

# Gamers' perception and management of online/offline friendship ties

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# Introduction

Preliminary results from an ongoing study of 241 online gamers trace the boundaries and intersections of their online and offline social networks. Interviews with 14 of these gamers elicited reflexive narratives of their top three online, and top three offline friendships.

# Research Questions

- How meaningful are the social ties gamers develop and manage online vs their offline counterparts?
  - How does the participant perceive these relationships and how does he/she manage his/her self-presentation when interacting with each network (offline-online)?
  - When it comes to making new social ties, what are the pros and cons of online relationships?

# Background

- Society is embedded in digital culture (Gere 2008) and that its citizens can be considered “digital natives.”
- “[G]aming forms an important part of (at least some) peoples’ everyday lives and identities” (Crawford et al. 2011:6).
- Social dynamics in online gaming are remarkably robust and similar to real-world communities (Jiang, Zhou and Tan 2009, Johnson, Zhao, Xu et al. 2009, Szell and Thurner 2010)
- The way groups form in-games is similar to way we assemble project teams in real life (Zhu, Huang and Contractor 2013).
- Gamers are loyal to their social networks (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell et al. 2007, MacCallum-Stewart 2011, Taylor 2006).
- Chan and Cheng (2004) Their findings suggest that time is the most important factor when it comes to online or offline friendships, but they make note that online friendships take more time to develop.

<b>Variables &amp; Categories</b>	<b>Mean/Median/Range/%</b>	<b>(SD)</b>
<b>Age (in year)</b>	<b>23.79/20/18-47</b>	<b>(7.82)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
<b>Male</b>	<b>78.6%</b>	
<b>Female</b>	<b>21.4%</b>	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
<b>White non-Hispanic</b>	<b>57.1% (8)</b>	
<b>Black non-Hispanic</b>	<b>7.1% (1)</b>	
<b>Latino/Hispanic</b>	<b>14.3% (2)</b>	
<b>Asian</b>	<b>14.3% (2)</b>	
<b>Middle Eastern</b>	<b>7.1% (1)</b>	
<b>Wk. Playtime MMOs</b>		
<b>Every day</b>	<b>35.7% (5)</b>	
<b>2-6 times</b>	<b>57.1% (8)</b>	
<b>Less than once</b>	<b>7.1% (1)</b>	
<b>Years Playing MMOs</b>		
<b>4 to 6</b>	<b>21.4% (3)</b>	
<b>7 to 10</b>	<b>35.7% (5)</b>	
<b>11 or more</b>	<b>42.9% (6)</b>	

# Method

- The research design was based on Elisa Bellotti's (2015) qualitative approach to social networks.
- Used previously collected network data to elicit participants to construct narratives, "meaning, history and dynamics of friendship" (Bellotti 2015:77) regarding their network without heavy interference from the researcher.
- Employing this combination of methods "allows observing and measuring at the same time the formal structures of networks and the content and dynamics of these structures" (Bellotti 2015:77).

# Approach - Thematic Analysis

- Deductive – Some concept were pre-developed according to literature and assumptions.
- Inductive – More codes were added as familiarization with the data began.

# Major Themes

- Comparison Online vs. Offline SN
  - Making new connections
  - Meaningfulness of relationships
  - Participants' self-concept
  - Game Genre and development of ties



# Female 18 -MMORPGs

Sometimes when I'm online, like, **I feel like I'm extroverted. Like, I feel like I want to talk to people**, and, you know... Like, **meet new people** and whatever. Like, find new people to, like, play with. But, like **in real life, like, I usually, like... Like, keep to myself.** I'm not really, like, seeking other people to talk to. Like... Like, online, I definitely, like, want to talk to people. Like, I want to get in Discord and be like, "Hey, what's up"? And then, like, in real life, I'm like, "Uh, don't look at me."

