

Gaming Capital in Contemporary Role-playing Game Platforms

Abstract: Gaming capital: a fifteen-year-old theory detailing how one’s gaming knowledge can be conceptualized into something tangible. In her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, Consalvo (2007) presented the term gaming capital to give a name and meaning to the collective understanding of both the individual player and the communities that entail the discussions about the game, genre, or the platform – including topics like knowledge, experience, and skill. Yet, there has not been much scholarly attention given to where one would situate gaming capital between cultural and symbolic capital, and where social capital would influence the transformation of knowledge to gaming capital. The discussion about gaming capital has been more about what it is, and what can be or cannot be gaming capital, but what steers gaming capital as an entity at their disposal has not been studied enough yet. The world of gaming has moved massively forwards in fifteen years, and the whole concept of what “gaming” is has subsequently changed, not only within the online multiplayer video game scene, but within analogue role-playing games too. Both mediums have their ways of accumulating and spending capital, and not everything is different in terms of gaming capital. Therefore, this study approaches the formation of gaming capital within both Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) and *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) through information flow and social space perspectives.

Keywords: gamer capital, role-playing games, tabletop, MMORPGs, cultural capital, symbolic capital

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1. INTRODUCTION

Players’ own motivations and approaches to any given game play loop or session steer their in-game actions. Collectively, for this study’s purposes, the extra-game, or meta-game, things and variables that bleed into games and game play sessions is defined as, and through, the concept of *gaming capital*. Consalvo (2007) in her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, presented the term gaming capital to give a name and meaning to the collective understanding of both the individual player and the communities that entail the discussions about the game, genre, or the platform – including topics like knowledge, experience, and skill. Yet, there has not been much scholarly attention given to where one would situate gaming capital between cultural and symbolic capital, and where social capital would influence the transformation of knowledge to gaming capital. The discussion about gaming capital has been more about what it is, and what can be or cannot be gaming capital, but what steers the gaming capital that an entity has at their disposal has not been studied enough (for studies about types of capital in video games see e.g., Korkeila 2021; Korkeila and Hamari 2020). The world of gaming has moved massively forwards in fifteen years, and the whole concept of what “gaming” has subsequently changed, not only within the online multiplayer video game scene, but also within analogue role-playing games. Both mediums have their ways of accumulating and spending capital.

More specifically, this study conducts a comparison of the affordances for accumulating gaming capital in analogue and digital settings through the game mechanics and games’ social spaces. With the continuously rising interest towards all kinds of gaming, this study highlights that while medium, physical space, and social affordances vary, they can be approached and compared in a controlled manner. For this study, it is gaming capital, even if its original domain was video game playing and players of video games, because analogue game players are equally gamers. There is a need to bridge and combine different domains of the same activity in order for academia, players, and developers to better understand many of these underlying variables affecting the information and knowledge surrounding gaming. Shortly put, this study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

Research question 1: How is gaming capital present in role-playing spaces?

Research question 2: What are the overlaps and clear differences related to gaming capital between analogue and digital spaces?

2. BACKGROUND, LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this study and to further contextualize the research aims, it is necessary to shortly situate the following concepts: gaming capital; role-play; analogue and digital spaces; and affordances in said spaces. Gaming in this study refers to the act of active gameplay, meaning everything that happens before or after the game play session is largely ignored here. This ensures a more comparable setting between the analogue and digital spaces. Active gameplay is naturally different between the spaces, and thus this study will mostly disregard the variance the interfaces bring to the gameplay. Interfaces in this case are printed character sheets, rulebooks, mouse, keyboard, and mobile devices used to search web sites for information and so on. In short, gaming means the act of gaming and the social and rule-bound space that is in effect during it (Harviainen and Stenros 2021; Stenros 2015).

