



## Bridging the online/offline divide: The example of digital gaming



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### ABSTRACT

Studies of virtual worlds are often based on the dichotomous 'real world'/'virtual world', yet research has indicated that this division is far from unproblematic. The aim of this study is to examine empirically the link between online/offline using the example of social online gaming. The data consist of individual and group interviews with 33 adult gamers. The results explore three themes—sociability and design; group membership; norms and rules—and show how on-and offline are inexorably linked through the social organizational demands of Internet gaming. Individuals ground online group membership in offline relations and shared characteristics, aiming to maximize game-play gains and support sociability. Gaming with 'people like us' facilitates creation of norms and expectations, which aids in producing stable social groups. Thus the boundary between online and offline becomes contingent on links between people. The study shows how important offline connections are for online interaction.

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### 1. Introduction

Contemporary life is increasingly interlaced with digital technology (Castells, 2001) and leisure activities are one important arena that have seen a digitalization. Leisure is a significant part of people's lives and what activities are available, participated in, and valued at any specific time and place is shaped by current culture (Kelly, 1983). Activities engaged in as leisure, such as games, hobbies, simply talking and so on, are increasingly embedded in digital technology, and as these activities go digital, they break away from earlier restrictions that limited them to certain times and spaces. Online and offline are terms often used when the aim is to distinguish between types of activities utilizing different technologies with different social implications and meanings. Early Internet and digital games research pointed at the liberating aspects of online life—how we in online social spaces could free ourselves from the constraints in our physical lives. Since then, research has increasingly come to show how the Internet is not creating 'new' social patterns but rather is an extension of our selves (Castells, 2001). Researchers have argued that we cannot understand sociality online unless we connect both online and offline (Williams, 2006) and that virtuality is a social property rather than an inherent quality of online social life (Slater, 2002). However, often the study of online social worlds, such as digital games, has not fully realized this development. There is a practice of separating offline and online and treating online worlds as social

spheres disconnected from offline life. In a recent review of empirical research concerned with community in online gaming (Warmelink & Siitonen, 2011), no connection between online and offline was prevalent so far in the literature. Lehdonvirta (2010) argues that especially MMO (massive multiplayer online games) studies have been based on the dichotomous 'real world'/'virtual world'. The aim of this study is therefore to empirically examine the link between online and offline in social Internet based gaming in order to ground this theoretical development in empirical data. The research question asks: *How is online and offline linked through MMO gaming?* The study sets out to answer this through interviews with 33 Swedish informants that together have a wide range of experiences from a multitude of different massive multiplayer online games. The aim is not to offer a generalizable picture, but to show how using an approach that attempts to connect rather than separate online and offline can benefit our knowledge and understanding of online social life. Focus is on analysing the nature of social experiences and preferences and through this reach analytical clarity on the relationship between online and offline. The results explore three themes; (1) sociability and design; (2) group membership; (3) norms and rules. The study touches on some classic phenomena in studies of online life, but does so while bridging the online/offline divide in order to reach new understanding about digital social life.

#### 1.1. Why Sweden?

Sweden is often considered a forerunner with regard to digital media. According to survey data, almost 90% of Swedes (18+) have

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access to the Internet and digital gaming is widespread with 62.5% of Swedes aged 12–65 engaged (Findahl, 2011). Sweden rates among the top countries in E-sports and hosts the world's largest local area network festival, Dreamhack, with over 20,000 visitors in 2011. The Swedish context of extensive use therefore offers a suitable ground for the study.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Understanding the relationship between online/offline

The Internet and other digital technologies have changed our access to information, and the Internet's capabilities for person to person connectivity have deeply impacted many aspects of life. The effect of the Internet on social interaction and relationships is a complex issue, yet the very practices through which people interact with each other is one of the main agendas both for previous and future research on New Media and the Internet (Lievrouw, 2011), and Game Studies is an important part of New Media studies (Aslinger & Huntermann, 2013). The Internet is an integral part of digital gaming; gamers not only play games online, but also search for game information and connect with other gamers. Social interaction is a significant part of massive multiplayer online (MMO) gaming as the game-play demands group effort to complete game goals; gamers collaborate, compete, and interact with each other. Playing a MMO game allows gamers to immerse in a social world together. Doing so they need to create and maintain relationships to manage their gaming and abide by and construct norms and rules that help make up the interactional space. Stenros, Paavilainen, and Mäyrä (2011) emphasise both social talk and social game-play as important for understanding digital gaming; gamers not only play together, they also engage in sociability. Sociability, as in Simmel's (1949 [1910]) original meaning, is here defined as the idle talk gamers can engage in and around gaming, interaction for the pleasure of it, void of meaning and purpose; the talk which makes up so much of our pleasurable interaction when we relax and enjoy ourselves.

In the debate concerning digital technologies few issues have been as prominent as social relationships and the division between online and offline. The debate often focuses on the argument that offline is the same as 'real life' and that online is 'virtual' and therefore less real. Much research has focused on the virtual aspects of online life and early—and later—New Media studies often spoke of virtual worlds disconnected from offline structures and the fluidity of identity that these spaces afforded due to the separation from the physical (e.g. Filiciak, 2003; Gotved, 2006; Turkle, 1997). In studies on digital gaming the dominant tradition has been to separate the virtual from the physical; that is, to view digital games as purely digital spaces with no connection to offline place. This separation often takes a specified form, such as magic circle, cyberspace, virtual reality, and liminality (Crawford, 2012). In these descriptions of digital games the outside world is often ignored or only briefly acknowledged and games are seen as separate spaces in their own right or as ludic spaces (Adams, 2003). Here only the rules of the game apply and outside limitations and hierarchies such as nationality, class, or gender are ignored. In general there is a tendency in studies of digital technologies to overemphasize the separation of the virtual from the material (Williams, 2006) as well as the deterritorialisation process of these technologies (Morley, 2011), where geography is seen as irrelevant, since time and space have separated in contemporary social life. Central to this division is the issue of sociality and whether these technologies limit or enhance users' social lives (Williams, 2006).

Castells (2001) has argued that online life is not a space of its own, but an extension of our social networks where we can

nurture the same social relations as offline. People now build their social network based on their interests, values, and projects both on- and off-line (ibid.). Slater (2002) notes that new forms of mediation in general have been experienced as virtual because at the time they seemed to be replacing earlier forms of interaction that were seen as 'real'. As Morley (2003) suggests, communicative actions must be contextualized; they are social practices among other social practices, of which online gaming is one. Therefore, the study at hand argues that when studying social interaction and digital technology we need to pay more attention to social circumstances if we are to understand how social situations are created, and their meaning. This understanding of offline/online is present today in Internet research (see e.g. Benkler, 2006) and is furthermore seen in how Internet users make sense of their experiences (Eklund, 2012). We need to connect online and offline and study effects and influences in both areas at the same time, as they are linked in everyday life (Williams, 2006). Following this theoretical development we can see virtuality not as something inherent in digital games, but rather as relational, a social accomplishment of people engaging with games. As Slater (2002) has argued in relation to the Internet, virtuality is not a property owned by digital technology. In other words, this study shows that virtuality is created between people engaging in games online. Depending on what we do and who we do it with, the 'virtual' properties and meaning of digital technologies will be different; virtuality is situational.

### 2.2. MMOs as social worlds

In online games, as indeed most other games, game rules are one of the building blocks together with narrative or fictional worlds which give meaning to the rules (Juul, 2005). The rules determine the structure of the game, while the narrative interprets the rules for us and has a strong impact on the game experience (Begy & Consalvo, 2011). Rules are constantly negotiated and changed, especially in online games where updates and patches regularly adjust rules that do not work, while gamers appropriate and invent new rules. As Consalvo (2009: 416) expresses it: "*Of course [game rules] apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes.*" Game rules are important for the experience of the game, yet they work in combination with or in addition to rules and norms of everyday life which gamers bring with them online. Searle (1969) divided game rules into the constitutive and the regulative. Constitutive rules are those that not only regulate but create the very possibility of engaging in a game—the game rules. Constitutive rules create meaning; by allowing certain things they create institutional facts, in this case the mathematical rules allowed by the game's code. Regulative rules regulate an activity that already exists by stating what is allowed/disallowed (Searle, 1969: 33–41). This can be stated in the user agreement that many MMOs make gamers sign, but also in the norms and rules gamers create to govern their social interaction. Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 140–150) use a somewhat similar definition of constitutive rules as the core rules of a game, in contrast to the implicit 'unwritten' rules. Social gaming encounters are made possible by the constitutive rules, those programmed fundamentals of the game in question, otherwise there would be no game in which to interact. Regulative rules are the norms and rules of conduct that gamers engaged in gaming together create and uphold. The game, as a whole, comes to be as it is interacted with, in the relationship between gamer, game companions, and game (see e.g. Consalvo, 2009).

Instead of seeing MMOs as virtual worlds we can see them as social worlds. The term comes from the sociologist Anselm Strauss (e.g. 1978) and has been suggested by Lehdonvirta (2010) as applicable to MMO studies. A social world according to Strauss is

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