

13 Family and Games

Digital Game Playing in the Social Context of the Family

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Introduction

In the information age (Castells, 1996) of today, we see a restructuring of social structures and identities (Giddens, 1990). The family is one such changing social context, and even though changing family structures are one of the hallmarks of contemporary life, we still rely on the family for emotionally satisfactory lives. Family is still the most important social context we have for support and psychosocial wellbeing (Cherlin, 1999). In the public debate on digital games, the focus is often placed on the problems that they pose for family life (Bergmark and Bergmark, 2009). In Sweden, parents worry about digital games (Brun, 2005) and tend to heavily control this activity for adolescents in the home (Eklund and Bergmark, 2010), but at the same time the understanding of the activity is low (ibid.; Linderoth and Bennerstedt, 2007). This chapter aims to examine the patterns of social play and experiences when gaming with family members. The focus is on people who play games, therefore offering a new perspective on family life and digital games. The main research question concerns what the role of digital gaming in family interaction and relationships is for people engaged in gaming.

Computer and video games form a part of our technologically mediated culture. These digital games have gone from being a marginal pastime to being part of our general culture (Shaw, 2010), and gaming is spreading to new age groups and social groups (Juil, 2010). In the past, as new culture forms spread they changed our lives; books, TV, video, and the Internet, all of these affected the ways in which we live and interact with one another (Castells, 1996). Since the mid-1990s, digital games have grown exponentially and today we have passed a benchmark where more than 50% of the population in the Western world plays these games; therefore, our idea of who plays digital games has been revised (Juil, 2010). For example, statistics from the American market show that the average gamer is 34 years old and that “Women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (37%) than boys age 17 or younger (13%)” (ESA, 2011, p. 3). Previous research on gaming has shown that social aspects of both online and offline digital gaming are important for players. Many play with family or with friends that they know from outside the

game (Cole and Griffiths, 2007) and gaming can strengthen social bonds within families (Durkin and Barber, 2002). In a study by Shen and Williams (2011), families playing online games together were shown to increase the amount of time spent together. At the same time, digital gaming is said to both hamper offline social relations due to time displacement and lead to conflicts in families over time usage (Brun, 2005).

This study builds on data consisting of face-to-face focus group, pair, and single interviews carried out in Sweden between 2009 and 2011. The interviews were held to investigate social gaming habits, and in analyzing the material, it soon became apparent that gaming with family members was an important aspect of social gaming. A comparative sampling method was used, as interviewing several groups (men, women, older/younger adults, couples, parents, and adult children) offers more detailed insight (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). While the samples aimed at capturing a broad selection of game users, the purpose is not to generalize the results, but rather to give insight into the subject at hand. Questions were put to a total of 33 participants in interviews lasting from 45 minutes up to 1 hour 30 minutes. Sampling was done in a the sixth form (ages 17–20) in an upper secondary school in the Stockholm area. Participants were made up of people who responded to two advertisements: one was posted at Stockholm University (ages 24–39), and the other on the project website, yielding one pair for the interview (aged 17 and 49).

All interviews—group, pair, and individual—followed the same setup, theme, and the same questions were asked; broad and open questions about social digital-gaming experiences and habits were asked in the style of in-depth interviewing or open-structure interviewing (Hayes, 2000). In conjunction with all interviews, a short questionnaire was handed out to gather additional information, as an extended focus group (Berg, 2009). Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and all quotes were translated by the author. Data was analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The data was structured around themes emerging from the interview transcriptions—here, the respondents' experiences of family-based gaming.

Playing Games With Family

Playing digital games with family members varies in both context and scope; however, the importance of digital gaming for family social life is consistent within this group. For some of the informants, gaming is a way of spending time with siblings, a joint interest, and an activity shared while growing up, which has continued even after moving away from home. For others it is a way for the entire family to spend time together.

Among the interviewees, gaming functions as a shared hobby, a common interest bringing family members together. As an example, Veronika (17) and Lotta (49), mother and daughter, play the online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004, *WoW*) together. On a normal

evening, they spend at least a couple of hours playing the game and they have done so for several years. This joint activity is a way for them to spend time together and share the same frame of reference. Furthermore, they participate in offline events; in 2008, they went to Paris on a “World Wide Invitation” to spend several days doing game-related activities. When describing the significance gaming has had for them, they say:

LOTTA: Yes of course we spend a lot more time together than we would have done otherwise {Veronika: yes} I’m sure about that.