For the purposes of this study, gaming capital means the resources an individual gains or has at their disposal during the gaming session. This means linguistic capital, information gained through playing, or extra-game resources (rulebook, guides on the internet), and other types of knowledge that a player needs and utilizes during the gaming. Information types can refer to and include the knowledge of how a party's abilities synergize together by partaking in meta-level exchange of information; where enemies and party members are; what the enemies are capable of; and the pacing of the fights and other encounters. Gaming capital has been utilized in earlier studies as something that is accumulated and utilized outside the gaming through social interactions (Consalvo 2007; Molyneux et al. 2015; Mäyrä 2010; Walsh and Apperley 2008). For this study's purposes it is more meaningful to think of gaming capital as a very dynamic combination of social and cultural capital where one's role in the social space (dungeon master, role in group, raid leader, main tank, etc.) is the defining factor on how much access they have to new or updated information, as well as what kind of information they are allowed, or able, to share with others (e.g., Harviainen and Hamari 2015). Some types of information and other related aspects of gaming capital could be re-checked before or after the gaming to negotiate how to weed out possible ruling errors or find a way to approach certain encounters differently in the future.

In essence, role-play has different definitions and applications depending on the medium and space it is used and exercised in. In the gaming world, it is often connotated with having certain degrees of freedom to play the character in multiple ways. Alternatively, if the character is predetermined, or if the game permits it, the game can be played in different ways from the technical standpoint (Bowman and Schrier 2018). For games deeply invested in role-play, every player has their own head canon on the details of the story and the world, while the biggest events stay the same: tragedies of loved ones lost, entire civilizations doomed to extinction, and same obstacles to climb throughout the story regardless of playstyle choice. How, when, and why the player approaches the gaming are the points where the role-play starts to shine. There are numerous differences and similarities in the analogue and digital spaces when it comes to how the role-play is possible to be carried out. Certain games and settings allow more freedom for role-play while in others, it is reduced to loosely fit into the definition of the word. Likewise, group dynamics and "staying together as a party" may have a strong limiting effect on possibilities in tabletop role-play games (TTRPG). (Dashiell 2017.)

The analogue space is closed in the sense that once gaming is on, no new players are allowed to randomly join, and even more rarely in the middle of a game round (be it a round of *Kimble* (1967) for example). While the social space might be open, such as a cafe or bar, the gaming happens with

a predetermined number of players and with restricted access to that space. Additionally, the gaming itself can be very dynamic and free in its form of progression, but the play itself happens within this *magic circle* that has its own operating language and rules (see e.g., Giordano 2022; Stenros 2012).

Digital spaces, however, refer to all the gaming that happens inside the game world, regardless of if the player is idle or focusing on the most challenging content of the game. Especially in the worlds of MMORPGs, the gaming can take many forms, including just idling in the game, hunting for achievements, and so on (e.g., Lehdonvirta and Castronova 2014). Due to the nature of the MMORPGs the interactions with other players are much more open in the sense that the game world itself is a rather large sandbox, excluding certain limited missions (e.g., instances). In the huge sandbox, people can come and go at their own pace, do their own things, and even choose how to interact with other players, or avoid that completely if they feel like it. Yet, the gaming is more closed in the sense that only those who commit to the game and own or subscribe to it beforehand can join other players.

The affordances for gaming capital also vary, and that goes more into how the gamespace is created and what the rules imposed by the games themselves are for the gaming capital to be accumulated. The affordances in this study refer to the type of information that can be exchanged, from which sources the information can be gained, how the information can be used, how the social hierarchy is built, how dynamic the social hierarchy is, and where the lines between social aspects are thinnest.

3. THE COMPARISON

To focus on answering the research questions through examples in order to provide a better overview on how different and similar gaming spaces are, this section starts with a focus on presenting how gaming capital is present in MMORPGs, then in a *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* setting. It finally draws more direct comparisons.

3.1 Information and Games

MMORPGs are already a relatively old genre in gaming, and their popularity has been fluctuating ever since the early days of *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Ultima Online*, and *EverQuest*. The market of MMORPGs is currently dominated by *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, *Lost Ark*, and *Final Fantasy XIV*. MMORPGs, and various *D&D* variants, utilize their own terminology, some of which is shared with other games in the same genre. The linguistic terminology relates but is not limited to the names of classes, jobs, professions, skills, abilities, spells, items, places, and characters. How these are presented to the player and how players exchange comments and ideas between each game, and even the players themselves, have nuances. A game might press certain terminology to ensure that the connotation of the word, or concept, is conveyed properly to the player. The game world is designed in a way that its non-player character (NPC) inhabitants communicate with the player through these specific nuances in linguistics. It is up for the player to learn the “lingo” of the game, and thus enabling them to understand more of the discussions that happen between the players themselves in-game, and related forums. In the analogue setting it is up to the dungeon master to give cues to the players on the nuances of the communication in contrast to the static way of information conveying in digital setting.

