putnam.[32] Putnam argued that while the first two-thirds of the twentieth century were characterized by deepening involvement of Americans in the life of their local communities, the recent decades have turned the tide. People are growing apart from each other, losing the "social capital" that has long been empowering American communities, and according to Putnam this development can be witnessed by the lessening popularity of traditional card games, parlour games and the social formations that support playing them together. While such traditional games, played face-to-face regularly bring people together and stimulate discussions that also focus on important matters for local community, Putnam argues that video games are very different. "My informal observations of Internet-based bridge games suggest that electronic players are focused entirely on the game itself, with very little social small talk, unlike traditional card games".[32(p104)] Rather than visiting each other's homes or public places, the late modern Americans prefer to stay home – a trend that Putnam primarily addresses to the powerfully grown popularity of televised entertainment, but also to the solitary use of video games and the Internet.[32(p223)]

Putnam's views have received their fair share of critique. In his review, Steven N. Durlauf[33] argues that there is conceptual vagueness in what constitutes social capital to start with, and that the causal connections Putnam presents as explanations for the decline in social capital are unconvincing. Sociability nevertheless appears to be chancing in the forms it takes, also in connection to game playing, but the interpretations of these changes diverge. Since the concept of community remains fuzzy and hard to define in unanimous manner, some scholars have suggested abandoning it altogether. Sociologist Barry Wellman has suggested that "networked individualism" better describes the social formations that characterize the social life in what he calls "networked society". From the unified family and shared, local neighbourhood as the idealised centres of society in the twentieth century, the life in twenty-first century is increasingly based on more loosely-knit social frameworks. "Untypical" family structures start becoming typical, and rather than sharing the same, tight community ties, individuals grow and maintain their own, individual personal social networks.[34]

This development towards increasing individualization and fragmentation of communities has been described to continue also in online social forums. For example, Paul Hodkinson[35] describes how transition from earlier, rather tightly integrated Listserv or Usenet discussion groups of the Internet to the era of blog writing in services like Livejournal meant move into social context that emphasised individual agendas, personal "fiends lists", and consequently higher level of personal control over social networking. The transition into the era of Facebook and other social networking services (SNSs) has been claimed to further

promote individualization of online sociability, even though it has also been suggested that there are significant differences in the ways people coming from individualistic or collective cultures[36] adopt and use new media like SNSs. In the study by Cho and Park,[37] Korean users used SNSs to reinforce their tight and close relationships with their family and close, real-world friends, whereas the U.S. study participants invited much more people as their online "friends", and consequently also controlled more carefully what kinds of personal information they shared in this, more heterogeneous social arena.

Online MUDs and MMORPGs as Gaming Communities

There has been special attention dedicated to the social dimensions of online gaming, particularly to the "massively multiplayer online role-playing games" (MMORPGs). This might partly be due to the commercial success and novelty of MMORPGs as a distinctive phenomenon that brings together the social character of game play with audio-visual and interactive, online environment. The earliest computer role-playing games were developed by groups of computer-savvy role-playing gamers for the PLATO system in the University of Illinois already in the early 1970s.[38] The text-based "multi-user dungeons" (MUDs) were the earliest type of games where the social interaction and team play could be transported within the world of digital simulation – every game player accessed and interacted with the same, textually described places, characters and events using their own computer terminals. The early accounts of the culture that was built around these shared digital domains often focused on their radical, socially supportive and individually liberating potentials. These two dimensions of online gaming can, however, also be seen as inherently conflicting.

