


Learning to play online: Social gam(b)ling and identity play in social networks

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- n Learning to play online: Social gam(b)ling and identity play in social networks
 - n The Internet has become an important social environment for massive amount of people. Online and offline social interactions are not separated but interconnected in multiple ways. This applies also to social interaction connected with gaming and gambling. Players can interact with each other before, during and after playing by utilizing various channels. In that way, online gaming has become an integral part of building and maintaining players' social ties. Gaming takes place in social networks and it is also closely connected with players' identity construction processes.
 - n Social gaming or gaming in online social networks, such as Facebook, has increased its popularity in recent years. Currently, also real money gambling has become available in Facebook in addition to free-to-play games. At the same time, online gambling operators offer games which are similar to popular Facebook games. The line between gambling games and other games keeps on blurring in online environments.
 - n This paper analyses the gaming experiences of Finnish online gamblers and Finnish Facebook gamers. It compares the similarities and differences between different game types and social interaction connected with them. The focus is on the social learning processes of online gaming. Both Facebook gamers (18 interviewees selected based on the questionnaire data of 134 respondents) and online gamblers (16 interviewees selected based on the questionnaire data of 409 respondents) have similar gaming careers. New games are learned based on the examples of other members in players' social networks. Playing continues if players identify with the games they start to play. If the games benefit their identity play, eventually gam(b)ling becomes part of players' everyday life

SoPlay project: Playful activities in social networks

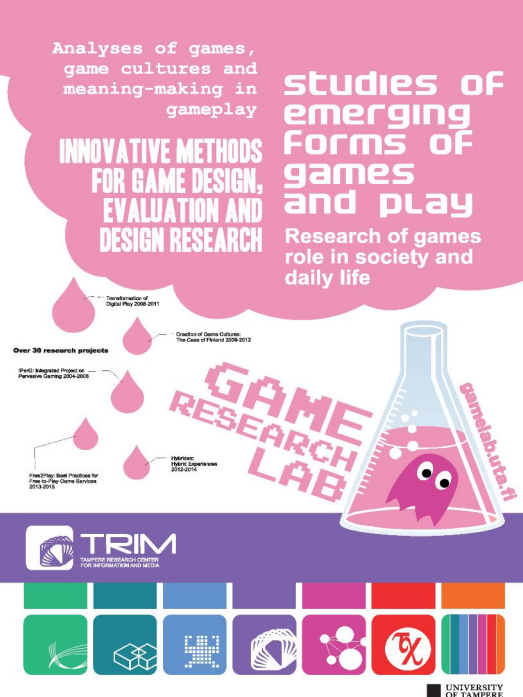
- Questionnaire: 134 respondents
- Interviews: 18 semi-structured

Triangle project: New forms of Finnish online gambling (eBingo and online poker)

- Questionnaire: 409 respondents
- Interviews: 16 semi-structured

What kinds of social learning processes are connected with online gaming?

What is the role of social interaction in players' gam(bl)ing careers?



The infographic for the Game Research Lab features a pink cloud at the top with the text 'Analyses of games, game cultures and meaning-making in gameplay' and 'studies of emerging forms of games and play'. Below this, it states 'Research of games role in society and daily life'. A central graphic shows a pink beaker labeled 'gameblabute.it' with a pink monster inside. To the left, a timeline of research projects is shown with pink droplets: 'Over 35 research projects', 'Transformation of Digital Play 2008-2011', 'Creation of Game Cultures: The Case of Finland 2009-2013', 'Helsinki Integrated Project on Perseus Gaming 2004-2008', 'Play(Play) Best Practices for Games for Learning 2013-2015', and 'Helsinki: Urban Experiences 2012-2014'. At the bottom, the TRIM logo is displayed, followed by a row of seven colorful icons representing different research areas. The University of Tampere logo is in the bottom right corner.

Learning to use Facebook

- n Starting to use Facebook
- n Almost all of the interviewees had started to use Facebook, because their friends already used it
 - They had direct Facebook invitations
 - Friends asked them to join and they felt pressure to join because of that
 - They felt they were excluded from conversations with friends
- n Many mentioned also the general hype about Facebook in the media that made them interested in Facebook
- n Couple of interviewees told that they were aware of Facebook already before they could join it because of their work and/or hobby which involved following the trends in the digital media
 - Still only one mentioned he was the first one of his friends in Facebook

- n *"I started it [Farmville] because everybody, all the time, sent some stuff to me, like cows and all kinds of stuff, so I had to go and check it out what it actually was, so it's like... my friends got me to start to play it and then, I wouldn't have played it everyday, but it was like somebody had sent me a gift again and then I had to go there again and again. And then I started to send those gifts myself and then they sent something back to me and then I was kind of addicted to it so I couldn't get rid of it."*