VERONIKA: The same with talking, too.

The game has an important role in Lotta and Veronika’s relationship, a common interest that brings them closer together.

Gaming is often an activity shared with siblings when growing up. Helen (18) plays games together with her brothers and gaming has always been important in her family, from watching her father and uncle play as a child, to visiting gaming cafés with her brothers before they had a computer at home. Stefan (17) and Peter (17), two twin brothers still living with their parents, tell me they often play the same game on a console, together, but also play the same game on different computers and then compare their playing experiences, both in a competitive way and to provide mutual assistance. To talk about games is an important part of the gaming experience for all of the informants; the experience of the game becomes heightened when telling others about it. Discussing it is part of the pleasure, as Peter explains:

PETER: For example, telling someone “oh shit, I did the coolest thing in *Age of Empires* [Ensemble Studios, 1997]” that might not be the first thing I thought at the moment but that what’s important in the end.

STEFAN: Yeah, it fills a social function.

For Maria (18) games are important for her relationship with her parents and foremost with her mother, who recently passed away.

MARIA: I feel that I have a very close relationship with both my parents. They are in fact two of my best friends.

They have played a multitude of games over the years, especially during the period before Maria’s mother passed away when games were very important. Each day they played *WoW* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004); the game was a way for them to spend time together and do something together, even though Maria’s mother was ill; a collaborative escapism during a very emotionally taxing time. Today she still uses one of her mother’s old game characters. Doing so keeps the memory of their joint experiences alive.

Playing games together creates a shared space for the family members to interact around a joint activity and this aspect is persistent in all of the interviews.

Gaming as Doing

Sara (36) and Ulf (39) are a married couple living together with their daughter and Sara's son from a previous marriage. They play an online game together on a daily basis; it is a shared activity for them. They explain that they value an active life, and are engaged in both political and union activities. Playing games in their free time is a way of doing something together in the family; watching TV, for example, they see as too pacifying. Gaming together is a way for them to share everyday life within the family. The informants in general push for the specific character of games in relation to other media; the reoccurring word used is *active*.

MATTIAS (25): [Gaming is] a different kind of culture and escapism like watching a movie or reading a book or something, but more active, you are more there.

Although games are compared to other entertainment media, such as TV, digital games have their own specific characteristics. You cannot passively consume the games, as without input actions from the gamer, the game will not progress, and the story will not be told, as the gamer needs to control the situation; games are interactive (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). This is something that gamers are aware of and discuss, as in the quote below.

TYRA (24): Games, unlike films, are something where you have performed, you have completed a game.

NINA (18): Maybe you could replace some of it with books but it is not as involving, there aren't as strong emotions involved "Yeah, I killed the boss!"

HELEN (18): Exactly.

After completing a game or overcoming a challenge, gamers are proud of what they have accomplished. Games are rewarding; challenges encourage gamers to invest in the situation and to relish victories over these challenges (Juil, 2005). The interactive aspects of games make them enjoyable and linked to the specific aspects of digital games as *games*.

The "social design" of games makes it possible and fun to play them with others and therein lies some of the charm of the activity. Gaming, for many of the informants, is foremost a social activity; some never play alone. The social aspects of gaming also transgress the actual gaming moment. Once a gaming session, single or multiplayer, is over, you talk, evaluate, brag, and compare your experiences, and this is an important part of gaming. Jonas (25) explains that games are bonding experiences and that is why it is fun to talk about games:

JONAS: You do something active yourself so it ends up a little in the same category as an experience you have made in your everyday life, IRL [in

real life] experiences, but at the same time there are others who have had the same experiences. But it's a very special shared experience and it matters, you can bond quite a lot over it.

Offering shared points of reference is something other media types do; see, for example, tabloid reading (Johansson, 2006). However, gaming is something you actively participate in together with others. In social gaming, you *do* something *together* with others.

