The strenuous task of maintaining and making friends: Tensions between play and friendship in MMOs

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ABSTRACT
This empirically driven study concerns the creation and maintenance of friendships in online gaming. Social interaction and community building are integral to online game-play, yet maintaining and making friends within a gaming context is not without its conflicts.
Through analyses of interview data (n=52) combined from two research projects concerning MMO-gaming this study presents three ideal type portraits of gamers. The portraits illustrate different struggles of balancing friendships, a challenging game experience, and everyday-life. Specifically they look at the relationship between social design and social play; everyday-life and contexts of play; and 'player burnout', when players leave the game. Results emphasise how friendships and everyday-life constrains affect how we play, our preferences towards play, and who we play with online. The study concludes that maintaining and making friends in an online game can be a strenuous task limited by both a rational game structure and everyday-life.

Keywords
social relationships, sociability, digital gaming, social interaction, game structure, rationalization

INTRODUCTION
The emergence and popularization of new game technologies, game titles, and game cultures have asserted digital gaming as an activity where friends and family can play together (Eklund 2013). Empirical research on play and players has debunked the

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stereotype of gamers as socially inept and solitary beings. Particularly studies of online games have highlighted play as a social endeavour, and play has been reframed as an arena to make and maintain friendships. Not only do gamers make new friends while gaming, they also maintain existing friendships; these relationships being necessary to build functional gaming groups and so progress in their gaming (see e.g. Taylor 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams 2006; Williams, Yee & Caplan 2008). The effort to highlight play as meaningful and social has been an integral, and necessary, part in the development of Game Studies. However, framing the link between friendship and play as inherently beneficial to play is problematic due to the instrumental and rational nature of the play space where both skills and contributions are made explicit and measurable (see Grimes & Feenberg 2009). Thus friendships become subjected to conditions of performance evaluation; conflicting with the ideal image of friendships as freely chosen and given, voluntary, and a matter of personal choice (Allan 1989). As the field of Game Studies has matured the one-sided image of Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) as inherently social for everyone is now being questioned (e.g. Ask 2012; Eklund & Johansson 2010). The unproblematic image of game relationships often ignores the conflicting aspects of friendship and MMO-gaming; an issue which has become increasingly apparent to us during our MMOs studies.

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the relationship between friendships and MMO-gaming. Specifically we investigate online gaming as an arena for conflicts of friendship with the research question: *What conflicts may arise in the meeting of play and friendship in an MMO?* To answer this question we present three ideal types that portrait tensions between challenging game play, everyday life and friend work (the effort put in to make and maintain relationships. The portraits are based on analyses of interview data with *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) gamers from two different research projects.

BACKGROUND

When playing online, gamers often spend time with others as active participants in an enjoyable and social activity (Taylor 2003). Jakobsson and Taylor studying MMOs state that, “The production of social networks and the circulation of social capital prove to be one of the most important aspects in EQ [EveryQuest; Sony, 1999].” (2003: 88). Thus, MMOs constitute social spaces with inbuilt possibilities for social interaction where individuals together take part in different adventures. Online games have been described as ‘third places’ (Ducheneaut et al. 2007); places for informal sociability that give opportunity for bridging social capital leading to community building (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006). Community building is often integral to play itself, and friendships are central to game enjoyment, motivation, and accomplishments (Chen 2012). In MMOs gamers can compete against others, work together and through the shared experience have the opportunity to build lasting relationships (Kolo & Bauer 2004). Social interaction is the key attraction and the unique selling point of these games (Williams 2006; Cole & Griffiths 2007) and the design for interaction between gamers is a basic condition.

Developers foster social engagement within the game through features like guilds (player constructed social groups) and more short-term player groupings, they also support interaction through friend lists as well as global and local chat channels. ‘Gamer interdependency’ is strengthened by limiting solo content and by creating challenges and characters that are reliant on team work (Jakobsson & Taylor 2003; Ducheneaut et al. 2006). Functional gameplay is dependent on high levels of trust and cooperation between

members (Chen 2012). Even highly instrumentally focused gamers are 'forced' to be social in these types of games, collaboration often being the only way to progress (Taylor 2003). The creation and maintaining of social ties, like friendships, seems to be an integral part of MMO-gaming. Meanwhile, play, in MMO's and other games, is a situation with clear win/loss conditions. This puts pressure on social relations operating within play spaces. As the play space is instrumental; both skills and contributions are made explicit and measurable, thus also subjecting friendships to conditions of evaluation and performance.

