The quiet pleasures of local networks: Against Massive Online Multiplayer Games

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One of the most substantial transformations in our digital every day is online gaming. I doubt this statement will come as a surprise to anyone, even less so in this conference and this panel, but still, I think it is worth putting the scale of the transformation into perspective:

Networked multiplayer games date back to the mid-70s, with *Empire*¹ often cited as the first game of this kind. (Daleske, 2016) But it wasn’t until the wide adoption of Ethernet technology in the early 90s that this form of gaming became truly popular; by the next decade a quarter of a million people were playing *Counter Strike* over the internet.² Today there are more than 1.8 billion people playing games around the world, and gaming has almost become synonymous with online gaming. (Newzoo Report, 2016)

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¹ Written in 1973 by John Daleske as project coursework for an education class, it ran in the PLATO system of University of Illinois. Also see: http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2390917,00.asp

² See: https://redd.it/18prp5 for a discussion on this.
According to Jane McGonigal, collectively, we have spent 5.3 million years playing *World of Warcraft* (one of the most popular online games). And according to Jesse Schell, professor at the Entertainment Technology Center of Carnegie Mellon University, in a country with a strong gaming culture like the US, or the UK, the average young person would have spent 10,000 hours\(^3\) playing online games by the time they are 21. (McGonigal, 2010a)

And it is not only blockbuster games aimed at the hard-core gaming cultures of the US, Europe, Japan or Korea; online games are coming to developing economies like Brazil or Turkey as well, fuelled in part by cheaper internet access through cellular networks and the wide adoption of low-cost gaming devices, like tablets and mobile phones (ESA Report, 2016).

Perhaps the most striking example of this occurred last year, when *Pokémon Go* made headlines by reaching over a hundred million downloads worldwide within a month of its release, attracting more users than Twitter after just the first three days, and doubling Nintendo’s stock value in the process. (Molina, 2016) (Reuters and Reuters, 2016).\(^4\)

In less than 50 years, gaming went from a technological curiosity to a 99 billion dollar industry. (Newzoo Report, 2016)

Unsurprisingly, much of the emphasis in the study of the phenomenon has been placed in the games themselves; from their aesthetic merits, to their narrative and spatial powers, to their specificity as a medium.\(^5\) However, not much has been written on the actual networking that enables multiplayer gaming, and the concomitant modalities pleasure that this networking enables. Perhaps because of its vertiginous development, we have devoted much attention to the massification of the medium in terms of

\(^3\) These hours, argues McGonigal amount to having a second job, which is in my opinion quite revealing, if not necessarily for the same reasons McGonigal suggests.

\(^4\) *Pokémon Go* was also reported to have disturbed behaviour in several strange ways, from provoking traffic accidents, to reported health benefits, and even in preventing and inciting crime. See: [http://bgr.com/2016/07/13/pokemon-go-crime-stoppers/](http://bgr.com/2016/07/13/pokemon-go-crime-stoppers/) and [http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/is-pokemon-go-really-driving-a-crime-wave-20160712](http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/is-pokemon-go-really-driving-a-crime-wave-20160712)

\(^5\) There is now an established games studies research community, specialised journals, and interest in games from other disciplines too.
numbers of users (now referred to as gamers), and in the process overlooked the way these users connect to one another.

I hereby suggest that one of these overlooked moments is a profound break in the history of networked gaming: when connection went from local networks to the worldwide web. The transition from one type of connection to the other was met with joy and enthusiasm by both players and the nascent industry, after all, connecting through the internet brought with it the promise of a staggering number of potential playmates scattered around the world. Endless play means endless demand, and endless demand is good for business, and so as online gaming took off, the quiet pleasures of local area networks were quickly forgotten.

Today these hyperconnected digital playgrounds are a reality: the dream of infinite play has come true. But if we have learned anything from the films of David Lynch film, is that realised fantasies can be treacherous.