Sherry Turkle's book *Life on the Screen*[39] is famous for highlighting the radical, individually liberating potentials of shared virtual gaming spaces such as MUDs. She describes life of one active MUD user, and claims that it "seems misleading to call what he does there playing". Rather, the intense engagement in virtual game worlds should be seen as "constructing a life that is more expansive than the one he lives in physical reality". Turkle describes the MUD as a "new kind of virtual parlor game and a new form of community", as well as "new form of collaboratively written literature", where one can construct new selves through social interaction and become "who you pretend to be".[39(p11-12,193)] The individual freedom of exploration and expression can of course take many forms, and in the area of sexual identity and experimentation, for example, interpretations of permissible behaviours have differed greatly, sometimes dividing the community in question. Julian Dibbell[40] has provided good illustration of this in his account of a "virtual rape" that divided the early community of LamdaMOO in their interpretations of whether everything that is technically possibly in a game is also legitimate behaviour – a topic that has also been extensively addressed by David Myers.

In his *Play Redux*[41(p128)] David Myers puts forward a view that solitary, individual and in a social context "selfish" competitive play is the true and basic form of computer game "aesthetic". Opposing Jean Piaget and other social play theorists' views, Myers suggests that there is no inherent reason why individual

and selfish motives of play should be forced to adapt into more socially constructive or acceptable behaviours. In order to experiment with this premise in practice, he created a game character, Twixt, into the *City of Heroes* MMORPG, which he played only with an eye towards the goal of winning "without reference to or concern with any social rules of conduct established by *CoH/V* players outside the PvP game context".[41(p145)] Myers/Twixt particularly used a controversial tactic, which involved teleporting a nearby game character to areas which were guarded by NPC (non-player character) drones that would immediately attack and vaporize the unfortunate victim. Myers describes how his application of this aggressive teleporting technique was met with increasing hostility by the other players, to the point where Myers/Twixt became the most hated character in the game. Yet, like Myers emphasised, his techniques were not actually forbidden by the game designers[41(p146)]; they were formally valid game strategies, but strictly against the informal social rules of gaming community. Such rules of "fair play" are set up by the gaming community as an important dimension of play, as a completely selfish play style would ruin the fun of game for everyone else. Unintentionally, Myers' experiment thus affirms the centrality of informal, gaming community created rules for the operation and appreciation of formal game rules and systems.

Like the mainstream attention on online sociability early on focused on virtual communities as a dramatically altered or different form of community, also the interest in game communities has been drawn towards studying massively multiplayer games, through their differences, rather than continuities in the range of social phenomena. Social forms of gaming do not take place in isolation, and much of the interactions that take place online, are embedded and intermixed with non-online forms of sociability in many ways. The issue whether MMORPGs should be primarily addressed as games (that is, as formal structures, in isolation from real-world social contexts) or as communities has led into diverse research lines. While few game researchers appear to share David Myers' interest in pushing towards "purely rule-based" play, and willingly ignoring the social norms that frame also online games, there has been sustained interest in the ways how game system and game design influences certain human behaviours, and discourages others. The branch of humanities-oriented game studies known as Ludology is particularly associated with the formal and text-analytical studies of games, and is also a style of study that is more likely to interpret player behaviours as being implicated by the game system, rather than by their social contexts and real-world motivations, for example. Espen Aarseth[42] has followed the approach adopted in literary studies, where an 'implied reader' has been identified as an element of text.[43] Aarseth[42] correspondingly introduced the concept 'implied player', which is a role designed and programmed in the game that the actual players must adopt, in order for the game become realized as it was intended to be played. However, Aarseth also pays attention and provides examples of the manner in how players can resist the role game designers have prepared for them, and engage in various kinds of transgressive, creative or surprising behaviours in the game.[42] The creative player and communities of active game modifiers, or modders, have indeed gained their fair share of attention by game research, as a category of game players that blur the boundary between game consumer and game creator.[44,45] Celia Pearce,[46] for example, has examined how the voluntary nature of play can contribute towards motivating online game players to commit themselves strongly in a play context, to form

online game communities and contribute to collective creativity and sharing. Some of the key motivations for such supportive game community that Pearce lists in her study include sense of pleasure and happiness deriving from altruism and love of learning, that underlie at least the culture of this particular examined gaming community.[46]

Mixed Motivations: Alone Together?