Delving deeper into the uniqueness of games, each one has their own -- yet derived from earlier games or concepts -- terminology and language. For example, the gameplay of *Mansions of Madness* (2007) TTRPG is a derivation from *Dungeons & Dragons*, shares similarities such as dice rolls, character sheets, the role of the gamemaster steering the group, the number of players staying fixed after a campaign has started, and how dynamic the group’s progress through the story is. The rulebook for the *Mansions of Madness* in all its totality spans 44 pages on the documents titled “Learn to Play”

and “Rules Reference” with separate documents for expansions and other additions (Fantasy Flight Games 2016). It will take time for first timers and novices to master the basics of the rulesets and its possibilities. Once learnt, this knowledge that is now gaming capital can be transferred to some degree to other similar TTRPGs and *D&D* campaigns as the games within their genre share the terminology and functionalities. Similarly, this applies to MMORPGs as within their genre specific terminology essentially means the same, for example “tank” or “support.” Further, how games utilize and name their services differ. In *World of Warcraft* expandable storage is called a “bank” and is accessed through specialized NPCs, whereas in *Final Fantasy XIV* storage is tied to NPCs that each player can have two of for free and are referred to as “retainers.” Therefore, future games rely and reflect on the previous installments in the same genre making it easier for players to switch games, and to make the massive amount of information role-playing games have more digestible.

This is related to the information gained by playing the game. The game decides how and when certain pieces of information are made available for the players. This means that the game holds back vital information, until it makes sense to the players (Harviainen and Hamari 2015), be it the reveal of the true antagonist, betrayal, giving more meaning to certain words, or names of phrases that expand the game world’s story greatly. This therefore affects game-related information sharing, in order to avoid sharing or hearing spoilers (Sköld et al. 2015). Thus, the power struggle that is often tied to social capital is absent as such because the power is negotiated strictly between the rules of the game and the players. Meaning there is no relevant power play between different players or human actors for this study’s purposes, yet its existence must be acknowledged.

Information is usually given at two levels: extra- and intra-gaming. Starting with intra-gaming, in addition to the story and game world building through interactions with the NPCs, games give information through flavor texts that are sometimes part of an item’s description, the arrangement of items to depict death of a loved one, or a still steaming meal on the table with flipped over mug. Eavesdropping on NPCs as they interact with each other, listening to the music or other audio cues, and looking around the game’s sceneries are each more subtle ways to convey information to the players, be it giving hints of where to go, answers to underlying questions players might have, scale to the happenings, or weighing in on certain themes giving nuance to them.

Extra-game, which also includes the meta level, information means the exact numerical attributes of abilities. For example, with “fireball” the game tells these things through the tooltip, in some way or another: exact damage range, can it critically hit, possible casting time, can it be cast while moving, what is the “cooldown” period for it, what resource(s) it takes to cast the spell, any other possible effects. This is not an exhaustive list, but this is the information that the game world does not know, but the player does. The game world might refer to “fireball” as “one of the more destructive and potent spells mastered only by few.” Similarly, extra-game refers to any guidance officially supported, endorsed, or given by the game: guidebooks, exact sell value of items, the power level of items, what items drop from which areas, and so on (Consalvo 2017).

3.2 Information and the Gaming

When it comes to social spaces, the knowledge can be turned into social and maybe even symbolic capital, garnering gaming capital to the holder of knowledge, through reciprocal actions within the game space (see e.g., Lin 1999 and 2000 for discussion about social networks, capital, and inequality). In digital settings this can mean chatting in zone-wide channels, specific server-wide channels, guilds, parties, whispers, and to those in close proximity. In analogue settings this refers to the communication between the playing members and dungeon master. Showing off the tangible rewards from knowledge utilization, such as gear, titles, mounts, minions, and even a house, are ways to solidify one’s cultural

capital aspect as gaming capital (Harviainen and Hamari 2015). As mentioned above, the social space in MMORPGs includes everyone on the same server, or instance, of the game world, where it is possible to simultaneously be in the presence of hundreds of players, and it is just as easy to be in solitude.