Massive Online Multiplayer Games (MMOs), like the aforementioned *World of Warcraft*, can host thousands of players simultaneously in a synthetic, shared “world”, which is often modelled as a *sandbox space* wherein players are more or less free to roam around, collect items, undertake quests, interact in many other forms with the environment, and crucially, with other players. (*What is Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG)?*, n.d.)

MMOs connect millions of players from around the world in seemingly social virtual settings, they create large online communities and entire virtual economies, virtual marketplaces that are valued in several billions of very real currencies. (Good, 2014)

In a sense, these virtual worlds amount to what Benedict Anderson called *imagined communities*, in his “Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism” (Anderson, 1991). Anderson, of course, was using the term to explore national identity, and this is only fitting since these online communities comprise not only as many people as some actual nations, but are also bound symbolically through imagery and tradition — ask anyone who plays *World of Warcraft* and they will tell you whether they *belong* to the

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6 With about 11 million players, if *World of Warcraft* was a country, it would be about the 75th in terms of population (roughly the size of Belgium).
Alliance or the Horde, and it is worth noting, for instance, that after Wikipedia, the World of Warcraft community keeps the second largest wiki in the world, with almost 80,000 articles and 5 million users every month. (McGonigal, 2010a)

Gamers are deeply invested in these worlds; in inhabiting them, in sustaining them, and in protecting them from intruders. Which, incidentally, also contributes to explain why many social antagonisms—racism, sexism, homophobia—are replicated in virtual settings. Interestingly, class is one social antagonism that is suspiciously absent from this list, but is this because virtual worlds are more egalitarian, or because the financial hegemonies that sustain them are obfuscated in more sophisticated ways?

To go back to the social aspect, for all the sense of community players appear to have, something critical is being overlooked: the community they belong to is not only imaginary, but the connections that sustain it are established through an abstract network. By connecting through the internet, gamers forwent mastery over the means of connection; they gained global reach, but the cost they had to pay was the effacing the networking itself.

When players are connected to a World of Warcraft server they do not know how their information travels around; they are not in control of the nodes, the routes, or the gateways through which the exchanges takes place. Martin Dodge makes the argument that unlike other connection systems, the internet has a very small physical footprint in our daily experience: the means of connection are usually hidden away in unmarked service spaces on top of buildings, basements, or windowless data-centers: “Unlike cars on the road, trains on the track, or letters in the mail, the packets of data flowing through the Internet do not exist at the analogue scales of human senses” (Dodge, 2008, p.107)

Furthermore, the industrial apparatus that supports and profits from the economy of infinite play depends on this effacing of the network, so minimizing latency, reducing packet misdeliveries, managing heavy traffic through choke points; it all amounts to keeping the illusion of perfect connectivity, the underlying goal of which is to lure the players into believing that the connections they establish are seamless to the point where the network itself disappears—since a network that is always on, that will
connect forever to an imperceptible grade of efficiency, will inevitably become invisible.\(^7\)

Perhaps the easiest way of showing what is lost by abstracting the network out of the player’s grasp, is by going back to a time when networked games were played in local area networks (LANs), which for our purposes here we can define as a closed, self-sufficient, self-governed, and often self-assembled, small network—whose components are often locally owned and managed, and which can operate isolated from the internet (Donahue, 2007).\(^8\)

Before the popularisation of broadband internet access, LANs were the main setup for playing networked games. The small gatherings of people to play games through LANs quickly made it to the gaming vernacular as LAN parties. These events are frequently private, and imply players bringing their own computing equipment, often to someone’s house, where a local network is implemented ad hoc with the purpose of playing games.

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\(^7\) Invisible, this is, to the conscious self. Unconsciously, the effect might be very different. Because these limitless structures became an external reality relatively recently, it is unclear that we are immediately, or naturally, capable of dealing with them psychologically. I suspect the unconscious trade-offs can be profound in ways that we are yet to understand: maybe anxieties of disconnection are displaced or projected onto other practices?