Gaming is a goal driven activity with set strategies and rules. Trying to mediate between goal driven and social aspects of online game-play is often framed as a conflict between hardcore and casual play styles (Juul 2010). The stereotype dictates that hardcore players care more about progress than friendship, and casual players are friendly but unskilled (Taylor 2006). Such dichotomization of play styles and player groups is highly problematic, as 'hardcore gamers' (or power gamers) are dependent on strong social ties to succeed, while 'casual players' may sport impressive game-play skills. Juul (2010), questions several assumptions that this division rests on, showing, for example, that casual and hardcore gamers can spend similar amounts of time on gaming. The juxtaposition of the two play styles suggests (however incorrectly) that gamers have to choose between friendship and progress. Thus explaining the pervasiveness of the casual versus hardcore discourse as an articulation of the conflicts gamers experience when attempting to make play both social and challenging.

Play can be seen as social 'glue', a foci of activity (Feld 1981) around which friendships can form and relationships be maintained: "A foci is defined as a social, psychological, legal, or physical entity around which joint activities are organized (e.g. workplaces, voluntary organizations, hangouts, families, etc.)." (Feld 1981:1016). Friendship is often seen as a relationship based solely on choice and individual preferences and as a relationship opposite ideas of rationality (Allan 1987). However, in reality friends are often people similar to oneself and who you meet through occupying the same arenas. For example geography limits who we can and will name a friend (MacPherson et al. 2001). Moreover, the structure of a foci, in this case a game, have implications for how such relationships can be performed. While games may en
courage free-form and imaginative engagements, they are built as rational structures. Grimes and Feenberg (2009) argue that games are sites for social rationality in which different structures of rationalisation such as the optimization of effort and calculation of results invites the players to engage in a rational game. Research on gamers and instrumental play has demonstrated that achieving goals, finding optimal strategies, and mastery of rules is not in opposition to enjoyment or playfulness (Taylor 2006). It is however worth noting that goal driven gaming with set strategies and rules may be in opposition to sociability. Sociability, or pure sociability, is defined by Simmel (1949) as the play form of association; that is, interaction free of meaning or purpose. Thus the very idea of sociability stands opposite to sociality driven by a goal or rationality which we could expect to find in games.

World of Warcraft

This study focuses on *World of Warcraft* (hereon *WoW*, Blizzard 2004) one of the largest and most influential MMOs. *WoW* can be played in many ways but is foremost a multiplayer game, heavily dependent on collaborative play. One of the more important player practices is raiding. Raiding may be defined as large player groups fighting the

most arduous monsters the game has to offer in a series of highly complex and coordinated battles. The complexity of play and required effort to succeed has made raiding an activity that highlights the link between play and work. For example, raiding guilds often use advanced point systems for delegation of game rewards (Silverman & Simon 2009), extensive application processes to join guilds, and signup systems for organization of play. While not all raiders identify as power gamers, MMO-culture is highly informed by power gamers' ideals of efficiency and optimization. This makes raiding an ideal site to investigate the relationship between goal driven activity (raiding) and non-goal driven relationships (friendships).

METHOD

This study is built upon data from two Nordic research projects. Both projects deal with MMO-gaming and concern social aspects of gaming, gaming culture, and everyday-life. Findings in this study are built on interviews with gamers with a special focus on *WoW*-players performed during 2009-2011. Though Eklund's material (N=33) focuses on social dimensions of gaming and Ask's (N=19) tones towards emergent culture and knowledge management the overarching focus and method in the two projects are compatible; allowing the data to be pooled and compared.

