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MOTHERS, PLAY AND EVERYDAY LIFE: ETHNOLOGY MEETS GAME STUDIES

by Jessica Enevold & Charlotte Hagström

The socio-cultural practice of gaming has taken a giant leap out of the cultural closet. Gaming is becoming a mainstream activity in many Scandinavian homes with a player base that is growing in size and diversity. Contemporary living-room and everyday culture is changing and developing; the new LCD or plasma-TV that many families bought for last Christmas will be used as much for console gaming as for watching DVD or blu-ray movies. Simultaneously, public discourses on media-use adjust to reflect the currents of transformation. The view of gaming as leading to addiction and violent behavior is slowly, but gradually becoming nuanced¹ and the formerly dominant image of the computer-game player as a boy has changed to include the whole family, with "Mom" being the most recent addition.

As gaming these days is taking a more and more prominent place as a pastime not only for children but also adults, across cultures and income brackets, it becomes imperative to study. Gaming is not a fleeting phenomenon, but *an everyday practice* with great social, cultural and economic impact that is here to stay. The family, and particularly adult females with children, is a largely neglected study object where gaming is concerned. Although the "daughters" of the gaming generation now have received some attention, its "mothers" have been largely unattended to and are, by far, the least researched game practitioners and consumers of this digital culture. To remedy the lack of knowledge on this particular group and the bearing gaming has on everyday culture, we have launched the project "Gaming Moms: Juggling Time, Play and Family Life" in which we center on women who play computer games (www.gamingmoms.wordpress.com).

This article should serve as an introduction to a relatively new topic requiring very specific methods as it involves both offline and online research. How do we embark on an interdisciplinary venture such as this, and be sure to produce qualitative research of high standard? How should gaming mothers best be studied?

In what follows, we assume that not all of our readers are extensively familiar with games and game culture or have engaged with computer games first-hand or as scientific object of study. We thus begin with a short assessment of its current status as a growing genre, whose image is changing as gamers and game culture become increasingly diversified. We also briefly situate games as an academic subject and outline some of the central concepts focused in the field² called Game Studies. Furthermore, understanding the ideological

¹ To give an example, the Norwegian resource network for the computer game industry, research, education and press, *JoinGame*, recently arranged a workshop that featured a panel debate debunking some of the "myths" about computer games as violent, addictive and only for boys (www.joingame.org).

² Some would argue it is a discipline rather than a field; what follows should explain some of the debate.

underpinnings of *play* is vital to understanding the contexts in which games and gaming exists because they constitute some of the fundamental conditions of games research. To briefly explain this, we relate the ambiguous status of game/play to the usage of the term the magic circle and of historically ingrained rhetorics of play. In our survey of the theoretical land, we notice an increasing attention among games researchers to players in addition to the games themselves. We can then assert that ethnologists have a particular methodological edge and a role to fulfill as games research more and more means studying games in relation to gamers, society and political economy and not only the game itself.

Introducing our research project “Gaming Moms” we explain why it is interesting – and now possible and highly apposite - to study gaming from the perspective of culture, the family and the everyday. We give our rendition of how to best study a particular category of players such as mothers and why a marriage between ethnology and the interdisciplinary field of Game Studies is necessary and useful. In doing so, we give specific examples from our ongoing project thus presenting a selection of the various methods we apply in our research. Our examples are chosen around two themes—gaming and time management and representations of mothers in the context of gaming. Having thus (hopefully) answered our questions, we conclude with a brief discussion of our findings, outlining missing perspectives and future challenges.

FROM *PONG* TO *BUZZ* - THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

For many, computer games mean shooting, violence, blood and gore. For others, games mean cartoonish, Italian plumbers Mario and Luigi jumping over pipes and turtles to rescue Princess Peach. Some may even reminisce their arcades days playing games like *Space Invaders* or *Pong*. And, even if gaming is not what they like best, most people will recall PacMan—the first game character to gain world fame. Since these early productions, the gaming industry has come a long way. As internet technology has become available to the general public, and hardware and graphics engines have become more and more sophisticated, games have become increasingly complex and accessible to millions of people. Most Scandinavian, US and UK families these days have at least one PC or console at home. (Entertainment Software Association 2008; Krotoski 2004) Millions of people play the extension of former day’s adventure games and MUDs³, so called MMOGs — Massively Multiplayer Online Games. These are 3D graphical virtual worlds into which players can log 24 hours a day 7 days a week for a monthly subscription fee to engage with game content and chat and adventure with other people around the world. The development of online gaming has significantly changed the scene; MMOG-players are often older (Yee 2003) and of both genders; web-based casual games are supposedly attracting a lot of female players. On-line game practices have also altered the common view of gaming as a solitary, asocial activity.

³ Multi-User Dungeon: basically a text-based computer program in which you can play a role, build things, solve puzzles together with other people online.

The past few years, the gaming industry has transformed the playing field again by embarking on a new significant trend, with Japanese gaming company Nintendo as one of the principal actors on the market. As *Edge*, the world's leading computer game magazine, recently declared in a feature article: "Nintendon't Care About Hardcore" (sic, 2008) the big game companies are turning towards a mass-market, using new super-market outlets such as Woolworths in addition to the usual more specialized retailers. The huge success of the Wii, a TV-based videogames console released in 2006, and the small handheld console Nintendo DS, released in 2004, speaks of a major shift in focus. These consoles had as of September 2008 sold in 34.55 million and 84.33 million units respectively (Nintendo 2008). In Japan, a vast number of the latter were bought by females, allegedly causing a DS "girl fever" (Kohler 2007). The diversification of game types accompanying the hardware development makes it possible for all to find an appealing game; Nintendo's repertoire now includes activities such as brain training (*Dr. Kawashima's Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain?*, 2005), pet-care (*Nintendogs*, 2005) and fitness (*Wii Fit*, 2007) while Sony can boast with the immensely popular and successful musical karaoke game *SingStar* (2004) and the quiz game *Buzz!* (2005).

The broadening of the console repertoire seems to have paved the way for new user groups, attracting more females and other non-stereotypical game-consumers. As this happens, the former categories of hard-core and soft-core players, often used in discussions of who is a gamer or not, break down and become questioned. In sum, games and gaming are approaching the consumer and cultural midfield at a breakneck speed.

FROM GAME STUDIES TO GAMER STUDIES

In 2001, Espen Aarseth, a pioneer within the field of studying games and one of the founders of the first journal entirely dedicated to the scientific study of games, *Game Studies*, proclaimed that games now could be said to have an academic field of their own. Games programs were being established all over the world, a journal was launched and DIGRA – the Digital Games Research Association— – was formed and the field had begun organizing its own game-centered conferences (Aarseth 2001).

How games should be studied—and perhaps the real issue was by whom—had been, and continued to be vividly debated, most notably perhaps in terms of ludological versus narratological arguments. This was mainly a debate where so called "ludologists" protested against "narratologists" (see e.g. Frasca 2003; several of the contributions in Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2003) carelessly applying concepts from, for example, film studies and narratology, to the studies of games, supposedly usurping the topic. Games were claimed to be something very specific requiring their own terms of study due to their *ludic* element—the element of *gameplay*. Games are not to be treated as 'ordinary' texts; Aarseth defined them as "ergodic works". They are productions differing from, for example, books in that they require "non-trivial effort to traverse", that is, more than turning a page or moving the eyes to engage with. In his groundbreaking Ph.D. thesis from 1995 he called them "cybertexts", discarding the loose and general term "interactive" privileging the more specific "ergodic" to characterize the specific nature of games, MUDs, hypertexts etc (Aarseth 1997). In short, games should first and foremost be studied as games (see also Frasca 2003).

Since then, this debate has abated somewhat and there has been less focus on establishing Game Studies as a specific discipline. The area of *games research*—which may be a less charged and more accurate label to use if a wider range of perspectives on games and gaming are taken into consideration—has expanded and rather than being a single discipline, it must be seen as a multi-disciplinary field, whose major branches tentatively can be divided into three major ones: the humanities, the social sciences and computer sciences. Although the tag "Game Studies", with capital letters, still to some extent is associated with humanistic analyses concerned with the structural characteristics of games, for example how play and games should be defined or categorized, so called game ontology or typology (e.g. Juul 2005, Aarseth, Smedsaa & Sommestad 2003; Aarseth & Elderdam 2007), it is safe to say that games research encompasses several disciplinary branches. These bring their own methods and interests to the field focusing on a variety of aspects from design and AI, over games as tools for education to games as sites of social processes.

All in all, the awareness of a need for methodology has increased over the years (Konzack 2002; Consalvo & Dutton 2006), and the efforts presented reflect the fundamental standpoints of its advocates. In "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Studies" Analysis" (2003) Aarseth, who is firmly rooted in structuralist analyses of games and very focused on the games per se, presents his suggestion. We see as the most fruitful contribution of his article his pinning highest on the agenda the necessity to play the games that we want to analyze; even when the researcher is primarily interested in, for example, the players' social realm or the economy of games distribution. As we explain below, we firmly believe in including the study of gameplay in a comprehensive cultural analysis.

Aarseth attempts to categorize the ways of approaching game analysis by setting up three main areas of focus for game analysis that he calls "gameworld", "game structure" and "gameplay", and then he sorts a number of disciplines into these various categories whose main interests tend to fall within them. Although Aarseth himself points out that his categorizations are in no way exhaustive or definite, his disciplinary indications have been criticized by, for example, Sybille Lammes (2007) who remarks that several disciplines may be interested in the gameworld (semiotic, fictional content, representations) or the game structure (rules and AI) while also focusing on gameplay (the players and their actions).

We do not perceive Aarseth's suggestions as prescriptive, rather that he is right in his observation that the focus of certain research ventures often coincide with these interest areas. What is significant is the striving for methodological clarity that can be seen in light of both the newness of the field and a recent perceivable expansion of focus in games research that moves also gamers into the analytical spotlight. In short, the horizon has widened – from looking at the semiotics and mechanics of games to what players actually do with games, what social meanings they have, how they use them and what they may learn from them. It thus comes as no surprise that anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2006) argues for the benefits of anthropological methods, including observations and interviews, to be added to the agenda, or that New Media researcher Sybille Lammes (2007) endeavors to synthesize Aarseth's and Boellstorff's efforts by discerning what they have in common that might be beneficial and productive for games research.

Lamme's main point is that both Aarseth and Boellstorff, each from his own angle, emphasize the need to "go native" but fail to stress what she calls the situatedness of both researcher (who plays the game) and the local nature of the game, and the gamers who are under scrutiny. Gaming is an outcome of local cultural practices. Aarseth's stress on gameplay, Boellstorff's call for anthropological methods and incorporating games into a much larger (political) cultural picture, and Lammes' emphasis on reflexivity and situatedness together lie at the core of our approach to studying gaming mothers. In all fairness, it should be noted that noted MMO-researcher TL Taylor brought such issues on the table in terms of embodiment already in 1999 when she did fieldwork investigating how people presented themselves through their avatars in game-like communities online.⁴ Moreover, methodological discussions of ethnographic endeavors have of course been going on all along in other fields—ethnology being one of them. However, we believe the unique qualities of games oblige anybody who wants to study gamers to take the specific concerns of Game Studies—games and play—into account. Next, then, we delve into the issue of "play".

HOW TO VIEW PLAY – THEORIES OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE AND RHETORICS OF PLAY

We believe gaming is an activity that offers a particular challenge to traditional approaches to studying everyday life. Play has been perceived as a "voluntary" and "unproductive" activity (Callois 1958/2001), as something that takes place within a space separated from "real life", a "magic circle" with its own rules. The concept of the Magic Circle (Huizinga 1938) is a much referred to but also debated concept in the field of Game Studies (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). With the advent of MMOGs, most notably *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, and other multi-player on-line games this has become an increasingly questioned notion; games and gaming have become part of everyday life for many people. In these worlds and games people meet, communicate and interact with others, sometimes in ways that have little to do with play or game in a traditional sense and thus call for refined understandings of what a game is or what it means to play one.

It is here important to differentiate between the perceptions of the general public or media representations and research that explicitly refutes the separation between game and non-game illustrated by the magic circle (Taylor 2006; Malaby 2007, Pargman & Jakobsson 2008). Judging by the most sensational media perspectives and a generalized view of the layman, playing games is still an activity that does not, or should not, overlap with "real" life. Media coverage of games and playing tend to maintain sharp distinctions between good and bad activities; gaming tends to end up either on the bad side of the fence as a practice leading to addiction and violence or, on the good, as a tremendous tool for learning and breaking isolation. In most cases, the connection between games and players is stereotypically viewed as one between the young and their leisure

⁴ It seems that Taylor has never entered the debate of how Game Studies should be conducted, most likely, we assume, because she is already firmly embedded in the field of sociological ethnographic research and as such never felt the need to stake out the borders of the field in the same way as the more "ludologically inclined" researchers would.

activities. These conservative but seemingly pervasive perspectives on play have bearing on how studies concerned with games are evaluated and understood and it should be safe to say that only recently have computer games and play come on the agenda as a truly “worthy” object of study.

Seen from an ethnological perspective, perhaps we should say that games and play *again* have come on the agenda? To simplify crudely, once upon a time games and play were “natural” topics of investigation for ethnologists and anthropologists, since playing games were seen as an intrinsic part of culture and culture formation. For example, in the Folklife Archives at Lund University, can be found a great number of records of old games and play. But these types of game activities (e.g. Forsgård 1987) seem to have more or less disappeared from the research agenda the last couple of decades. When Swedish ethnologists have studied play more recently, they have mainly studied sports (Schoug 1997; Fundberg 2003; Hellspong 2000; Fundberg, Ramberg & Waldetoft 2005). It could be argued that these studies are concerned not so much with the playing activity itself but with issues of cultural identity regardless of the game played. What is significant in the context of computer games is to note that, as a rule, playing football has positive connotations whereas playing computer games does not; doing sports is good and healthy because it involves physical movement, and is perceived as leading to social fostering. On the other hand, non-athletic games and play—perhaps with the exception of chess—have historically not been regarded in this way, particularly if the players were adults, in contrast to children who “should” play. Brian Sutton-Smith's historicizing analysis of play from a broad cultural perspective, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) can be used to understand the multiple possible positions that play can occupy in public discourse. He describes seven rhetorics of play among which the rhetoric of *play as frivolous*, oppositional, revolutionary and conflicting with a “work ethic”, and thus a “useless activity”, easily can be recognized as the rhetoric employed when computer games are referred to in a negative way. When media and research attempt to promote computer games, it is often heard in terms of the rhetoric of *play as progress* that is associated with children's play; “play turns children into adults” and is valuable because it is educational and developing. It can also be done in terms of *play as imaginary* meaning innovation, imagination and creativity, a rhetoric associated with the improvisational play of literature and theater. Depending on whether play is to be promoted or refuted, different ideologies underpinning these are employed. These various rhetorics are signs of the deep-rooted ambiguity of play, which in turn is reflected in the way play, here in the form of computer gaming, is conceived in everyday life and, as a result, often viewed as a contentious activity and controversial object of research.

The ethnological focus on cultural identity mentioned above, corresponds well with the terminology Sutton-Smith terms the *rhetoric of play as identity*. Play is thus talked about as a means of confirming, maintaining and advancing the identity of a community of players. The activities he refers to, though, are traditional celebrations, festivals and ceremonies. We can see, then, that alongside the trend described above in the field of game design—the broadening of the market and target audiences—computer-game play is becoming increasingly legitimate to perform and to study. We see this as play becoming re-introduced into the general concept of everyday culture and everyday practice even for adults, and consequently in cultural research. This

means that more “positively tainted” rhetorics are again used to describe also computer game play – as social, as identity forming and as community building. We can begin to speak of gaming as popular culture, a “folk”-tradition even.

GAMING MOMS - THE PROJECT

As we write this, the interest in the everyday practices of gaming is increasing among researchers interested in computer games and gaming. So is the awareness of the significance of videogames to other player groups than young males, for example “gray-haired” gamers (Quandt, Grueninger and Wimmer 2009) and “baby-boomers” (Pearce 2008). However, there is still a lot of work to be done when it comes to mapping out its cultural patterns and impact. Though statistics and data, produced by the game industry as well as through research, confirm that women do make up a large proportion of the gaming community, this does not necessarily imply that women are socially and culturally acknowledged as gamers. Thus, when WomenGamers.com on their web site introduces the forum's merchandise, ranging from t-shirts to coffee mugs, with the rhetorical question “Tired of explaining to sales clerks that you’re not buying gifts for your boyfriend or husband?” we understand that it is based on an experience shared by many female players. Their slogan, “Because Women DO Play”, says it all.

The phenomenon of mothers who play has not previously been examined. A lot of games research has been limited to teenagers and young, mostly unattached women (Schott and Horrell 2000; Royce et al 2007; Jenson and de Castell 2008). Women with families usually play in a very specific socio-cultural situation. As we pointed out in a previous paper (Enevold & Hagström 2008), women in affluent Western society do, as a rule, not struggle to put food on the table, but they still seem to go home, as Arlie Russell Hochschild once put it, to a second shift (1989). One of the hard currencies in today's society is time, and gaming takes time from other everyday activities. For mothers these include somewhat different tasks and roles than it does for women without children. One of these roles is being the domestic guardian. Women, especially when they enter into relationships and have children, are still assumed to take the main responsibility for organizing the domestic sphere including upholding routines, cultural traditions, social relations and fostering the kids. Among these ‘duties’ have been policing the play activities of others; mothers are said to complain, apart from calling the game companies about their no-good games (Cassell & Jenkins 1998), about their children watching too much television or playing too much videogames (Kerr 2003). Thus, a mother who plays computer games challenges cultural norms, claiming time for an unproductive activity only for her, acts in contradiction to what the concept of “mother” implies.

Turning our interest to this group of players we tap into the area of gender roles, family time management and issues of equality. Our project, “Gaming Moms”, aims to examine the role of gaming in families where the mother is an avid gamer. Female gamers with families play in distinct situations involving normative gendered ideas of family roles, time and place. Games, seen as personal time-consuming pleasures, may cause conflict

with other everyday activities. Gaming moms do not stereotypically support or deny the gaming of the rest of the family; they join and engage in the gaming themselves. But how is this role negotiated and contested, what does the fact that the mother is a gamer mean to the structure of everyday life? How do gaming moms juggle time, play and family life?

Aiming to illustrate how gaming must be understood as an aspect of everyday culture, affecting and involving not only the actual players, we will in the following section use these two themes – perceptions and management of time and representations of gaming moms – as examples when describing our methodology. We believe applying several strategies and combining various methods is crucial for understanding the situations in which gaming moms play and live, and how the fact that they are at the same time both mothers and players affects their experiences. After accounting for our methods, we will resume our methodological discussion and conclude.

METHODS FOR STUDYING GAMING MOMS: TIME AND REPRESENTATIONS

TV, MUSIC VIDEO, GAME ADVERTISEMENTS

As part of the methods that we in our project have ranged under the bigger heading of discourse analysis, we are always on the lookout for representations of mothers in the context of gaming. One notable case that reflects the dominant picture of mothers as non-playing beings is the *Southpark* episode # 1008, “Make Love, Not Warcraft” where a mom is remarkably supportive towards her gaming son and his friends and brings him both food and potty whenever demanded during an extended session of *World of Warcraft*. Another case is the music video “Vi sitter i Ventrilo och spelar DotA” by Swedish DJ Basshunter in which an incredulous and irritated mom angrily complains over her son and his friends doing nothing but play computer games all day long.⁵ One of the initial inspirations for our project was actually our sighting of a mom that supposedly was gaming in an advertisement by Microsoft, a cartoonish picture of a smiling woman holding a videogame console. The picture featured in a campaign launched around Mother’s Day 2007 that encouraged children to enter a writing competition where the best story about a “gaming mom” would win an Xbox 360 Elite.⁶ The woman is drawn with a characteristic 1950’s hairdo, a pearl collier, make-up and spotless apron seemingly the perfect housewife. We have analyzed this picture in greater detail elsewhere (Enevold & Hagström 2008), but, in essence, what this and all of the above mentioned representations tell us is that a lot of the mothers in the popular gaming discourse still are rather traditionally portrayed.

⁵ DotA (Defence of the Ancients) is a custom map of a game called *Warcraft III*; Ventrilo is a so called voice-over-IP program that enables players to talk to eachother while playing games online.

⁶ <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/community/events/mymomsagamer/default.htm>

NEWS ARTICLES AND BLOGS

Included in the discourse analysis is also scanning news articles and blogs on a daily basis using keywords such as “mom” and “mother” in combination with “gaming”, “computer games”, “Wii”, etc. As was indicated above, the content analysis of the material so far reveals that “gaming mom” here most often is equivalent to “hockey mom”, which does *not* mean a mom who plays hockey. The hockey mom was recently glorified by Governor Sarah Palin’s portrayal of herself as “your average hockey mom” (Welin 2008): she drives the kids to games and washes their gear, takes pride and invests time in her family but does not play herself. By invoking the concept of the hockey mom Palin tried to present herself as a responsible ordinary mom, but in the process reinforced the stereotypical view of the mother as supportive – even if she is a successful politician or businesswoman. The dominant interpretation of “gaming mom” we have found so far seems to go hand in hand with this view. Another example of the supportive mom was found in the line to a game shop on the night of the release of the latest expansion to the game *World of Warcraft*; a teenage boy queuing outside was asked by a journalist whether he didn’t get cold standing there? No, not a problem, the boy answered, mom has been here with hot chocolate and saffron buns (Lundell & Mattsson 2008).

But are there then no moms who play games themselves? Well, when a mom who games appears in media it is often as a member of a family or a group rather than as a single individual: she is implicitly included in games directed to families or in articles on gaming in family life. The author of the blog “Ancient Gaming Noob” (2009) tells a story of how his mother started playing with him and his daughter and many of the replies speak of parents “drafted” to play online to bridge long distances. A games journalist writes on the website *straight.com* about the game *World of Goo*: “Rarely does a game come along that appeals to both casual and hard-core gamers alike”. He concludes his article by emphasizing: “This is a game you can introduce to your mother. With its delicious atmosphere, simple controls, and inventive gameplay, it’s very easy to recommend *World of Goo*” (Bassett 2009). Thus, a gaming mom is seen as somebody who requires simplicity and she is the implied “soft-core” player playing short games. This is one way the concept of time is related to mothers – mothers need shorter games. Nobody ever really questions why though. It is also incorporated in various articles, such as this from *Aftonbladet*: a 23-year-old new mother, who wants to lose weight, has problems finding time to work out having to care for her baby. Her solution is long walks with the pram and an audio book in combination with X-box *Dance Stage*. One hour on the dance mat, she explains, is more demanding than an hour of spinning at the gym (Berge 2007).

WEB FORUMS

Web forums are scanned on a regular basis. These include forums directed to games in general, such as *Games.Forum.com*, to specific games, such as *The Official World of Warcraft Forums*, and to female gamers, such as *WomenGamers.com*, as well as forums directed to parents such as *Familjeliv* [Family Life]. In all of them we have found various representations of mothers: as passionate gamers, as ignorant adults, as forbidding guardians, as caring parents. An interesting approach is a post by a player in a gaming forum who suggests

fellow players to “Get your mum to draw the Lich King”, which is a creature in *World of Warcraft*. The response is massive and lots of drawings are posted, of which the majority is drawn by mothers who obviously have no idea of what the Lich King looks like but nevertheless happily have engaged with the task. There are also several posts in various forums related to time: one expectant mother writes about how she has found a way to be able to play and breastfeed at the same time with the help of a special pillow (see Enevold & Hagström 2008 for a more detailed account), while another one explains she has grabbed the chance to set her talent points while the kids are currently playing with their toys.

INTERVIEWS

So far, five interviews have been carried out, all with mothers in their 40’s. The games they play stretch from casual single player games on the PC, such as *Mahjong*, over online games like *Betapet* to multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*, requiring extensive cooperation and communication with others. They also play social TV-based console games such as *SingStar* and *Guitar Hero* as well as small and quick games on social sites like Facebook and on their mobile phones. Representations of gaming moms is one of the themes in the semi structured interviews, revealing that a majority of the informants consider themselves exceptions as they do not know any other mothers who play. One informant describes arguments going on in the in-game chat channels about playing mothers who are not considered to act “motherly” enough. These disputes concern, for instance, time management: in a *World of Warcraft*-guild some players have reservations about female powergamers who they think are spending too much time playing and thus neglecting their children. Time also features as a theme, as the informants sometimes feel they have to defend their gaming from others who judge it a waste of time or have to battle with themselves about the clash between play and household chores. But, some mothers also slot gaming into the schedule of domestic life without any obvious conflicts: they play short games while cooking, thus seemingly taking for granted the limits housework and family life set. Also, we noted that in order to make time for gaming, something else was cut back – often the time watching TV, not family life.

OBSERVATIONS

When “Wrath of the Lich King”, the latest expansion of *World of Warcraft*, was released the 13th of November 2008 an observation was carried out in Uppsala. Outside a game shop over 200 people lined up waiting for the doors to open at 00.00, the majority being young men in their early twenties. Walking along the queue and talking to several groups of people revealed different experiences of mothers and gaming: there were those who had mothers who did play themselves, those whose mothers found the whole idea of playing dubious, and those with mothers who did not play but who were genuinely interested in learning more about their children’s activities. Two people stuck out in the crowd: one was a mother waiting with her 13-year-old son and his friend, the other was a mother at the very front together with her husband and teenage son. Though obviously both were gaming moms, their relation to gaming was entirely different, representing the two concepts of the

gaming mom found in the discourse analysis. The first one did not play but was supportive of her children's play, emphasizing among other things how gaming had improved their English. A certain amount of control was, however, deemed necessary: one must find time to play not only *WoW* but football as well. A similar example of motherly encouragement could perhaps be the practice of the woman who is the Godmother of one of our children; she, who is an avid gamer, provides this boy and her other god children who play *WoW* with in-game presents, including game gold and mechanical animals, on their birthdays. The ritual of gift-giving has thus crossed the border into the virtual world – another sign of gaming becoming part of everyday cultural practice. To return to the other mother in line, she was an active and passionate player as was the rest of her family that she had been waiting together with for over 6 hours, well prepared with chairs and blankets. She nevertheless explained that her playing habits had changed over time and that today she had found a balance, in contrast to some time ago, when she felt she played too much which led to consequences for her family. To her, playing *WoW* involves a lot of communication and she often comes to take the role of nurturing and motherly listener, sometimes spending a considerable time not actually playing but listening to other players in need of counseling or just someone to talk to.

PARTICIPATION, OBSERVATION, CO-PLAY

Besides observations of events such as the one described above we also work with participant observations, both offline and online. These include playing together with our informants, thus being able to observe, as ethnologists and anthropologists often have acknowledged, the gap between what people say they do and what they actually do. A very telling study was recently concluded by Williams et al. (2009) who had permitted access to the game-time logs of several thousand players of the game *Everquest*. One of the big surprises was the discovery that women severely underreported their time played. Similarly, an observation may reveal that an informant who states there is no conflict between play and family life, or who on the contrary says she seldom finds time for gaming, in fact is playing more or in a very different situation than what she states in an interview. Methods thus need to complement one another, sometimes in unanticipated ways. Our intention is not to question the gaming mother's experiences but to analyze the circumstances under which she plays and to understand her interpretations of what is and what is not happening. This also includes playing ourselves, in the process performing an auto-ethnography. Following the discussions going on in general chat of an MMOG, or talking to fellow players, lets us understand the diverse conditions under which different players participate that may not be easily accessible by other methods. The same relates to in game-experiences of playing together with a group of other players. It can happen that one player suddenly has to leave, or that you (the researcher) have to, because a child needs to be attended to. The reactions of others and the feelings of the player cannot be thoroughly understood without the researcher having experienced it.

BLOGGING

At an early stage we decided to set up a blog, “Gaming Moms: Juggling Time, Play and Family Life” (2008), as a means for communicating with our informants. It is used for sharing information, reporting on how the project progresses and for posting the most interesting or relevant articles related to mothers and gaming that we find through our examination of forums, news articles and blogs. Next, our plan is to set up an online survey on mothers and gaming, drawing on our findings from interviews, web discussions, news articles etc. Since the project aims at examining the specific situation of mothers, a group of players who seldom is recognized as *players*, we find that recounting and sharing our clips and thoughts through the blog is both important and productive. Mother or not, a visitor to the blog should gain some understanding of the interrelation of gaming, motherhood and everyday life.

PLAYING ANALYSIS

Our view is that to be able to understand, interpret and analyze the place gaming has in the everyday life of our informants we must place ourselves in their position. Playing Analysis (Aarseth 2003) that was first mentioned in the beginning of this article to a large extent concerns being acquainted with the game itself, its semiotics and mechanics; how does the game work, what can be done, what does it look like and what features does it contain? Do you plant flowers or shoot terrorists? Do you conquer continents or solve riddles? Do you play alone or together with others? Do you have to use devices other than a mouse such as a board, a guitar, a nunchuk, a steering wheel, a laser gun? All these elements affect gameplay and consequently the gamer and her experience. Nevertheless, playing analysis is also related to participant observation in-game and co-play as discussed above. Classic ethnographic methods such as participant observations—through play—can thus be seen not only as one of several possible methods but as paramount. As Aarseth points out, “informed game scholarship must involve play, just like scholars of film and literature experience the works first hand, as well as through secondary sources” (2003:3). He also states that “what takes place on the screen is only partly representative of what the player experiences” (ibid).

In the interviews the women name a lot of different games that they play. It is important to be aware of the characteristics of these games, how they function, what kind of demands they put on their players. As indicated, there is a huge difference between playing a round of the single-player game *Sudoku Master* on a Nintendo DS in bed while feeding your baby or alone, and participating in so called end-game raiding in an online game investing many hours. In short, we play to understand the informants’ accounts of how, when and why, they play.

CONCLUSION

When you find a picture of a young woman among birthday greetings and wedding pictures on the family pages of a daily newspaper with the text “Congratulations on level 80”, which refers to the highest level a

player can reach in *World of Warcraft*, you know that games and gaming are becoming routine activities integrated into contemporary social life and everyday culture (*Göteborgsposten* 2008).

In their article on ethnographic approaches to the internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC), Garcia et al posit that ethnographers who are faced with the “current blending of online and offline worlds” are required to incorporate CMC and the Internet “to adequately understand social life in contemporary society” (2009: 53). The new media requires the researcher to learn new skills, among them: textual and visual analysis; impression management, that is presenting oneself properly on websites, through e-mail communication and chats and to take into consideration the different ethical demands these contexts pose. The cultural competence these environments may require a researcher to acquire, in order to at all gain access, may also include learning new technology. A similar claim about ethics and impression management, “establishing online presence” in relation to using blogs as empirical sources, is made by Hookway (2008). It is also important to remember what Nancy Baym emphasizes. She states that studying website texts and images is not enough, interviewing people is a must, or, in some way, having “access to their points of view” (2006:85). When studying games all these points become necessary to take into consideration in a number of ways – belonging to a guild or a clan in a game, or to a forum community may alleviate access; knowing how to communicate through IRC or the voice chat program Ventrilo (which a lot of game clans require their members to use), recognizing what a game bot is or how to ban a player from a game means possessing cultural and technological competencies that help in accessing, understanding as well as interpreting players’ realms of practice. As Williams (2005) and Baym (2006) have pointed out and Garcia et al.'s survey confirm, multiple strategies vouch for higher quality studies. "Multi-method, multi-theoretical approaches" is the best way to "advance understanding" (Williams 2005: 458).

In our study we will employ as many methods as we deem necessary and possible to adequately graph our subjects multidimensionally. Here we have accounted for some of them. Nevertheless, in our endeavor to understand the everyday experiences of gaming mothers we will implement even more; among these are diary-keeping. A small number of participants will get to choose a recording instrument of their choosing, whatever tickles their fancy: video, audio, writing or collage-making (Mikkelsen 2008; Sotamaa et al 2005). We will also throw pizza parties, a kind of group interview, inspired by Sherry Turkle (1995) who would always interview as many as possible of the people she first had only interacted with online. This is not necessarily the order of recruitment in our project where some of the women we have interviewed will be asked to participate in such a game and pizza meeting. As we mentioned above, mothers who play often do not know any other mothers who play. Pizza parties thus have manifold potential outcomes—meetings such as these can be consciousness-raising, they generate new insights for the researcher as well as the participants and, perhaps, lead to new friends and networks, to name a few. We are also considering experimenting with co-constructed narratives working with the entire family of the gaming mom.

To study gaming mothers means taking on several fields at once. Similar to Nieborg and Hermes who in a recent theme issue on games of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2008:11) wrote that the history of the

development of cultural studies should serve to inspire game studies to “remain open-minded and not get bogged down in untimely orthodoxies”, and cultural studies to learn from game studies how to be truly interdisciplinary, we see that game studies and ethnography need to learn from one another. This will generate high quality studies of game culture, a culture in which reaching level 80 now seems to have become a rite of passage worthy of ceremony and celebration.

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