\(^8\) This is not the technical definition of LAN, but it is how players that use them understand the term. LANs are in fact very often just the most local expression of the internet, and are often managed in the similar ways as many other major infrastructural sections of it.
After the internet, it would seem initially counterintuitive to go to the trouble of setting up a local network for gaming. But these events still happen, and are still a significant part of gaming culture. One of the reasons for this, I argue, is because contrary to online gaming, playing over a LAN involves the players in a substantially different way: it forces its participants to countenance the material problems of connection (both of machines and of humans).

LAN parties were born before wireless technologies became commonplace in networking, which effectively meant that players (who were also organisers) had to own and configure the constituent pieces of equipment that made up the network, including computers, routers (or most commonly in those days, switches), network cables, etc. Connection was not only not immediate, but always fraught, insofar as players needed to know how to assemble a and troubleshoot their local network: they were always exposed to compatibility issues in software and hardware, but also in the personalities of the attendants themselves, since they had to occupy the same domestic, improvised, spaces for long periods of time. This inevitably leads to the tackling of very immediate physical constraints: the number of available connection ports, cable length, available electricity outlets, number of chairs, ventilation, and catering provisions.

In the Wikipedia entry for LAN parties, it is noted how these events rely in high quantities of junk food, particularly sugary drinks and coffee to keep the players
engaged⁹, this is perhaps because of widely socialised youth practices, but also serves an important function: to maximise networked time, as players are acutely aware of just how precarious and ephemeral their connection is — always contingent to power failure, or equipment malfunction. Note, for example, that players do not usually have spare parts, nor do they necessarily know how to fix computing equipment, and similarly, solving software issues without advanced knowledge was no minor achievement in the days before anyone could turn to google or stack overflow.

LAN gaming is the paradigm of finite and frail play, as opposed to the infinite and seamless play of online gaming.

I hereby submit that in a paradoxical way, not being hyper-connected returns agency over the means of connection to the players, opposing the potential alienation of vast but ultimately abstract networks. Connection thus becomes both more evident and more intimate, for players are necessarily responsible of how they connect as well as for what purpose. It might seem trivial to think along these lines until we are reminded that this abstraction of the means of connection obscures the fact that much of what makes online gaming possible is today not only not open to modification by the players, but it is increasingly owned and leased to them by handful of large corporations. In the words

⁹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LAN_party
of Jonathan Zittrain: “The future is not one of generative PCs attached to a generative network. It is instead one of sterile appliances tethered to a network of control.” (Zittrain, 2008)

Following Zittrain, I argue that effacing the networking of gaming is problematic because networks —however basic, or however invisible they are made to be— are always symbolic forms: they embody hierarchies, and through their architectures enact hegemonies. The connections they allow and disallow carry with them the distinct legacy of their ideological a prioris, and in terms of gaming, it is my belief that they enable and disable specific types of pleasure responses.

Admittedly, connections amongst machines are not necessarily equivalent to connections amongst people. But again, I believe that in many ways —networked games being one of them— the former enable the latter. The means of physical and symbolic connection of machines prescribes the range of possible human connection between their users, allowing them to experience their attachment in particular ways, and to derive different types of meaning and pleasure from human interaction mediated by computing devices.

Based on Jaak Panksepp’s work on affective neuroscience, I want to suggest that there are two different types of pleasure responses to be attained from these modalities of networked gaming:

a) Gaming interaction through a massive but abstract hyper-network, like the internet, will tend to enable what Panksepp calls “SEEKING SYSTEM”, which operates through the dopamine circuitry in the brain. It can be observed in foraging behaviour, and is often characterised by states of curiosity, excitement and pursuit. (Panksepp, 2004) Panksepp calls it “the granddaddy of the systems” since it regulates motivation for basic activities needed for survival, like the gathering of resources: food, shelter, etc. However, since it is a highly self-sufficient system, more so perhaps than any other, its over activation can lead to potentially obsessive behaviour —manic activity which is ungrounded and
unstable — chemistry-wise, dopamine is not too dissimilar to cocaine. (Yoffe and Harris, 2009)