The analysis is articulated as three player portraits depicting situations concerning friendship and play. Using an inductive approach inspired by phenomenology (Creswell 2007), we let the lifeworld of our informants, as well as our own extensive experience as *WoW*-players, suggest relevant ideas, concepts, and theories. The three portraits represent ideal types (Weber 1904) created to exemplify trends in our material and are based on synthesised actual events and people from our data. Ideal in this case does not imply perfect but rather signify certain extrapolated common elements of a given phenomenon, ideal types are used to capture, interpret, and analyse the life world of studied informants. Our portraits are inspired by the travelogue jargon found in Miller's (2011) ethnographic study of Facebook-users. Thus, the individuals who embody the results are not actual people but ideal type gamers constructed in analyses of our data. However all quotes used in the result originates in our interviews. We argue that these portraits are thematic for situations and experiences commonplace in MMO-games that have not yet been identified in the literature.

RESULTS

Given public discourse around games we sympathise with the desire to tell positive stories about games and friendships, as the negative view of gaming as isolation and introversion has needed correction. However, in our material we noted a similar legitimization discourse sometimes skewing the informants' stories towards play as free of conflict or emotional costs. While our informants were generally open and articulated about their gaming situation and practices, they were more reluctant to talk about gaming in negative terms. They frequently lifted positive aspects of play, even when these did not accurately describe their own situation. One example was informants who rarely made new friends online, but freely talked about how great online games are for meeting new people. Another example was informants talking about how great it is to belong to a game community, while leaving out his or her longstanding conflicts with other members in the guild. In both cases this construction leaves out much of the everyday conflicts, sacrifices, and tensions that make up a game career. The portraits are thus not only chosen to reflect some of the tensions that come with strong social engagement in a time

intensive and competitive hobby like gaming, they are also an attempt to articulate part of the life world that our own informants are under-communicating. The first portrait details tensions between friendship and the desire to play competitively, the second relates friendship to the limitations of an everyday context, while the third portrait details how strong connections to a player community has its costs.

"Should I stay or should I go?"—tensions between social game design and competitive gamer culture

MMOs are embedded with social engineering features that encourage group play and player interdependency. Guilds, group quests, various in-game chat channel, character skill design, as well as the general promotion of the game as: "At its core, what makes World of Warcraft such a fun game is that you share this world with thousands of other players at the same time." (Blizzard, 26 July 2013: eu.battle.net/en/game/guide/how-to-play), forms a 'script' (manuscript for use, cf. Akrich 1992) where group play and interpersonal relationships are encouraged. In the first ideal type portrait we meet Benedict who started playing mainly because of the possibility to play with friends, but found that as he progressed through the game he needed to readjust both aims and play style.

Benedict started to play *WoW* in order to play with his friends. The "*Club Stupid*" guild was formed by people he knew from school and only friends of friends were invited. Initially social in nature progression through the game brought up the issue of raiding and a change within the guild:

> *Benedict: We started to play because people we knew played; it was they who pulled us in so to speak. And we played with them in the beginning and then they quit but we continued and started to raid and become more serious.*

The move from 'friendly guild' to 'raiding guild' was not entirely unproblematic. Whilst Benedict enjoyed the added challenge, investing more time studying strategies and improving his character, his desire to play the game competitively was not shared by everyone. These differences in player attitudes became more tangible after they began raiding:

> *Benedict: Half [of the guild] wanted to kill stuff and the other half only wanted to talk, and then it became hard when half didn't care about killing things and the ones who wanted to kill things got angry and then the others got angry because they nagged about it…*

During a period where the guild continually failed on a raid challenge Benedict considered leaving and finding a more competitive group to play with. He knew that if he applied to a more progress oriented guild he would be accepted. He had the in-game items and the necessary skill to play at a more difficult level, but in the end he decided to stay:

> *Benedict: I mean you have your friends and you don't want to leave them.*

Benedict knew that the guild would never be a successful raiding guild, and that raiding with this group of people would mean that much of the game experience and content

would be out of his reach. He, however, did organize groups of likeminded players in his guild he considered skilled for more challenging content—distancing himself during play from those 'who were there to talk'—a compromise that allowed him to continue playing with friends.

Benedict's story illustrates the emergence of, and possible solution to, a conflict between competitive play and maintaining friendships. It is not a story about choosing between optimal or sub-optimal play, or between social and unsocial communities—it is first and foremost a story about how friendships are put under strain when entering a competitive culture and practice. The strain may be seen as a consequence of competition, and occurs in many social arenas where competition becomes a dominant rationale (Hessen & Eriksen 2012). Of interest is how this competition emerges between players who are presumed to be 'on the same team'. "*Club Stupid*" was explicitly formed in order to share exploration and enjoyment, yet the MMO context lifted previously unarticulated differences among the friends towards play and leisure.

