

On behalf of society? The potential of online gaming worlds for public value, social capital and civic engagement.

Computer games were traditionally seen as an intense leisure activity and a typical form of entertainment media that could involve considerably negative consequences. On the other hand, recent studies have shown that computer games, because of their potential for interactive play, can be seen as a form of media based communication having significant influence on everyday life and processes of identity. Because of their manifold and complex possibilities for both interpersonal as well as public communication and the resulting selection, transmitting and appropriation of information, particularly online computer games and their virtual game worlds form a communication environment that constitutes public spheres of similar significance and functionality as mass media does, especially with reference to the life circumstances of younger players. As current research results on the converging media world amongst youth show, computer games are increasingly considered as one of the central components of the mediatization processes of society. More and more, computer games are becoming therefore relevant for processes of public communication and public connection. Based on these findings and referring especially to the case studies of MMORPGs and e-sport, current studies claim that mediatized 'playgrounds' of online computer games have the potential of establishing social capital, and hence provide an opportunity for social involvement and participation (e.g. Ducheneaut et al. 2007, Steinkuehler & Williams 2006). Under specific circumstances, computer games can be considered as "social media", creating new socio-politically relevant platforms of interaction ("third place") (Oldenburg 1991).

This lecture presents a critical overview of current findings of research corresponding to this topic, which has, up to this point, mostly focused on theoretical approaches and descriptions of game characteristics and rarely on the sense of the gamers. In a second step, several empirical case studies are presented in order to discuss whether the "semi-real" (Juil 2005) communicative networking environment of online gaming and the associated gaming culture revitalize the 'third place' concept, and hence assume important social functions for (media) society, beyond their intrinsic nature of entertainment media. Ultimately, this could help answer the question whether online gaming worlds resemble "pseudo communities" or could be seen as "neoliberal utopias" (Kücklich 2009) in which both traditional as well as modern forms of social and cultural differences are manifested. While literature exclusively examined MMORPGs so far with their prominent examples, *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*, other manifestations of virtual gaming worlds are additionally empirically examined like e.g. the manifold gaming communities of the international browser game *Hattrick*. The case studies demonstrate which effects certain gaming habits can have on the sense of political engagement in real as well as virtual life (e.g. willingness to demonstrate or protest). On the one hand, these findings indicate how the potential of virtual (gaming) worlds for socio-politically oriented processes of participation and engagement can contribute to a change of perspective for the public discourse on computer games. On the other hand, based on the findings I will present possibilities and challenges how commercial providers of gaming worlds can incorporate and/or improve the development of social capital and political engagement within the context of the gaming experience.

References:

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