Gaming Online, Keeping Family Close

The informants claim that one reason digital games are well suited for social play is that online gaming, in particular, makes performing a joint activity easy. Time constraints in ordinary life are a prominent factor, and a perceived lack of time is worked around through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). In an interview, Mattias (25) discusses how it is easy to meet with your friends by playing a game online; instead of trying to get everyone together, you can log into a game and turn on a voice chat program. A group of friends and partners, playing *WoW* (Blizzard, 2004), agree that without the game they would not have been friends today; even though they met through contexts unconnected to the game. The game has been the factor that kept them together.

RITA (26): I don't think we would be sitting here today without *World of Warcraft*.

LOUISE (22): No, I do not think so either.

LUKE (27): Probably not.

Even though they all live within walking distance and regularly meet each other physically, the game is a central point of focus. The game is a common reference, and through a voice chat program they "hang out," talking on a daily basis; often they use the game and chat channel to organize spontaneous eating out. However, they all believe that it had not been enough just to chat; the game in itself is important. For this group, the game functions as a socially cohesive marker, keeping them in contact and in the same frame of reference. Playing online is easy and provides a shared social setting for the involved, something which gives a ground for sociality.

Helen (18), whose parents separated recently, now lives with her mother. She plays backgammon with her father over the Internet during week-days as a way to spend time together when they do not have time to meet face-to-face.

HELEN (18): Now that we're not living together it is a great way to socialize, to play some backgammon through the 'net.

NINA (18): Yeah, in your case, it's easier to find the time to play some backgammon, than "Hey let's get together and have dinner or a coffee". "No I can't that day." And so on. You can always squeeze in something like that.

ANNIKA (19): Just sit down in front of the computer.

When time is limited, CMC in games facilitates continuous interaction, a continuity of association. Something leisure activities in general can provide following divorce (Kelly, 1983). Other informants also participate in these types of games over the Internet. Nina plays *Betapet* (Betapet, 2003), an online version of Scrabble, with her boyfriend in the evenings, since they do not live together. They normally talk on the phone at the same time but the game offers them something to do as they talk. Another informant, Kristoffer (34), plays over the Internet with his two brothers.

KRISTOFFER (34): I play a lot with my brothers, I mean I see them normally anyway but it is very fun to sit with your headset and talk with them and you talk about all sorts of things as well [besides the game].

Playing over the Internet is easy to set up and offers the participants a joint activity at the same time as them being able to spend time with each other.

Gaming as a Marginalized Activity

Games can, on the other hand, also be a source for conflict in a family. As gaming often takes up a considerable amount of time, parents or siblings not playing themselves can object to the activity. The time gaming takes and the "newness" of the media is a prominent feature in this. Games in their very form are difficult to understand if you do not participate in them, whereas other more established media, such as TV, is more immediately accessible just by observing.

MIKE (17): Often it's older people that complain about computer games because they aren't informed, it can be sports jocks at school, or parents, or even grandparents, but it feels like it's always like this when something new comes, people complained about comics for making you stupid.

Playing games is still perceived as a marginal activity by many and is therefore hard to relate to, especially when gamers play online and create alternative social networks. Seeking online social contact can, however, be the result of existing conflicts within the family rather than the cause of conflict. Diana (25) is the only one of the informants to have experienced a serious conflict over gaming in the family. When she was a teenager, her father had problems with alcohol and the family in general could

be described as dysfunctional, at that time. In the interview, Diana (25) discussed the fact that, at this point, she did not have many friends and so spent a lot of time playing an online game, *Ragnarok Online* (Gravity Co., 2002). Her best online friend was from Australia so she spent her nights playing with him. Her father disapproved of this activity and this in the end led to her being thrown out of her home. She explains that this was resolved and now she lives with her parents again, although she is looking for a place of her own. She still plays games and her family has reconciled themselves with her interest, as she now works with digital games. For Diana, gaming was a way of creating a space of her own in a stressful situation, though this also became something that aggravated the situation.