These results resonate strongly to Chens (2012) story of a guild that started out as a group of friends wanting to raid, but eventually split up when central members decided that the guild's progress and attitude towards raiding were not competitive enough.

While *WoW's* design is clearly aimed toward promoting sociality there are still game features that are adverse to sociability. The game either rewards or penalizes players based on their abilities and expertise (like situational awareness, understanding of game mechanics, and familiarity with strategies), not the relationships between players. Both social and cultural capital is highly relevant in gaining access to, and maintaining players' communities, but will in and of itself not guarantee success in any grouping effort. Rewards are only given to players in groups which succeed in their effort to defeat digital dragons, and unless the player community constructs a radical oppositional reading of the design (like an anti-program see: Akrich 1992) this imposes win/loss conditions on team effort.

Friendships are, for many gamers, an essential part of gaming. Friendships are not only a way to play together; friendships can give alternate meanings to the performance of play. Benedict's story exemplifies how, in many cases, friendships make gamers redefine their own goals and what enjoyment they could/should attain from playing. Instead of seeking flow, the sensation of total engagement which comes from being adequately challenged, Benedict in our example sought community. For gamers the tension lies not only in choosing friendship over challenge, but also in knowing what is forsaken at the cost of friendship. It serves as a reminder that even though virtual worlds and games may be used to explore new and other identities and challenges, they are never separate from the everyday context in which they are performed. The next portrait explores this further.

"Mother by day, Rogue by night"—online gaming as situated and performed within constraints of everyday-life

Virtual worlds are often depicted as separate from physical places. Particularly early studies of online gaming supported the idea of stepping into another place that was different and 'other' compared to our everyday-life. Turkle's (1997) analogy of "stepping through the looking glass" serves as a good example of this. In this second ideal type

portrait we explore how, in actual practise, gaming and everyday-life is rather inexorably linked.

Anya has played *WoW* for several years. Her level of dedication has varied throughout the years, but she still enjoys playing. Today she plays at home together with her husband, and while it took a while for her to convince him to try, he is now as involved in the game as her. Previously, she used to play in a serious guild, raiding and playing most evenings. She took great pride in her skill and intensive progressing. She stopped playing with this group once she finished university and got a job.

> *Anya: I played in a good guild, but then I didn't have that much time to play so I wasn't allowed to be with them anymore *laugh* so I had to join a calmer guild*

The new obligations of her life changed how much time she had available for gaming and essentially dictated her play style. Her new job changed the hours she could keep and reduced leisure time. Changing guild and play style was not a hard choice, choosing to prioritise her working life over gaming. She views her time as a more serious gamer as a passed phase that she does not miss. Today Anya and her husband have a child and this has, of course, changed their lives further. However, they both continue their gaming passion in the evenings after their child has gone to bed. Anya's new guild is also quite different from her old one.

> *Anya: Yeah we are all parents or older at least. So no one minds when you have to suddenly go afk [away from keyboard] to change nappies or something like that.*

The fact that everyone in the guild is in a similar life stage makes it easier, if not possible for Anya to manage her gaming with the life of being a parent to a small child.

The guild still raids a bit, but more leisurely. The guild is a mix of real life friends and acquaintances and a few people that have joined independently. Everyone speaks the same language though, something Anya's husband especially appreciates due to his poor English. Anya thinks that the shared language makes everything much easier.

> *Anya: I feel very safe in this guild, you can ask questions and feel you get support and that you can be social, get to know people, not just talk to a lot of people you don't know who they are.*

This guild is limited to same language speakers. This, according to the guild, is to avoid culture shocks and to make sure everyone gets along.

Anya's gaming has gone up and down; as her life changed so of course did her gaming. Starting her working life and later having children are factors in everyday-life which restrains gaming style and motivations. Finding a group of people sharing her real life constrains made it possible to continue playing with others. The fact that she now plays with her husband also matters to her.