"[...]I'd say I'm more comfortable talking online than outside... Just because **I feel like I'm close to my online... online friends.**"

# Male 19 - MOBAs

“There's **so many people I've met like just by playing games**, that I **would never have met in my life** if I didn't. Like JJ is from Arizona. I mean I was born and raised in Connecticut. I would have never met somebody from Arizona, or like ST is in California. It's like I never would have met him if I didn't play video games. There's **a ton of people** that it's like, you know. That's why I guess the online connections are a little more, **they're more impactful to me**. Because, that's something that people that don't do stuff like that [gaming]... they're missing out on. It's like their like group, their **social circle is extremely limited to their location**. And for a lot of people that game, that's not really a problem.”

# Male 27 – FPS/ Third- Person Shooters

“I feel like the **communities are just completely different like FPS** people are like douche bags...Yeah, like, you know what I'm saying. But like **people in RPGS**, you know, like when I was playing TERA. When I played TERA that was the first time I like really got into a community because there's these people, and like they saw that I was like doing okay, and they're like hey you want to join the guild? And then they like introduced me to like Vent and stuff and they're like hey we get on every, you know, day at this time, if you want to play with us and I... So, it's just two completely different communities in my opinion so...”

# Male 19 - FPS/ Third-Person Shooters

**“I made a great friendship in real life because of Smite. Like, I’ve met [J], and I could have met [C] over Spring Break cause he came from [FL] where I live for Spring Break. But, it was just... I was with [B - girlfriend] a lot, and it was... There’s no parking during Spring Break, so I couldn’t drive out and see him. But, I have made a friend off Spring Break, and I plan on seeing him again, probably going to New York to see him. So, I don’t know. There’s a lot of benefits that Xbox has provided for me.**

# Female 18 - FPS/ Third-Person Shooters

“I think it **takes much longer offline**. Because **online you can contact them at any time** and then they'll respond when they can. But, offline, like if, um, we all have classes. And our schedules conflict with each other and maybe you only have a certain window to talk to that person.”

## Female 23 - MOBAs

“[...]online I can be myself more. It’s hard for me to meet people that like my interests offline, because I’m always online, and, like, the other people are always online. So, that’s, like, how, like, I had a feeling that I’d meet my boyfriend online... Because, I don’t meet guys, like, outside of my computer. And so, it’s just I’ve gotten used to this, making friends online, and it’s usually, like, older guys that just have been gaming for a while, and, like... They’re, like, wise and they act like my fathers, and they, like... I don’t know. They’re, like, the coolest guys and it’s just... They’re not so materialistic, or, like... They’re not... They’re just... They’re, like, gamers. They’re... They’re hard to find.”

## Female 18 -MMORPGs

“I’d say I present myself, like, more honestly online, but also, like... In a real life, like, I... Like, I maintain my cool, you know. I’m, like, collected. I’m calm. But, like, online I’m just like, “Hey, guys. What’s up? Ah.” Like, excited, crazy, loud, and, like... Like, that is, like, who I am, but, like, I feel like, online, like, it’s less, like, restrained. Like, I just, like, say whatever I want. Like, it doesn’t matter. Whatever.”

# Takeaways

- Interaction time is a main factor for developing meaningful relationships.
  - Technology has made it possible to interact more often.
- Game genre seem to have an effect on the development of strong or weak ties.
  - Games with a slower pace and a strong requirement for cooperation, makes it easier for relationships to develop.
- The virtual aspect of the participants' lives provides a space for self exploration, and makes it easier for self-proclaimed introverts to make new meaningful ties.
- Options for new ties online are limitless. Some offline ties are maintained due to physical proximity.

# Limitations and Next Steps

- Most of the interviewed participants were between the ages of 18-19. The questionnaire had a more distributed age range.
  - Mean: 32.7 Median: 28 Range: 18-76 SD: 12.67
- Only three female participants accepted to be interviewed.
  - Questionnaire distribution was Male 64% - Female 36%
  - Gender stigma and related topics require more attention.
- Further in-depth analysis is needed, using both the questionnaire answers and the interviews.