

Gaming as a social activity

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Abstract: Gaming – no matter, whether it's done analog or digital – is a social kind of activity. The gameslab of HTW in Berlin has made an investigation about Gaming in Germany. Some of the results of a representative survey are: Only 2 % of all Germans don't like to play analog or digital games; 95 % play at least occasionally board games, 43 % play at least occasionally video games or computer games; 74 % like "playing together with others, because it's communicative and interesting. Although there are many digital gamers preferring gaming lonely, there is a big number of them – which is increasing steadily – who prefer playing together with others and who use digital gaming as sort of social activity, social interaction and communication

Keywords: Games, impact of gaming, social activity

1 Introduction

The common image of digital gamers – especially as shown in German mass media and believed in by people, who are not playing digital games – is characterized by the following features:

- Gamers are boys or young men
- they like to play for themselves sitting in front of a personal computer or using a game console
- they have only few or any social abilities and activities
- they are potentially dangerous (amok) or getting addicted

Some typical photographs, related to this image¹:



Fig. 1. to 4. Typical photos of digital gamers in German mass media

Of course, most of us know not only pictures like these but real persons and settings quite similar to those shown here.

But is every digital gamer a „lonesome cowboy“ in front of a screen?

We wanted to know more about that and made a study representative for German population.

Who’s meant by „we“? We, that means the gameslab at the HTW – Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Technik – Berlin, University of Applied Sciences. The gameslab is a center for research about development, evaluation, impact and teaching of games, led by me, Carsten Busch, and my colleague Thomas Bremer, both of us professors in the programs of media & computing and interaction design / game design at the HTW. The gameslab is a cluster of studios for motion capturing, eye-tracking and perception research, game

development, and experimental interaction research.² The following Figure shows the structure of the gameslab cluster:

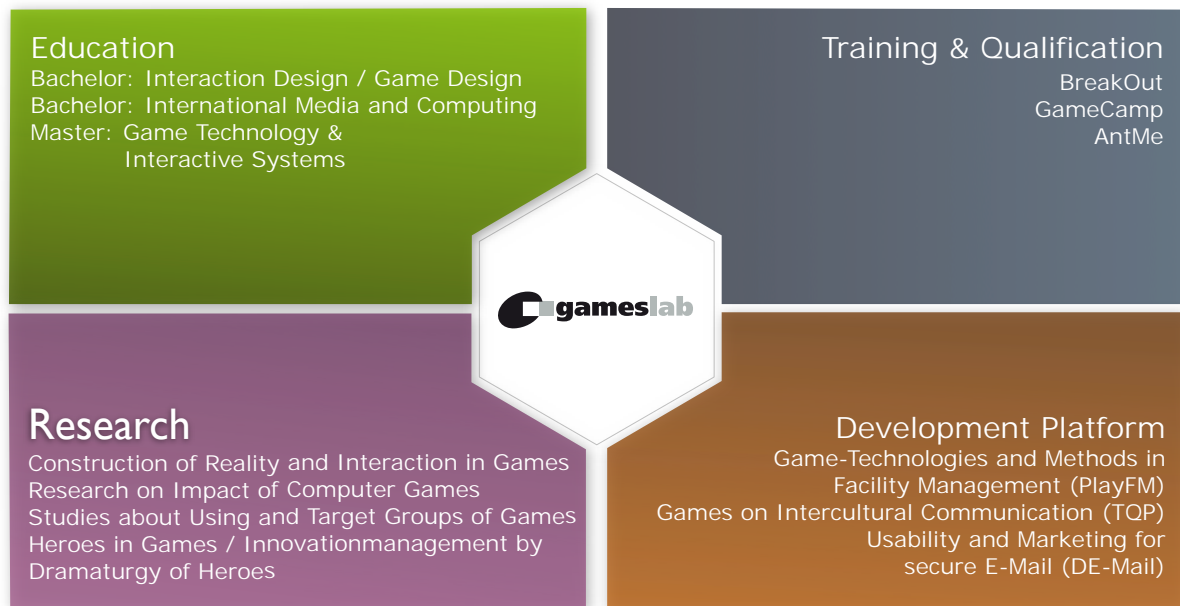


Fig. 5. Structure of gameslab cluster at HTW Berlin (source: gameslab)

One of our projects is called “Realitätsnähe und Symbolische Interaktion in Computerspielen und Online-Games” in which we did research about new target groups for gaming, the relationship between games industry and the development of hardware and software, and new kinds of business models in games industries. The project started in autumn 2007, ended in autumn 2009 and was funded by the German ministry of research (BMBF).