> *Anya: It's something we have together, like a hobby. Playing together just makes it much more fun, and easier as well. There is always someone you know you can count on completely.*

Anya's story highlights the social context of play. Often research considers virtual spaces as spaces in their own right (e.g. Turkle 1997; Adams 2005), even if this is increasingly questioned. Malaby (2007) argues that games are processes rather than objects; they come into existence as we game. The game spaces that users occupy allow synchronous doing together with others and in this way game spaces become social spaces. However, as we see in the empirical data underlying this study, gaming is tightly connected to gamers' everyday-lives, showing that the virtual is far from disconnected from the physical; in turn questioning game space as a virtual place in its own right. Space and place matter even in our digital society and the virtual and the physical are linked together; gaming can be seen as an offline situated activity. How gamers play, what they enjoy in a game is restricted or allowed by factors from their everyday-life.

As Anya does, playing with a partner further allows the everyday social context to extend into the game. It is clear in her case and for many others in our study that gaming with family or close friends is different from playing with strangers or acquaintances. Family and friends not only make gaming more enjoyable, they also make play easier to plan and organize as when playing with family and close friends gamers become more deeply invested in the social gaming situation. It does matter then, who we play with. Something further highlighted by the shared language in the guild. A certain cultural understanding is clearly outlined by the shared use of a language. It becomes quite clear that sharing game style or game space is not enough to create stable social groups and additional offline characteristics are felt to be necessary for achieving social cohesion online. These processes are also visible in the first portrait, serving as a reminder that even though games are excellent arenas for building trust and community, making meaningful relationships requires effort.

In the first and second portrait we see how Benedict chooses friendship and offline ties over competitive play and how Anya's game goals and friendships depended on her everyday-life. In the final portrait we meet Rupert who was able to combine friendships and competitive play—at least for a while.

"I think we should see other games"–gamer burnout and work-like play

The problematic work/play dichotomy has been highlighted in Game Studies, and raiding in particular calls this divide into question. Empirical studies have pointed at how play can be performed through strenuous effort, optimization, and productivity; traits we have previously defined as pertaining to work (Yee 2006; Consalvo et al. 2010). The blurring of the two spheres, while being an accurate theoretical reading, might prove to be a challenge to players themselves. How work-like can play become and still be enjoyable? The following ideal type portrait shows how such strong bonds and commitment to the community combined with a work-like play situation can cause what many players label 'gamer burnout'.

Rupert is an officer in a raiding guild called "*Poxxy*". As part of the guild's officer team he is an integral part of the day to day running of the guild, often spending 40 or 50 hours online every week. He is respected and is at the core of the social network of his player community. The game has been a central part of his life for several years, but lately something has changed. Some of the other officers note that he is not signing up for as

many raids as he used to, and that he doesn't stay logged on after the raid for the usual post-fight chitchat. Then one day his resignation post is up on the guild forum:

"Hi all Poxxy-people

This has been a long time coming for me, but it's still sad to write. Anyways, here goes: I am leaving Poxxy and I'm taking a break from the game altogether.

Poxxy has been a good home for me the last year—you guys are awesome! Downing Ygg Saron was beyond epic and I will never forget it. Or how Drae kept spamming me PMs during the ENTIRE fight about some dudes he was watching have cyber [sex] at Goldshire Inn. To this day he claims he was only watching, BUT WE DON'T BELIEVE YOU!

So it's been good times, but it's time for me to do something else. It's just that logging into the game feels like a chore and killing pixelated monsters just don't make me as happy as it used to. And if I am not having fun, then it's not worth it.

After the summer I am starting grad school and I need to focus on that. My band "The Jackets" is also rocking hard and we are gearing up for our first concert now.

I would like to especially thank Darrow for his help with figuring out my attack rotation, to Sheyna for hours and hours of fun alt-ing and to Mika for gold making tips.

Thanks for everything, please stay in touch—here is my MSN: Rupert@msn.com

/salute"

As he quit, Rupert felt good, now he had time for all those little things he used to do, like walks on Sundays and cooking a fancy meal on a weekday. Things he had cut to make room for gaming. Yet he still missed the people.

Rupert: "The thing that left the biggest hole in my life when I stopped playing, it was that I couldn't log into teamspeak [a voice over IP program] and just sit and chit chat with everyone, the rest was ok but I missed teamspeak"

Quitting the game also meant quitting his friends in the guild, which was the reason he postponed it for as long as he did.