Female, 27 years old, Favorite game: Farmville

Starting to play in Facebook

- n Only few interviewees searched and tried out new games in Facebook by themselves
- n The most common reason to try out new games was the fact that their friend(s) played that game already
 - .. Invitations
 - .. News feed "spam"
 - .. Informal invitations inside and outside Facebook
- n If the game was fun enough interviewees continued playing it
 - .. First learning to play solitarily
 - .. After basic skills were acquired, social interaction became more important element
 - n Giving gifts to other players
 - n Inviting new players
 - .. Later, active interaction with those Facebook friends who also played the same game
 - n "A well-knit community"

- n Even if interaction with other player-friends were the most active, it was also important to maintain social relations to other Facebook friends
- n Interviewees had to balance between different social obligations
 - ... Game-related social networks
 - ... Social network inside Facebook
 - ... Larger social networks also outside of Facebook
- n Based on different negotiation processes playing was adapted as part of everyday life



- n Both elements of games and social interaction connected with them were reasons which kept players committed to playing
 - ... For example, after building a big and lively farm in Farmville players had to keep coming back to take care that their plants and animals wouldn't die
 - ... In many games the progression is benefited if players give and receive gifts from each other. Players can feel that they let down their friends if they stop playing
- n Players more engaged in the game





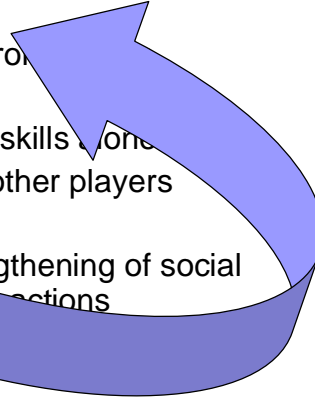
- n Playing a particular game ended because of two reasons:
- n Playing became too addictive
 - Took too much time
 - Other social relations were left aside
- n Saturation – playing didn't give anything new anymore
 - Hard to manage too big game world
 - Repetitive game mechanics
 - Friends stopped playing
- n After that, new game was picked up

Social gaming careers

- n Information about a game from friends
 - à Tryout
 - à Acquiring basic gaming skills alone
 - à Social interaction with other players
 - à Identification
 - à Maintaining and strengthening of social relations by reciprocal actions
 - à Addiction or saturation
 - à Stop playing

Social gaming careers

- n Information about a game from
 - à Tryout
 - à Acquiring basic gaming skills
 - à Social interaction with other players
 - à Identification
 - à Maintaining and strengthening of social relations by reciprocal actions
 - à Addiction or satisfaction
 - à Stop playing
- è Playing as part of everyday life



Starting to gamble

- n About 90 % of the Finns have gambled at some point of their lives
- n Everybody has family members, relatives and/or friends who gamble
- n General attitudes towards gambling have been rather liberal in Finland
- n Games can be found everywhere
 - Grocery stores
 - Gas stations
 - Kiosks
 - Bars and restaurants
 - Online
 - Gambling venues
- n It's easy to start to gamble in Finland
- n Possibilities to tryout gambling are plentiful
- n The general age limit of 18 years for gambling was passed in the year 2011. Few years ago there were no age limits for example for lotteries. The slot-machines had the age limits of 15, but also younger children were allowed to play them if they were accompanied by their parents.
- n Beginning gambling is fundamentally social process (Reith & Dobbie 2011)



n Gambling first time

- Majority (11) had started to gamble with parents (9) or grandparents (2)
- Friends had also influence on starting process
- Only one interviewee told that he had started to gamble alone

n Starting online gambling

- Friends' influence much more important
- Also advertisement and other media texts had influenced
- Usually started with the same games which were familiar from offline sites

n Finding new games

- Friends play the same games
- Environment and situation influence
- Advertisements