2 The study “Gaming in Germany” - Settings

Based on the results of the project “Construction of Reality and Interactin in Games” we made the study “Spielen in Deutschland” - “Gaming in Germany” which was co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund³.

Some of the main questions of the study “Gaming in Germany”:

- Who is playing games?
- What about playing non-digital games oder traditional games?

- What sorts of games do people play?
- Why do they play games?
- Are they playing with other or playing solely ?
- With whom do they play their games?
- Are they talking about?
- What kind of other media and activities are they used to?

The characteristics of the study were⁴:

- Topic: Gaming behavior of Germans
- Basic Population: German speaking persons living in private households up from 14 years
- Sample: 2.145 target persons
- Method: Putting the questions into forsa.omninet, which is a representative panel for German population from 14 to 69 years with about 20.000 persons
- In-home-questionnaire per pc or set-top-box combined with TV
- Time in the field: 25. of September to 13. of October 2009

The questions were divided into four parts: non-digital-gaming, digital gaming, media use (such as television, cinema, reading print media and others), socio-demographic features.

3 Results of the questionnaire “Gaming in Germany”

What are the results? First of all we learned that nearly everybody in Germany is playing games periodically: Board Games are the most popular kind of traditional game, played at least recently by 95 % of the Germans, followed by card games (85 %) and dice games (83%). The number of absolutely never gaming people is about 2 % – less than TV-deniers. The number of persons, who play at least recently digital games is about 43 %. So digital gaming is no longer an activity of a small group of persons but is getting a phenomenon concerning an increasing part of whole society as shown in Figure 6:

People play ...

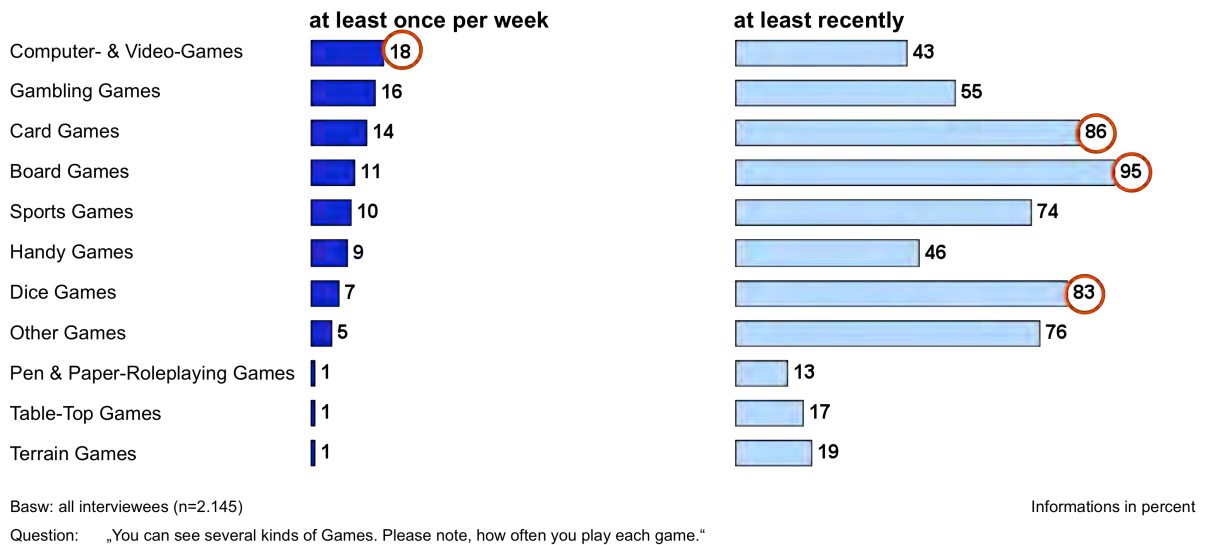


Fig. 6. What kind of game do people play – overview (source: gameslab)

Board games, card games and dice games are played most – if we stress on games played at least recently. Among the games played at least once per week the computer and video games have actually the leading position, followed by gambling games and card games: 18 % of German population play digital games at least once per week. Figure 7 shows a closer look on the details of the categories of games and how often they are played:

Gaming...