Negotiation of the social space is different because “playing *WoW*” is not the same as “playing a *D&D* campaign” from the social viewpoint. “Playing *WoW*” is not guided gameplay, like a “*D&D* session” is (see e.g., Hendricks 2006; Mizer 2019). *World of Warcraft* and other similar MMORPGs have been in the past described as amusement park games (Aarseth 2008). In these games the player steps into the game world (amusement park) that is co-inhabited by others simultaneously, the player can choose how they go around the game world, with whom, at what pace, on what very select attractions they want to focus or do they want a taste of everything, and so on. Attractions refers to various activities that can be done: battling enemies in dungeons, raids, outdoors or instanced areas; battling other players in Player versus Player arenas; gathering resources on their own or with someone to share the mundane part (travelling from resource to another); honing their skills in professions such as carpentry and cooking; taking part in social events such as in-game weddings or other specialized happenings (role-playing within role-playing world); or just away from keyboard (“AFK”) somewhere in the amusement park and enjoying the alone time following others’ actions.

“Playing *D&D*” is guided gameplay with focused parts of the session between resupplying and gathering information at settlements, travelling to the quest location, and fighting enemies. Some sessions can include all of these, but some focus only on one or two of them. Session length in *D&D* is also pre-determined, making the claim “playing *D&D*” much more descriptive of what the gaming entails. There are greater limitations on the types of attractions one can do as in many ways the sessions are active participatory for the duration of it. However, there is more freedom on how the interactions happen, as they are more akin to following social interactions between the group members, the dungeon master, and the dice roll results.

The difference largely lies in how the gaming happens, and how the information is gained that is then turned into gaming capital. In digital settings the information from the game, and about the game, is often non-negotiable as items have their set prices that cannot be haggled, and so on. The story, the world, is largely static and pre-determined. Whereas in analogue settings, the information gained is more open to negotiation and often relies on the preparations the dungeon master has done; how the players interpret hints or haggle prices for items; and so on (Mizer 2019). While the gaming is more social in analogue setting, the main part of the story is still static: the main purpose of the campaign is predetermined, either following directly a pre-made campaign, adaptation of such, or maybe even a completely custom campaign. The exact “how” is more open to the player group and their dice rolls. In digital settings, the world is much more static on the “how” part, especially when it comes to interactions between the game and player (e.g., Lehdonvirta and Castronova 2014). In analogue settings the dungeon master often works as the “game” who decides what rules are followed etc. (Mizer 2019). Yet, in digital settings there is often more freedom on when and how one wants to partake into the story, and if they want to do the story alone or with others (see Ducheneaut et al. 2006). In analogue settings, the gameplay largely focuses on advancing the campaign in some form and often in cycling between information gathering, resource/item gain, travel, and battle phases.

4. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS

This study highlights how the socialness and information in game spaces operate from two different approaches, with select focus on comparable settings from the gameplay point of view. There are possibly more suitable focus pairs depending on the approach where different game genre or concepts are utilized. We have selected these two in order to showcase how even game types that use very similar types of information – in this case the quintessential role-playing game and a genre of digital games

strongly inspired by it – fundamentally differ as platforms for gaming capital. Further, the study wants to bring more attention to the concept of gaming capital, and the need to utilize it to further explain, explore, and exemplify the modern and contemporary gameplay spaces and settings. Additionally, this study touches very lightly on the limitation of the usage of gaming capital as a framework, especially its original conception, as there has been so much progress and evolution in both analogue and digital game spaces in the fifteen years since Consalvo's book (2007) was published. Still, the gaming capital stands true: it explains gaming subculture in more depth, by giving it a tangible touching point to outside and other theoretical concepts so as to study and investigate what gaming and gamers are.

This study highlighted some of the differences and similarities between analogue and digital game spaces regarding how the information flows, openness and closeness of the game space through the lens of gaming capital. Thus, this study brought forward the connectedness of analogue and digital game spaces, and that both should be approached with a similarly open mind when it comes to methodology and the choice of frameworks. There is, after all, a reason why many (MMO)RPG players have delved into *Dungeons & Dragons*, and one reason is the similarity in rules, progression, and communities.

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