The question nevertheless remains, whether MMORPG games always grow or cultivate communities around them. The studies of sociability in massively multiplayer games tell a mixed story. For example, the study Nicholas Ducheneaut and team published in 2006[47] focused on the most popular MMORPG of all time, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004; "WoW"). Using an innovative methodology, the research team collected both qualitative in-game observations, as well as automatically logged quantitative data gathered from 129,372 unique WoW player characters. Their conclusions suggest that an MMORPG like WoW is not as socially oriented game as is often thought: the recorded player characters spent typically only 30-35 % of their play time in groups, and "solo play" was more typical. While the authors recognize the important role that more permanent guild structures and larger raid groups play particularly in the high level play, they suggest that most WoW subscribers tend to be "alone together", as they play surrounded by others, rather than playing with them. But the ambient presence of other people is nevertheless an important factor in online games of this kind. The ability to show off one's achievements and high level gear to other players is an important rewarding element in itself. Massively multiplayer games would therefore not fulfil the criteria of dense, classical communities, but would rather be more correctly characterized as socially saturated environments, where game subscribers, "instead of playing with other people, rely on them as an audience for their in-game performances, as an entertaining spectacle, and as a diffuse and easily accessible source of information and chitchat". Even guilds, the more permanent groupings in WoW tend to have high "churn rates" as old members are constantly leaving and new ones enter; only about 10 percent of guild members actively engage in joint guild activities.[47]

The instrumental character of MMORPG play has been discussed in several studies. For example, sociologist and game scholar T.L. Taylor has studied the "power gamers" of *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999)[48] and found their play style to be highly goal oriented, or like an interviewed power gamer said: "I want to be [level] 50. I want to be 50 first. I want to be 50 in three weeks. How am I gonna do that?" At the same time, Taylor also notes that the observed power gamers do not fit in the "lone ranger" stereotype of isolated gamer, either. The successful play in an online game like *EverQuest* relies on what Taylor characterises as "complicated systems of trust, reliance and reputation". Even the most goal driven power gamer needs to rely on maintaining working social relationships and memberships in larger organizations like guilds in order to be able to meet the increasingly massive in-game challenges.[48]

The character and potential consequences of participating in gaming communities are intimately tied with the gaming motivations. There appears to be several, even conflicting game play motivations, which

emphasises the diverse nature of gaming communities. The early studies into digital game play motivation such as Malone and Lepper[49(p239),50] have referred to the key character of intrinsic motivations, such as need for competence and challenge, optimal levels of arousal or stimulation, as well as control and self-determination. Malone and Lepper added to such motivational categories also other game-content related ones, such as emotional and cognitive aspects of fantasy – vicariously experiencing satisfactions of power, success, fortune, and of mastering "situations that would baffle or be unavailable to us in real life".[49(p241)] They also emphasised that in addition to individual motivations, there are interpersonal motivations such as competition, cooperation, and need for recognition, which provide both extrinsic as well as intrinsic motivations for game play (and for learning, which was the main focus of Malone and Lepper).

When human activities based on complex, intermingling motivations take place in an environment that is computer-mediated and partially based on fantasy, there are rich potentials for diversity of both action and interpretation. While everyone is co-located in the same game environment, the reasons for playing, and the interpretations of these activities may differ greatly. Richard Bartle, the co-creator of the first MUD ("Multi-User Dungeon") was a pioneer to highlight the ensuing motivational space. In his article "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs",[51] Bartle analysed online MUD forum discussions to outline two main directions of interest for playing: the game environment, or other players. Of his four main "player types", the game environment oriented one ("achievers" and "explorers") are driven to acting, or interacting and experimenting with, the game environment, and other people are for them of low interest, potentially adding some element of authenticity or competition to the game experiences they are after. On the contrary, those belonging to the player oriented MUD player types are primarily drawn to such shared gaming spaces in order to interacting with other players ("socializers"), or for acting on, or humiliating other players ("killers"). It is interesting to note that while players belonging to the last "killer" category might appear anti-social by definition, Bartle actually emphasises that killers want to demonstrate their superiority, and that their reputation and impact on other players is important for them.[51]

The non-altruistic behaviours of killer, or grief-player gamers easily appear somewhat marginal or non-essential for understanding gaming communities, which are after all mostly created around joint interests and willingness to collaborate with other players in a positive manner. However, Foo and Koivisto in their grief play study[52] point out that the online violence and conflict is also one of the motivations for players to group together and form tight knit groups, and to rely on trusted comrades, and guild structures. In their online games design guidebook, Mulligan and Patrovsky defined a grief player as: "A player who derives his/her enjoyment not from playing the game, but from performing actions that detract from the enjoyment of the game by other players."[53(p299)]

Stenros[54] has adapted the frame analysis developed by Erving Goffman to understand the different orientations of play that affect how player-to-player relationships are also defined in game play. In his model, there are three main frames in a gaming situation: frame of the game world, frame of the (game) system, and frame of the ordinary, or everyday reality. The person who engages in game play activities becomes involved in all of these frames, as a participant, as a player, and as a game character, but their

orientation regarding these frames may be different. Making reference to psychologist Michael J. Apter's reversal theory,[55] Stenros differentiates between serious and playful mindsets (corresponding to telic and paratelic states in Apter's theory), and then suggests that paratelic or playful mindset can be adopted in all three main frames, but it will lead to different kinds of play behaviours. While research has mostly focused on either the level where the playful activity is directed towards game world ("playing the game"), or game system (e.g. hacking or cheating to win), there is also the third level, where the playful activity is directed towards other players – "playing the players". Stenros emphasises that while the victims of killers, or grief players, suffer, for grief players themselves their behaviour is still playfully motivated, and they have also been documented to establish griefer peer groups where they document their exploits, and share efficient grief play tactics.[54] "Trolling communities" such as those convening at the popular 4chan anonymous imageboard website can further be analysed to emerge loaded with internal, conflicting impulses that both celebrate irony, alienation and aggression, but that also promote paradoxical identity creation for a trolling community through shared, "collective shame".[56]

Positive Community: Participatory Culture and Gaming Capital

Research does not agree on how social, or anti-social digital game play generally is, and what kind of consequences to socialization the engagement in game play involves. Pew and American Life project has carried out studies into the use of games and Internet, and their results from a teen video game study[57] suggest that gaming is a diverse phenomenon, where both single-player and lone play setting, co-located social play, online social play, and solitary play online are all common. For most American teens studied, gaming is a social activity, and an important element in their overall social lives. Only about one quarter (24 %) of teens only played games alone, whereas the remaining three quarters played games with others at least some of the time.[57(piii)]

The series of nationally representative Player Barometer studies our research group has carried out since 2009 in Finland suggest that over half of the Finnish 10-75 year-old population play digital games regularly – circa 53 percent reported playing some digital game at least once a month in 2013. When all forms of play, also non-digital and casual or occasional playing were accounted for, almost everyone (99 %) could be categorized as a "game player".[58] In an earlier study, the prevalence of playing alone and playing together were examined, and also in this study the majority of digital game players appeared to be playing together with other people, whereas 30 percent of digital game players only reported playing alone.[59(p75)]

Studying the social integration of game playing and its relation to positive adolescent development, Durkin and Barber[60] reported results where those young people who played either a lot, or moderately, both reported higher levels of family closeness and less risky friendship networks than those teens who did not play games at all. Also the attachment to school was higher in the game player groups as contrasted to the non-player group. The player groups had reported less depression, and higher self-esteem than the non-player group. The conclusion of Durkin and Barber was that game playing can "contribute to participation in

a challenging and stimulating voluntary leisure environment", which has positive consequences for social integration and healthy development in adolescence.[60] Recent longitudinal work by Kowert and colleagues[61] uncovered similar findings, as over a two-year period, they found online video game play to contribute to higher rates of life satisfaction, and have no discernible negative impact on sociability, for adolescent players.