b. In contrast, I contend that gaming interaction through a small Local Area Network will tend to activate the “PLAY system”. Panksepp argues this system points primordially towards physical engagement and improvisation. It is characterised by laughter, and by the unpredictability and spontaneity in rough and tumble play behaviours in young mammals (Panksepp, 2004, 2010). It developed later than the seeking system in terms of evolution, serving highly integrative social functions, and because it often requires of the unexpected, it is harder to self-generate without attachment or meaningful connection (Carroll, 2004).

These pleasure responses are not mutually exclusive, and they might overlap in several ways given different symbolic configurations. I do not claim that these pleasure responses are exclusive features of either online gaming or LAN gaming, and it is also true that I have very specific examples in mind for both types of experience. Similarly, the emotional systems described above do not operate in isolation and belong to a much more complex view of emotion and the brain (Panksepp describes other five distinct systems with their specific neural circuitry and behavioural patterns).

But these caveats notwithstanding, it seems clear to me that MMOs are more about SEEKING than they are about PLAY. Sometimes quite literally, like in the case of *Pokemon Go* (*Got to catch them all!* right?). Conversely, in all its subjectivity, my experience of LAN gaming seems to be more about PLAY. This modality of networking tends to allow for a type of emotional attachment and physical proximity that I have never encountered in internet gaming.

If this is true, there are several conclusions that might follow. But for now, I just want to suggest one as a counterpoint to Jane McGonigal’s overoptimistic view of the

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10 “Play probably allows animals to develop effective courting skills and parenting skills,” writes Panksepp, “as well as increasing their effectiveness in various aspects of aggression, including knowledge about how to accept defeat gracefully.” see: http://mybrainnotes.com/autism-adhd-play.html
transformational power of gaming in our digital every day, and particularly to her notion of “blissful productivity” in online gaming (McGonigal, 2010b).

Relating networking paradigms to brain chemical neurocircuitry might help explain why we are migrating by the millions to online games supported by abstract networks: it is not only that we are, perhaps quite literally, chemically hooked on our own seeking systems—a dopamine addiction that is key to a 99-billion-dollar industry. But it might also be the case that this addiction, like many others, actually conceals a much darker truth: that there is a large void when it comes to meaningful foraging activities in our world today; that we have grown so deeply dissatisfied with our jobs and more generally with how we earn a living, that many of us are using online games as a substitute, in the hope of re encountering traces of curiosity and excitement that are conspicuously absent from the contemporary labour markets.

Under the light of networks as symbolic forms, the collective productivity of gamers appears less as a blissful promise of more satisfying work, and more as highly profitable recourse to countenance what David Graeber calls: Bullshit Jobs (Graeber, 2013).

On my part, although there is undoubtedly certain nostalgia for a time where networked gaming was not fixed but more of an experimental, almost artistic endeavour, I do not hold that we should all go back to LAN gaming. This is, I believe, neither viable, nor necessarily desirable (even if it would makes laugh more often). Instead, my stance towards the paradigm of infinite play is more akin to Patrick Jagoda’s network ambivalence, a type of uncertainty:

“[…] which does not require an evacuation of one’s passions and convictions, requires being present to an unsatisfying present. It demands risking absence, uncertainty, boredom, complexity, and disconnection—without promises of instant gratification, certainty, discovery, closure, or reconnection” (Jagoda, 2015)

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11 Remember the “ten thousand hours is enough for it to be a second job”?  
12 These, according to Graeber, are made-up jobs that are redundant and meaningless; designed to keep the university graduates occupied and away from political discourse, social transformation, or critical reflection.
References


Yoffe, E. & Harris, A. (2009) *Seeking* [online]. Available from: