

Why Game Studies Now?

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Researchers are encouraged to study the social uses and effects of gaming before stereotypes form and guide both their own and the public's thinking. The rise of online games comes at a particular historical moment for social reasons as well as technological ones and prompts a wide array of questions. The transition of public life from common spaces to private ones is exemplified in the move of game play from arcades to homes. As our real-world civic and social institutions experience steady decay, what is the impact of transferring our social networks and communities into virtual spaces? Will games become our new third places, and how will that affect us? These are questions researchers can answer but ones that need to be addressed before ideologues, defenders, and attackers muddle empiricism.

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The usual reasons given for studying games—their current economic impacts, for example—are not the real story. Financial totals are relevant, but they are merely the proxies for the more interesting fact that a lot of people are suddenly playing. Most important, a lot of people are playing together. Why? There are business and technical reasons for this postarcade era resurgence of social game play, but they don't fully explain the sudden boom in online networked gaming that ranges from casual card games to vibrant massively multiplayer online games. It has become obvious that the content of games matters—yet the social side of what happens to the players, their friends, families, and communities matters as well and matters a great deal at this particular moment. We should study games now because these networked social games are a wholly new form of community, social interaction, and social phenomenon that is becoming normative faster than we have been able to analyze it, theorize it, or collect data on it. What do these new collections of people and interactions mean for friendships, families, and communities? There is simply too much change, too much newness, and too many unknowns to leave the social analysis of games to headline writers and policy makers. We need to provide theory and data on these new phenomena before pundits in the mass media create the stereotypes that will frame thinking on networked games for the next decade.

Fortunately, we do have some leverage on the why now question—why social gaming is on the rise. To begin, games do not exist in a social vacuum, and the reason to study them has as much to do with what's happening outside of games as it does with

what's happening in them. The key trend is that social, political, and economic indicators in the United States and many other industrialized nations point to the slow but steady atomization of modern life. The appeal and controversy over Robert Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* is direct evidence of this. Putnam argued that the United States suffers from severe and systematic declines in "social capital," which is the helpful stuff that we get from being part of communities (Coleman, 1988). In significant detail, Putnam outlined the declines of civic organizations, joint family time, church involvement, and myriad other indicators of community and interpersonal networks over the past 50 years. For Putnam, the media, especially television, are the culprits. Time spent in front of the boob tube is time spent away from human contact. And although scholars have justifiably criticized Putnam's inferences about causality, no one disputes these broader civic and social declines.

One clear symptom of the decline is the scarcity of so-called third places (Oldenburg, 1997). Third places—meaning a place that is neither home nor work—are vital for community formation and maintenance. The European idylls that Oldenburg (1997) cited are tabernas, piazzas, pubs, and public squares—all real-world spaces that have been crowded out or made irrelevant in the United States as Americans have conducted a decades-long migration from cheek-by-jowl urban life to separated and atomized suburban commuter clusters. A microcosm of this trend can be seen in the history of arcades, which in the early 1980s bore all the hallmarks of idyllic third places until social forces made games "for kids" and an object of derision and conservative paranoia to be ultimately watered by that unstoppable force of capitalism, the mall (Herz, 1997; Williams, 2003).

The death of arcades is one piece of evidence suggesting that Putnam (2000) was right about the decline in vibrant civic spaces. And indeed, his choice of a social game (bowling) as the symbolic face of social decline is telling. The effects are deep and real and bad for civic life—a greater separation from others of different races, classes, ethnicities, genders, and ages as Americans have built homes with ever greater distances between each other. Ironically, as people scattered from cities to new suburban homes, the same patterns occurred inside the houses. Architecturally, families are evermore internally separated from each other. Census data show that our houses, like nearly every portion in modern society (Kaufman, 2002), are ever larger and more subdivided ("In Census Data, a Room-by-Room Picture of the American Home," 2003). Media entertainment stations can be found increasingly in the private spaces of individual family members rather than in common spaces. For example, recent data show that roughly 50% of all children now have game consoles in their own rooms, where presumably they play away from their parents (*Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds—Report*, 2005). So, the same trends that have occurred in public spaces are taking place within homes. It is no less than the slow death of diverse public and familial *gemeinschaft* in favor of *gessellschaft* (Tönnies, 1887/1957) via the commuter expressway, and now via the two-story, four-bedroom home.

So this is the backdrop for the rise of social gaming: a decline in civic and shared spaces and a decline in real-world places to meet and converse with real people. As these go down, gaming goes up. Neither event is likely causing the other. Instead, here

is a hypothesis about what is happening: Humans, whose need for social contact has never changed, find themselves with a desire for community and social interaction but with fewer and fewer real-world outlets. The demand for human connection has been static but stymied by the real, it has moved into the virtual. As a result, social ties have moved online as part of a virtual community trend (Rheingold, 1998). As one of the most popular online functions that bring people together, games are a particularly important site of activity to consider.

If you accept this hypothesis about what has happened, the why question is mostly solved. Yet the how and with what consequences questions arrive quickly and with few answers. These questions form the research agenda for academics who want to know what the uses and effects of social, networked gaming are. Here are but a few of the more obvious questions to explore: What is the social impact of replacing real-world connections with virtual, game-moderated ones? And wouldn't different games, different codes (Lessig, 1999), and different communication modalities lead to different outcome? Or, for those who have terribly depleted social capital and no third places in which to generate more, what is the impact of adding game-moderated social connections? More complex still, how do games augment or change existing social relationships? What happens when families stop watching television and start playing games? What happens when friends stop meeting for a drink after work and log in to World of Warcraft for 4 hours a night? What happens when the games become mobile, wireless, and networked? Will we see the reconstitution of new, mobile third places?

Each of these questions represents the tip of some greater iceberg. And like real icebergs, there is a danger to steer around: We must not drape our own ideologies, hopes, fears, and suspicions on top of these questions. This goes as much for the ardent defender of gaming technology as it does the conservative technophobe. It is our role to be agnostic about the uses and effects that gaming technology has and to provide intelligent insights and empiricism. We cannot go into these issues attempting to find a particular set of answers and then fighting with the data until they tell us what we want to hear (Kuhn, 1961). Games will be "used" by players and will have "effects" on them. Each will be both positive and negative, and we must be careful to keep our own ideological baggage out of our theories and methods. But the questions must be addressed because the public and policy makers want answers. They are coming to the realization that these things matter to them in their very real daily lives. For example, parents will want information about their children's social game use, and legislators will not be far behind. Will we ignore their concerns as paranoia and simply deconstruct the power relationships that lead to their fears, or will we take their concerns seriously? It is up to us to supply answers before the stereotypes are formed by punch lines, pundits, and demagogues.

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