The aforementioned Pew study[57] was particularly focused on finding out whether involvement in game play has negative or positive consequences to civic and political participation in a society. As many games require young people to work together as teams, and jointly resolve complex challenges, they have potential to promote what Henry Jenkins has called "new participatory culture". According to this view, games and the online contexts where they are commented on, such as online fan communities, offer the game players opportunities for participating in community life, engaging in civic debates and to become political leaders, even if in the alternative contexts provided by massively multiplayer games and their online discussion forums. The results from the Pew survey suggest that general involvement in game play does not automatically translate to significant political or civic activism. However, those teens who commented on websites or participated in games related discussion boards proved to be more engaged civically and politically than those who did not belong to such gaming communities. There were significant differences in such activities as participating in social protests, political campaigning, raising money for charities, and staying informed about current events, all in favour of those teens who play and also contribute to game-related websites, as contrasted to those teens who just play games.[57(pvii,4-6)]

The idea of participation carries many positive connotations in general. Participation in social and cultural affairs signals empowerment and capacity to act in a societal context. Scholars of media culture such as Henry Jenkins often draw attention to the ways in which active fans of games, comic books or television series, for example, are capable of remarkable achievements that challenge the view of media consumers as "victims" or subjects of marketing machinery or various "media effects". The communities of fans in this line of analysis approach media texts actively, poaching for elements that are personally useful or pleasurable for them, and then use them for constructing new texts – or, as in the case of game play, alternative performances.[62] Digital games play a central role in the development towards increasing cultural prevalence of such participatory, or active media culture, as they are after all highly interactive, and in contrast to television, for example, allow much greater degree of freedom for consumers to act upon the mediated or represented world.[63(p133)]

Cultural capital is another important concept that is useful for unlocking the positive dimensions of gaming communities. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has identified three key forms of capital: economic, social and cultural capital, and while money and other classical forms of economic capital, as well as the influential connections and memberships of social capital are immediately useful, the forms of cultural capital also are intimately linked to individual's status and capacities to function in society.[64] Mia Consalvo[65] has applied and further developed Bourdieu's thinking with her concept "gaming capital", which provides a flexible way of recognizing and discussing the complex and dynamic significances that games, game playing

and forms of knowledge about such things can hold for groups and individuals alike. When people meet, face-to-face or online, to discuss their game experiences and for sharing tips, tactics or even cheat codes that allow extra lives in a game, they cultivate and shape their gaming capital. Consalvo also emphasises that such meetings and activities do not take shape in a cultural or economical vacuum. Games industry, including the diverse network of game developers, publishers, distributors, marketers and gaming press, all also try to gather people around games, and to direct their attention to certain elements in games. It should nevertheless be remembered that instrumental uses of games, such as seeking notable achievements, social recognition or trying to establish leadership roles in gaming communities are not all that there is in a game play. Consalvo underscores that being playful can be immensely satisfying for its own sake, and it may have nothing to do with advancing in the game, or even with gaining a skill.[65(p4,104)]

An alternative approach to conceptualize the cultural and interest-based connection fans or players of a game share with each other is to treat it as a 'subculture', rather than as fully developed community in the sociological sense. Classic studies of subcultures such as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: Meaning of Style*[66] focus on subculture's differences or deviances from the norms set up by the "mainstream culture" in a society. The research carried out in the field of subculture studies has often focused on groups such as punks or hip-hoppers, who carry signs of their affective relationship to a particular musical style also in their style of clothing, for example. Alienated from the (white, bourgeois, Christian) values of the dominant societal structures, such subcultures provide alternative symbols and a sense of identity and solidarity for groups of excluded individuals. Hebdige points out that a subculture has links to, but is also different from a 'counter-culture', which exists in explicitly political and ideological opposition to the dominant culture, and also aims to establish alternative institutions, like communes or media outlets of its own.[66(p148)]