Rupert's farewell post reads much like a 'Dear John' letter where the player 'breaks up' with the guild; 'Thank you for all the great times we had, but things aren't the same anymore and I need to see other people/games/interests'. As an officer Rupert had in the last year attended officer meetings, interviewed applicants, trained recruits, managed disputes, and lead groups. He was happy to take on these responsibilities as they were both necessary and vital for the guild to play successfully together, and he performed those tasks with pleasure for a long time. However, at some point what used to be pleasurable, joyful, and exiting turned to routine, stress, and chore. Rupert's portrait illustrates the gamer burnout; when playing is no longer fun and thus play no longer feels like play.

The description of this situation as a 'burnout' is quite apt. In psychology a burnout is: "a general wearing out or alienation from the pressures of work" (Tracy 2000: 6). It describes a process of growing stress, dissatisfaction, and waning energy. Considering the amount of hours Rupert put into the game, his responsibilities and tasks, the analogy to the burnout we know from work life is strong. The main difference lies of course in this being leisure time, and that the structure keeping him in place was not bound by contracts or formal responsibilities, but rather friendships.

Just as friendships may keep a guild together through hard times, give increased meaning to and enjoyment to play, friendships might also hold players in the game longer than they actually 'want'. A player without responsibility and friends can quit as soon as the game starts to become tedious, and therefore quitting would not be a big deal. Because of Rupert's central role and the guild's tightly knit social network, leaving "*Poxxy*" and the game behind was a big decision. In many cases leaving a guild also implies leaving many friends behind, and the formulation of the 'Dear John' letter in itself speaks to leaving as something that needs to be explained. It does not make friendship or work-like activities enemies of play, or something to be avoided. They do however put a strain on the role of friendships, as the friendship may no longer exist for its own sake. Friendships are measured up against the amount of work the player is committing to the game, and Rupert's story is an illustration of many similar examples in our data when that tipping point has been reached and found wanting.

DISCUSSION

Friends are people we choose to have relationships with and friendships have to be maintained and constantly worked on. Our three ideal portraits constructed from analysing and synthesising our interview data (n=52) highlight several aspects of conflict and friendship management in MMO-gaming. We have seen that there are conflicts between friendships and game goals in a game that promotes winning, rather than grouping. How constraints in everyday-life affect which social groups are sought out and which friends made. Furthermore, that friends can be a reason to continue playing, even after the game has ceased being rewarding and 'fun'.

A "foci of activity" (Feld 1981) allows social interaction and relationships to have something to organize around. It is clear from this study that online gaming indeed can be such an activity. The game becomes an underlying structure creating a platform for relationships. Around and in gaming, works of friendship can be performed. Relationships are maintained both while gaming together and while engaging in sociability, talking and enjoying each other's company. As Stenberg et al. (2011) has argued the sociable aspect of online gaming should not be underestimated. Yet, for many relationships created in *WoW* the game is the only foci and without the game the player risk losing the relationships built around it. Gaming friendships are difficult to keep up unless another foci for the relationship is found, e.g. engaging in a new game. As the shared base is lost the 'natural' ground for friend work is lost, and this weakness in player relationships is something players are acutely aware of. As the third portrait illustrates, the will to maintain relationships can make gamers play longer than they might have done otherwise and can be the cause of a gamer 'burn out'.

The tension that arises between the desire for challenging leisure time and meaningful friendships is not unique for games. However, the very nature of games puts the possible