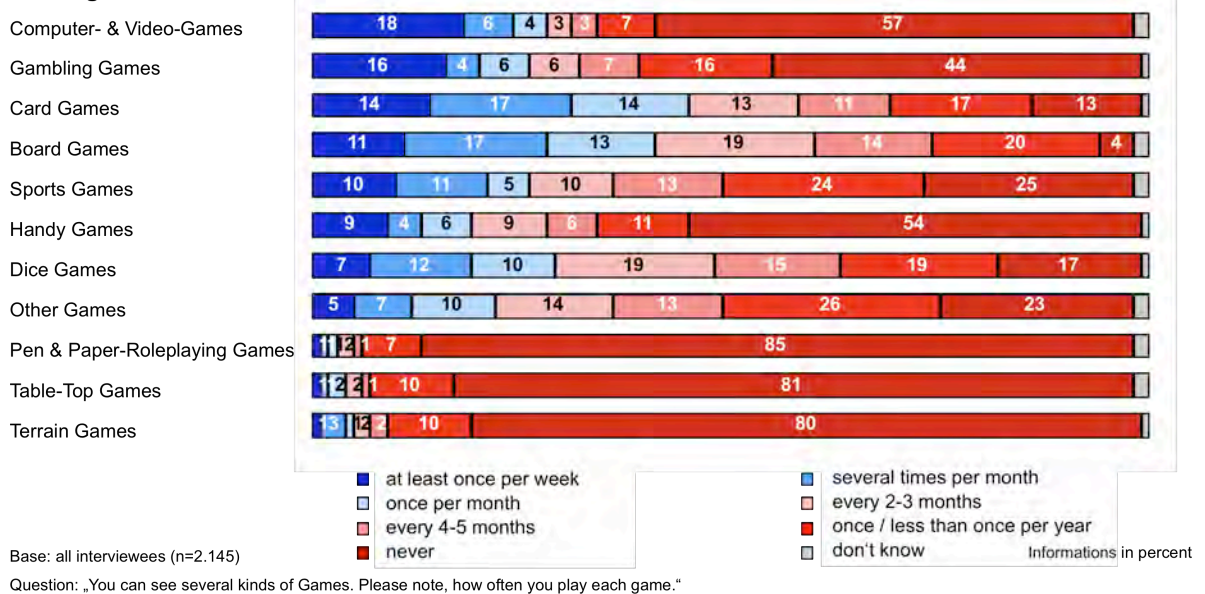


Fig. 7. What kind of game do people play – details (source: gameslab)

The most interesting feature here is that computer and video games seem to polarize: More than a half of German people never play digital games, but among them who play digital games there are the most “heavy gamers”, who play at least once per week. Figure 8 approves the fact, that digital gamers tend to play more often than other gamers:

