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LINKING ONLINE AND OFFLINE SOCIAL LIFE THROUGH DIGITAL GAMING

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Introduction

Prominent in the debate on digital technologies and social relationships is the division between online and offline. This debate is often focused on the argument of offline as 'real life' and online, as virtual. In the literature this is expressed as a tradition of separating virtual from physical (Williams 2006); studying digital technologies, e.g. games or social network sites, as virtual spaces in their own right without connecting them to physical places (Crawford 2012). Online, in this perspective, people are more equal as anonymity and partial-anonymity work as equalizers, stripping people of the physical characteristics that otherwise divide. Yet research has increasingly shown how online and offline life is inherently intertwined the techno-utopian discourse on online freedom still affects how the Internet is understood (e.g. Slater 2002; Morley 2003; Williams 2006; Lehdonvirta 2010; Shen & Williams, 2011). Researchers have in response to this called for more studies looking at social processes as not only either/or relationships between offline and online, but as dynamic flows grounded in agents' everyday lives (Williams 2006). Research that connects online and offline and how social relationships play out in these interconnected spaces is required if we are to fully understand the effect of the digitalization of sociality (Slater 2002; Williams 2006; Crawford 2012).

In light of this, the study at hand reports on the results of a research project running from 2008-2013. During those years social digital gaming, both online and offline, was investigated. Two main data sets were collected, an interview study containing in-depth individual and group interviews with 41 dedicated Swedish gamers engaged in a vast array of digital games. Results from this led to a batch of survey questions included in a nationally representative survey "Swedes and the Internet" (see Findahl, 2011), using a simple random sample, answered by over 2600 Swedes aging from 12 to 100 years old. Sweden is one of the leading countries in the digitalization process affecting societies worldwide (Bilbao-Osorio, Dutta and Lanvin, 2013)—where Internet use is almost universal except among the very young and the very old (almost 100% among 12-55 year olds (Findahl, 2014)), and digital gaming is widespread (Findahl, 2011). Ideally one can imagine comparing different national contexts instead of focusing on a single

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country. On the other hand, this can be considered a strength of the study, the relatively homogenous sample population allows us to compare results from the two data sets. Building on previous research showing that digital gamers interact with a broad mix of people while gaming and that gaming is far from an isolated social space (see Taylor, 2006; Consalvo, 2009; Shen & Williams, 2011) this study investigates the linkage between online and offline by looking at the relationships gamers have with their coplayers.

The aim is to shed light on the connections between online and offline life by analysing digital gaming using a relational sociological perspective. Relational sociology focuses on understanding the dynamic ebb and flow of social relationships between actors, and how these shape social world(s)¹. Emirbayer (1997) argues that attention to relations offers a perspective where researchers can see how the world unfolds as processes in an increasingly moving world. By exploring connections between people this study shows how intimately linked online and offline life is in the everyday lived experiences of digital gamers. At the same time a clear paradox is experienced as users express an ideal of the global Internet, reducing boundaries between people. Yet this ideal is not realised in peoples' practises. The study contributes with both in-depth understanding of how online and offline life is connected in practice but also suggests how to theoretically, in a relational perspective, understand online life's intimate connection to the offline.

Results

Through qualitative analyses of interview data and quantitative exploration of the survey data the results reveal aspects of social game-play with a focus on relations and interactions between gamers, both online and offline. Results show how gaming can be understood as relational, coming to be in interactions between gamer, co-players, and game. What this implies is what it means to play is intimately linked to interactions with both games and other players, furthermore, how gamers experience playing, even the same game, varies depending on with whom they play. More concretely results demonstrate how co-players such as family members, out-of-game friends, Internet friends, and strangers shape the experiences and motivations of gaming. While informants subscribe to a techno-utopian ideology heralding free, borderless interaction, individuals' actual practise supports glocalized ties between users blending online and offline into one social world. Playing with strangers is furthermore, not primarily a social activity on par with playing with friends, but rather relaxed leisure free of social obligations. While enjoying the freedom which comes from playing with strangers gamers still often limit this type of social play; particularly strangers seen as dissimilar to themselves are avoided. The techno-utopian ideology hides a concrete practise that reinforces cultural boundaries and material realities based on offline relationships and cultural values.

Moreover, different game structures promote play with different co-players and provide a designed fundament that acts as an anchor for the maintenance and creation of

¹ Social world here implies an arena featuring some organization and shared activity for members. An individual simultaneously belong to a multitude of social worlds that can be more or less interlinked. (Strauss 1978).

different types of relations. A game joins people together with a shared purpose, offering structural foundation for relationship work. Offline friends/family allows additional embedding of social norms supporting both sociable interaction as well as instrumental aspects of attaining game goals. For individuals not sharing an offline setting the more similarities on both a macro level, such as country of origin or language, and micro level, such as age and life-stage, the easier the creation of stable social groups is perceived to be.

Finally the study lifts up the case of female gamers, a group still struggling for acceptance in game culture. While women tend to play alone to a greater degree than men, when they play with others they are more restricted through relations to co-players in opportunities for play. How to play is intimately linked not only to values and discussions in online gaming culture but also to female gamers' relations with individuals online or in their physical proximity; both known and unknown. Particularly in interaction with male gamers whom they share everyday life with gendered gaming expectations and online identities are negotiated and realized.

The conclusions offer a relational perspective that puts focus on the constant flux of relations that gamers, and internet users in general, engage with online. These relations connect different social worlds, both online and offline. Relations shape expectations and experiences of online life and ultimately ground it in offline relations and cultural values. At the same time structures matter; the design of games and other online platforms offer a distinct flavour to social experiences and create possibilities for interaction online. Different design of different platforms allows different relations to take hold and be realized. Design limits what can and cannot be done and is thus a base for how sociality online can be realised. Yet structures gain meaning and different usages in a social context of various interactions between individuals.

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