conflict between optimised results and sociable relationships on the agenda. As Grimes and Feenberg (2009) argue, games are rational structures through increasingly featuring rules determined at the technical and institutional level as well as the measurement and optimization of game play, these are processes though which games are/become rational structures (*ibid.*: 112). It is therefore in the nature of MMOs as structures—that might be rational in their very form—to reward successful groups, rather than social groups *per se*. Rationality becomes the antithesis of sociable- or free form-play as play for its own sake. Corliss (2011) argues that when engaging in a digital game we are embedded in a 'virtual play scape' which disciplines us into certain ways of acting; we become part of the game. A gamer has to act within a designed architecture that structures the experiences in that space. In other words, games allow only for certain behaviours and the ways that the game user can act are largely implied in the design (Aarseth, 2007). This, we argue, leads to a situation where the social possibilities of games are inherent in the designed structure and different games allow for different social behaviour. To do 'friend work' gamers not only need to communicate and be social with each other, but also to engage in game challenges together. When these game challenges reward rational and goal driven actions they promote a streamlined socialisation at one's own proficiency level to maximise the outcome of gaming. On one hand the rational structure of the game encourages players to engage the game with rational logic instead of encouraging sociability. At the same time the same structures can highlight previously hidden differences between friends as their friendship is tuned towards in-game performance rather than relational persistence. Chen (2012) points to the introduction of user made software (addons) like '*threatmeter*' that for the first time visualized each players input into a fight. Such changes to the design guide play towards instrumentality, surveillance, and competition (Taylor 2009). This creates a space for competition between players, in addition to the competition between the player-group and the in-game challenges. The software modifications thus further emphasise and visualize how the goal oriented nature of gaming rewards performance not experience.

The game becomes a platform for the process of doing friendships, yet it is also persistently situated in everyday-life. The second portrait illustrates how gamers start playing young then grow up, go to university and on to jobs. As gamer's everyday-life changes their gaming changes as well. It is clear how limitations and possibilities in everyday-life affect gamer's engagement in the game. Montola (2012) argues that games are often treated as systems and as such interpreted as isolated from ordinary life; as the system we explain the game with cannot explain the outside reality. In other words, games are often portrayed as isolated complete systems, with no effect on 'real life', and are seen, therefore, as being outside everyday-life. This study shows on one hand how players make room for gaming by reorganising everyday-life activities, and at the same time that everyday-life clearly influence how we can game, our play-style and what friends and groups we seek out in the game. For gamers, play is situated inside the social context of everyday-life and the social relations one upholds there can sometimes (and sometimes not) extend to the game and have a clear impact on how gaming is experienced. How we can and also how *we want to* game can only make sense if we see gaming as situated within everyday-life. What we enjoy in games is thus dependent on more things than personality or game-style preferences, something often forgotten in studies on game-play behaviour.

Malaby (2007) has argued that the idea of games as safe, fun and separate from everyday-life does not hold as an intrinsic and universal feature of games when they are studied empirically. While engaging in games is seen as something we do in our 'free time', a

part of life that—contrary to production—is voluntary and liberated from all but the game's own rules; this is far from the truth. Our portraits point to how rationales from everyday life, sociability, and games both overlap and conflict as players uphold or make friendships online. Using the term 'friend work' thus points to how the relationships that are forged around and through play are neither incidental nor effortless.

The three portraits tells of players who have foregone play as a form of challenging leisure in order to maintain friendships, who change their play style as job and family situations change, and finally friendship as a 'glue' that keep players online long after their desire to play has waned.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated online gaming as an arena for friendships; specifically we focused on the maintenance of existing relationships but also on the creation of new friendships in MMO-gaming as a strenuous task. We asked: *What conflicts may arise in the meeting of play and friendship in an MMO?* Our conclusions exemplify several points of conflicts. Firstly, MMO-games can be seen as foci (Feld, 1981) for friendships, a structure around which relationship work can be performed. This implies that once the foci is lost, as a gamer stops playing, the structure supporting the friendship is lost and often the friendship in turn falls apart. MMO friendships are created on the basis of a shared activity and this shared interest and social sphere is what keeps the friendship going. Secondly, friendships today are often defined as voluntary relationships defined by choice and lack of demands. These ideals of friendships conflict with the nature of MMO-games as rational structure that, contrary to first impression, rewards successful gamer groups instead of sociability. When these two ideals meet conflicts arise. Thirdly, real life constrains create boundaries for how gamers can play and who can become friends online. Due to real life constraints gamers create groups with people who are like themselves, can relate to their everyday-lives and the limitations and possibilities therein. Not only what opportunities someone has for play but also how they want to game depends upon the social context of everyday-life.

It is clear that when looking at points of conflict we gain an increased understanding of the social structure of online gaming. Future research should put more focus on such areas of conflict. While previous research has placed too much focus on showing that online games are social this study rather shows the intricate and sometimes conflicting work gamers put down to support their social gaming life.

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