

Gaming under pre-trial detention: At-risk youth and their digital leisure practices during remand

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the practices of young men engaging with digital leisure activities within the physical, social, and psychological setting of a Danish Juvenile Detention Center. The study of young men's digital play prevails in game studies, yet the experiences and lifestyles captured in over a decade of research on youth gaming practices are far from representative of the diversity of gamer lives. In view of this disparity, this exploration renders visible gaming practices from other kinds of life-situations, and from unconventional socio-structural conditions – otherwise unnoticed slices of digital play within a civil society (Foucault, 2008).

For the young men of this study, secure detention equates to a period of time under confinement while awaiting trial hearings and further placement decisions. The importance of contact with the "outside" was emphasized during our visits, where one of the boys was found having smuggled a mobile phone into his room. This was an incident that caused an aggressive (though performative) tantrum - emphasizing how frustrations can ramp up quickly, and as such strict rules and a notion of fairness are salient parts of the experience of navigating in this space. Under these circumstances, the duration of the stay is often a tumultuous period of extreme uncertainty and boredom, which makes it challenging to distinguish normal and abnormal adolescent cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Rossen & Nielsen, 2013). Despite the efforts of the personnel to create an active club-like environment for those under confinement, the tedium and listlessness of daily life is prevalent. In this vacuum the PlayStation 3 becomes a scarce resource and a focal point of much of the interaction between the youths. But how is this situated digital gaming moment experienced?

This is the circumstance, which we directly investigate, in this early study: the digital leisure practices of incarcerated at-risk youths who experience boredom as “a part of the walls” of their short-term way of life (Torbenfeldt Bengtsson, 2012). This early study

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looks at how play and, in particular, football are used as activities to promote flow experiences in the "free time" of the detainees. The digital and analog games put to work in the institution promote a clear attention to the rules of play and a closeness between otherwise distanced young men. With football as a social lubricant, these two themes become clear - rules of engagement as an articulated and necessary part of everyday gaming action, and a sense of play as caring and togetherness.

As an exploratory investigation, we look to examine gaming practices as they manifest themselves in this unique situation, which is full of contradictions. A setting where concerns about youth, violence and aggression in games are challenged. A period of time where gaming is a way of harnessing social capital as an alternative to former high-risk or otherwise unlawful endeavors; a situation where "leisure", detention, and boredom are a framework of play (Dam, 2002).

Keywords

Youth, gaming, detention, leisure, juvenile delinquency.

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