The relative novelty of the media results in informants engaging in situations where they have to defend their activity to people who do not play. Every now and then, groups, activities, conditions, and so on crystallize in society and media as deviant. Gaming is by far not the first or the last activity to be treated as a threat to societal values and interests, but rather follows a long tradition of what has been called moral panics (Cohen, 1980). As gaming permeates media awareness in a more general sense, which is definitely happening, we should expect the understanding of this activity to increase. What is worth pointing out is also the immense changes this media is still undergoing as it finds its form; an example of one such change over the last ten years is the support most games today have for social play.

Concluding Discussion

For most of these informants, playing games with family members is an important part of their gaming habits. The support for CMC offers opportunities for joint activities over time/space boundaries, and gaming can function as a mutual interest and/or hobby for the gamers, creating shared frames of reference. Digital games facilitate spending time together in some instances and also increase the perceived quality of the family members' relationships. Games, as a shared activity, can also support families in difficult times, offering the opportunity for "collaborative escapism." At the same time, the informants say that gaming is often considered as a "strange" and anti-social leisure activity, even though digital gaming is an activity that is becoming part of our mainstream culture; seeping into a "general" consciousness.

For the informants, gaming is a multifaceted activity where the social aspect plays a major role. Gaming experiences improve when playing with others; this is something the informants agree upon, or as Stefan (17) expresses it: "So like they say: A shared pleasure is a double pleasure." However, it is not just that they can play together; the social experience of the game transcends the actual game situation and creates a common ground of experience and contexts for the gamers.

LUKE (28): It's this that you do something together [while playing]. It is not just talking, then I might as well phone someone.

LOUISE (22): But then maybe it is to have shared frames of reference. Like have a common language.

In the sample, gamers share the idea of what constitutes “good” gaming, where playing games with your family comes first, friends second, then Internet friends, and last comes strangers you meet online. Gaming is placed in a discourse where it is more highly valued when performed together with others, and the closer the relationship with these others, the better. Oldenburg claims that social interaction in general benefits from two components: sociality and activity (1999, p. 47); this is clear in the case of gaming. We enhance the activities by increasing activity or social involvement. Gaming in this light has much in common with “traditional” leisure activities, where the focus is on *doing* something *together* with significant others.

The informants emphasize digital games as social facilitators, offering arenas for joint activity, while adding continuity to relationships with family members, those both close and geographically separated. In a study of family leisure, the authors conclude that leisure activities that are unique, shared, interactive, purposive, challenging, and requiring sacrifice have the capacity to deepen family relationships and cohesiveness (Palmer, Freeman, and Zabriskie, 2007). Common in the gamers' stories is how gaming is used to extend time together with family members who they meet often in other settings. Gaming is not performed *instead of* other activities, but rather to *complement* them. Gaming together with family members is about a creation of shared experiences, of a sense of belonging together. Moreover, digital gaming makes this play community wider in both time and space, re-embedding both activity and relationships in new space/time constellations. We can share this feeling of togetherness with loved ones not present, or with people we have never, and will never meet face-to-face. Today, due to new relationships across time and space, we are more spread out geographically (Giddens, 1990); we often live apart from family and friends. By using games and CMC, people find ways of linking these new time and space combinations. Online games have been said to overcome spatial and temporal constraints, thereby becoming “third places,” places for informal social interaction (Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell, 2007; Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006).

The form of the media (McLuhan, 1964) says more about its societal influence than the content of the media. It was the form of TV as a mass communication medium that changed how we accessed information, not foremost the content of different programs—as McLuhan expressed it, “media is the message.” While research on digital gaming often focuses on the content of different games, this study shows how the form of the media offers certain opportunities to the users. As social gaming combines doing with socializing, the shape and opportunities of this particular medium

become clear. The fact that games entail aspects of activity, the pleasure of participating in something together with others, and that sometimes support CMC gives games the unique position which these gamers ascribe to them, is undoubtedly responsible, in part, for the success of digital games in recent years. Gaming with family members might share many of the same functions/roles that other leisure activities do; however, starting up a game takes little time and does not require vast amounts of space, although certain economic resources are needed. Gaming is an activity that can be performed together while occupying different physical locations; this gives digital games a unique form. As the informants describe their gaming, the image of a multifaceted activity emerges with different meanings depending on the social context of use.

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