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Sharing games and gaming:

Social organization and interaction around games on a youth center Discord server

Fredrik Rusk

Matilda Ståhl

Abstract

The primary aim of the proposed paper is based on the questions and needs that the project EduGaming (2021–2023) has brought forth: we need a better understanding of all three forms of gameplay (Harper, 2013) within young people's gaming communities from a participant perspective. The three forms of gameplay within a game community under scrutiny in the project are: (1) play practice, which entails how the game is actually played by the participants, (2) normative play, which refers to the way the players think the game should be played, and (3) social play, which includes both playing games together and how the players engage in the culture of gameplay together (Harper, 2013). This paper focuses, primarily, on the third form of gameplay (social play) within one gaming community. More specifically, the focus is on the social interaction around sharing, and supporting, play on one gaming adjacent platform (Discord) by ethnographically studying one specific community (Discord server) that is maintained and organized as an online youth center by a non-profit organization focusing on social and health services in Finland.

Digitalization has changed conditions for participation and social relations. Social interaction online changes spatial boundaries as another world than the offline presence is constantly accessible. For most young people, the digital dualism between being on- or offline is no longer relevant, as the spaces that young people inhabit and socialize with others in is rather on a continuum between on- and offline than in a strict binary (Nelson et al., 2020). The connectedness makes young people's communities, identity and communication quite different compared to previous generations. The interaction online is framed by both the platform's technical affordances as well as the online and offline communities they are part of (Ståhl & Rusk, 2020; Ståhl, 2021). Part of the vast array of online communities are gaming communities and/or communities about/around games that make up a large part of children's and young people's lives. Online social platforms (such as Discord) connect users through, for example, features such as VoIP (Voice over IP), chat, emoji/gif responses, file distribution, and live streaming organized into threaded topic channels or user groups. These tools are fascinating examples of how sharing games has evolved from something being done sitting side-by-side in front of screen, to several users being able to simultaneously stream entirely different games, and gameplay, and interact with others watching the streams or playing something for themselves while they voice chat in a voice channel. However, Discord is still severely under-researched as a social online platform (see, e.g., Banson, et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2019).

The context in question is a Discord-server functioning as an online youth center. The server is facilitated through a non-profit organization focusing on social and health services in Finland and the activities are organized by a number of youth workers. Through this data, we can gain a better understanding of online social play outside of a school setting that is still moderated by an adult presence, as well as acquire insight into the social organization of a gaming related setting (a Discord-server) from a participant's perspective. The paper integrating several complementary sources of data to assemble a complex array of ethnographic information from a gaming and gaming related setting online: (1) digital ethnographic data (observations, field notes, and interviews) from an online youth center that is organized on a Discord-server, and (2) screen recorded data that participants from the former context, themselves, record and share with the researchers. Such a multifarious approach—in its focus, methods, settings, and technologies—has yielded a

thorough collection of data. The data is in several ways parallel and overlapping, both temporally and methodologically.

Preliminary analyses indicate that every participant's online interaction is both individual and shared; participants encounter different content in-and-through their individual screens on their individual devices, but at the same time the interaction and content is shared with tens of other users (individuals). The major consequence of screens is related to an understanding of increased individualisation of each person's participation in communities. However, communities, also online communities, are inherently shared. Therefore, we would, in this paper, like to discuss and collectively examine this apparent juxtaposition. We want move away from the often universalizing and normative debate(s) regarding online digital interaction. The novelty of the project's data lies in proposing new understandings of both the design for studies of digitally-mediated social interaction and of the identity (co)construction and communication practices of contemporary youth in online gaming contexts.

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