Identification

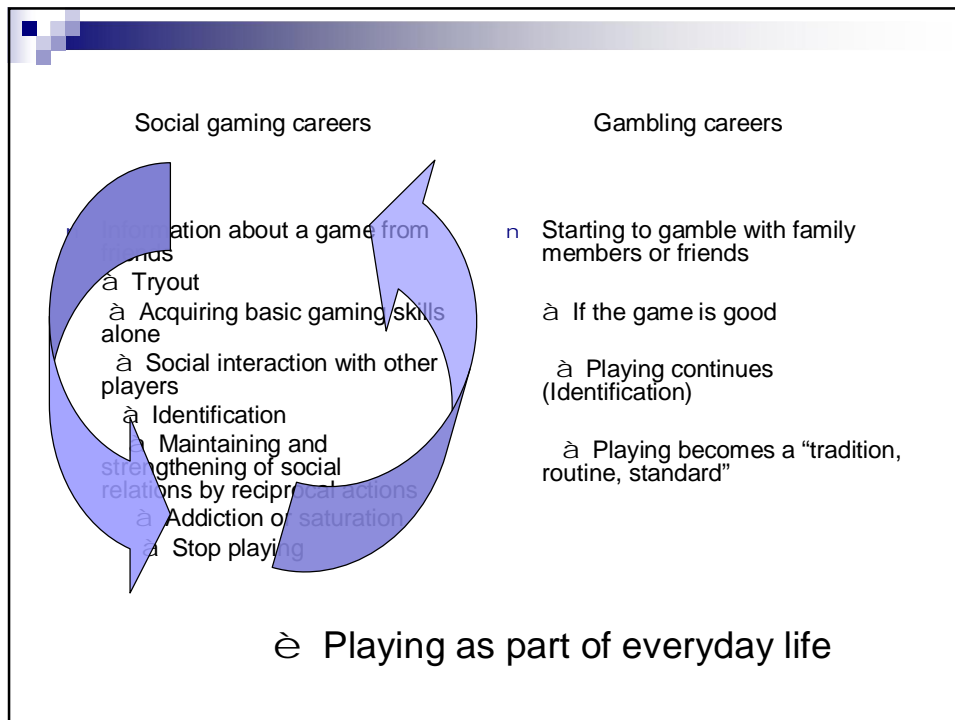
- n “[My parents don’t play] online games. Internet is not that familiar to their generation. They play mainly slots” (ID 5)
- n ID 8 used to be “a horse-girl” à likes especially horse race betting in race tracks
- n ID 10 used to play football so it was easy for him to become interested in sports betting
- n Foreign vs. domestic online sites
 - Domestic sites are seen more responsible, reliable and safe
 - Long history in Finland
 - n Parents and even grandparents have been and are customers to those companies
- n Players continue to play those games (and in those venues/sites) to which they have an emotional connection
- n If the game somehow represents their identity, it is likely, they will continue to play

“tradition, routine, standard”

- n “Lotto is kind of a routine [...] bingo has become almost kind of a tradition [...] usually I have always the standard [amount of money for games]” (ID 5)
- n Gambling has become a routine for most of the interviewees
 - “ The time and the place of gambling is almost always the same
 - n E.g. weekly lotteries, weekly sports betting, slot machines after grocery shopping, poker playing after work week
 - “ The size of the bets is usually the same
 - n Standardized weekly bets, spare change after shopping, spare change after weekly online lottery
- n Routines are also safety factors
 - “ Will not consume more time or money one can afford to
 - “ Routines are known by family members and friends → social control
 - “ If there are special occasions (e.g. gambling during holiday trips, trip to casino) different precautionary measures are necessary

Gambling careers

- n Starting to gamble with family members or friends
 - If the game is good
 - Playing continues (Identification)
 - Playing becomes a “tradition, routine, standard”
 - Playing becomes part of everyday life



Gam(bl)ing careers

- New games are introduced by friends or family members
- If the game is good, playing continues
- Identification
- The more investment (money and/or time and/or social relations), the more emotional attachment
- Playing becomes “routine”, “standard”, “tradition”
- Playing becomes part of everyday life
 - Identity construction, identity play
 - Money and other currencies as representations of identity


Social rewards

- n Players stake money in gambling games or invest time/money/social relations in social games
- n In both cases players are actually staking their identities
 - Only the representations of identities differ from one genre to another
- n By acting socially acceptable ways, players seek social rewards from these games
 - Using right kind of money
 - Managing social relations by invites, gifts, liking etc.
- n Representations of social rewards differ from one game to another
 - Money, points, rankings, gifts, likes, amount of discussion in forums...
- n The value of stakes, investments and rewards are socially constructed and learned
- n Ultimately, players seek acknowledged membership in their social networks
 - Social rewards make connections stronger and validate player's identity
 - After that, identity is staked again → identity play continues all the time

Conclusion

- n Free-to-play social games are not actually free
- n Gambling games are not fundamentally played for monetary rewards
- n In both game types, players stake their identities that are constructed in the same networks in which the games are played
- n Social rewards received from playing guide the identity construction and play
- n Only the representations of identities and social rewards vary between different games
- n There is no technological restrictions to merge these representations in a single game
- à The line between different game types will keep on burring in online social networks and might vanish altogether





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THANKS!