The concept or subculture or counter-culture carries similar undertones as the secret, disguise-wearing societies or social groupings that Huizinga associated with games and play. A typical player of a digital game, however, rarely carries in an everyday context such overt signs of his or her affective relationship with a particular game, or of membership in a gaming community. A particular event such like LAN party or gaming convention, may however provide suitable setting for expressing the games-related fan identity also with outward signs – the constructing and wearing elaborate cosplay dresses and props inspired by video game characters are probably the most easily detectable type among this kind of game fan practices. Studying the Japanese *otaku* phenomenon, Mizuko Ito[67] has argued that while the field of electronic gaming remained somewhat separate from other forms of media fandom like those of manga or anime, by the 1990s popular game characters such as Mario or Pikachu had become well integrated in the overall media mix. The expansion of fanlike cultural activities and peer-to-peer forms of social organization into Internet has also encouraged alternative perspectives into how more activist and productive forms of media engagement are perceived in research and public discussion. While the interpretation of passionate game or media fans as infantile, obsessed or cut-off from normal reality remains, the threshold for participating in fandom as well as in gaming communities is lowering, and the demographics of interpersonal networks are becoming more diverse, while new forms for contact and communication have become widely available.[67]

Conclusion: the Good, the Bad, or the Irrelevant Gaming Communities?

On the basis of research, playing of all kinds, including digital game play, is predominantly well socially integrated and integrating activity. Dmitri Williams and the research team studied[68] *World of Warcraft* players who belong to guilds – in-game social groupings or communities – and found out that in this kind of MMORPG, there was a large group of players (about one third) who used the game primarily to strengthen and maintain existing, offline friendship ties. Even a larger group of players (a third to a half) reported using the online game as a casual "third place" (cf. Oldenburg[69]) to generate bridging social capital, but rarely using it for tight, bonding interactions; the anonymous character of online, in-game encounters appears to create an obstacle for many to use it for developing in-depth relationships, or for exchanging advice or emotional support on personal issues. However, a small portion (five percent) of the studied *World of Warcraft* players reported forming new friendships within the game, bonding, and extending those relationships outside of the game, into their "real lives". However, there was also a substantial number of game players (about a quarter) who were not interested in creating social relationships with other gamers, and saw their utility for them merely as instrumental, necessary for accomplishing some tough game tasks.[68] The character of gaming communities appears to be highly diverse, and translate into different kinds of behaviours and meanings for different people.

As discussed in this chapter, sociability and participation in communities has been associated with several benefits for individuals and groups alike. The advantages for individuals' health, success and general well-being from social ties are well documented. A team or group which functions well together is also likely to perform well, which is important in gaming contexts, as participation in gaming guilds or forums is closely associated with the needs for in-game achievements, as well as with social motivations. The griefer players and the plentiful evidence of online, games related harassment, however, also point towards the dark side of gaming communities. At the time of this writing, during autumn 2014, an online campaign was organised around the hashtag #GamerGate, providing an example of how effectively a group of like-minded gamers can form a community to target female game developers or liberal game journalists in a hate campaign. To conclude, both the social forms of game playing, as well as the other forms of games related sociability all contribute to highly divergent and extensive field for gaming community studies. For many players, the personal importance of their gaming community for them is the single most important reason why they keep on playing. Also, players regularly report receiving support from their community that goes beyond its in-game origins. However, it is equally important to recognize the casual and instrumental character that games related communities have for what is perhaps the majority of digital game players. It is also too narrow to see gaming communities only as online communities, even while expanding opportunities for online communications have greatly contributed to the growth of games' social significance. As online and offline lives are increasingly intermingled, games and information technologies continue their proliferation, and various game-like services muddle such distinctions as play versus work, or game versus

real-life, it will become increasingly difficult to differentiate gaming communities from our other social relationships in the future.

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