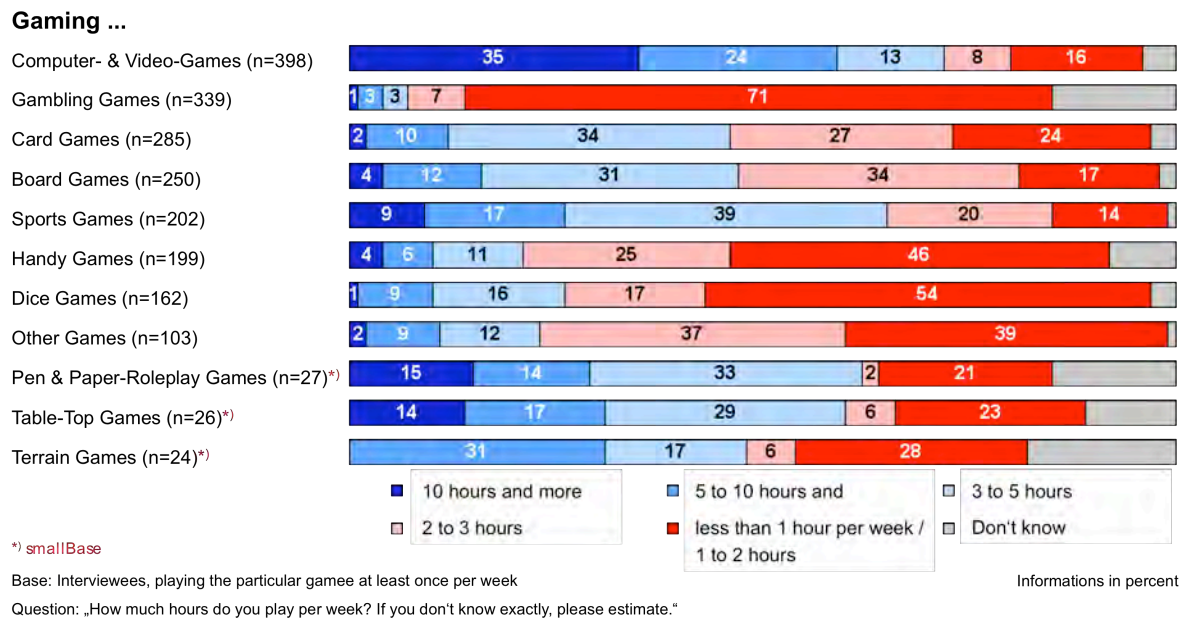


Fig. 8. How often do people play – details (source: gameslab)

Six of ten digital gamers play at least 5 hours per week, – more than a third of them

plays 10 hours a week or more. With that digital gamers tend to be the most intensive category of gamers. 5 or even 10 hours per week seems to be a lot of time for gaming, on the other hand it is quite few time in comparison with other media like television and radio: In 2009 the Germans elder than 14 years old were looking television 18,55 hours per week, listening to radio had the same volume.⁵

Knowing how often people play games the next question is: Where do they play? Television for instance is used mostly at home, in contrast radio is used mostly while listeners drive a car. Where people play games depends on, what they play, as shown in figures 9 to 11:

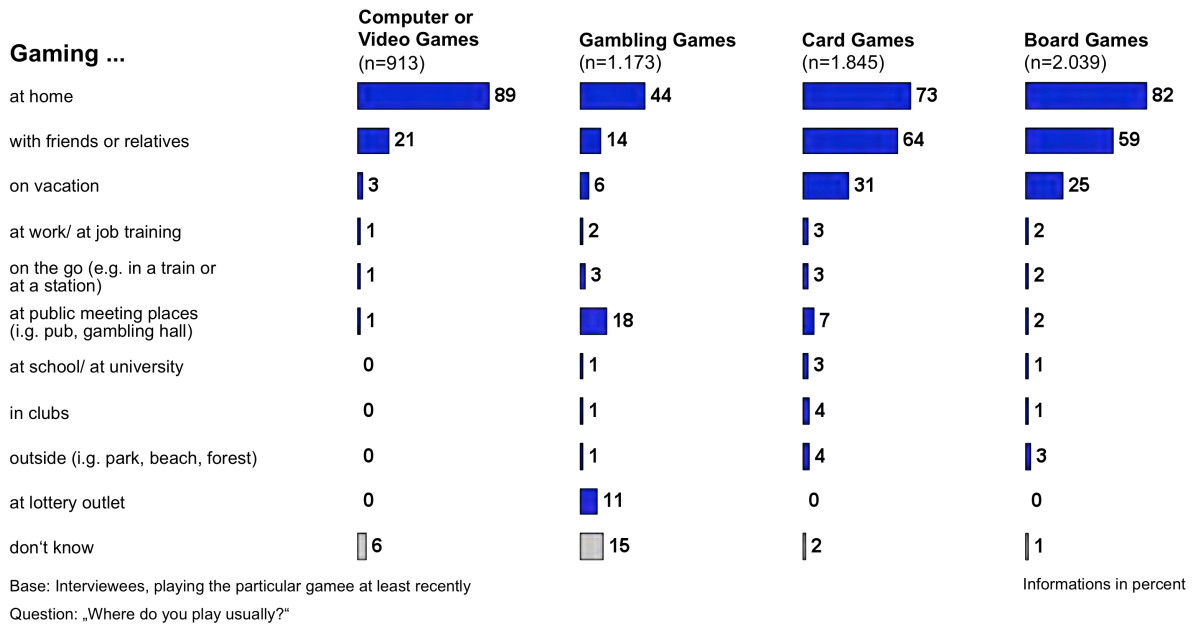


Fig. 9. Where do people play I (source: gameslab)

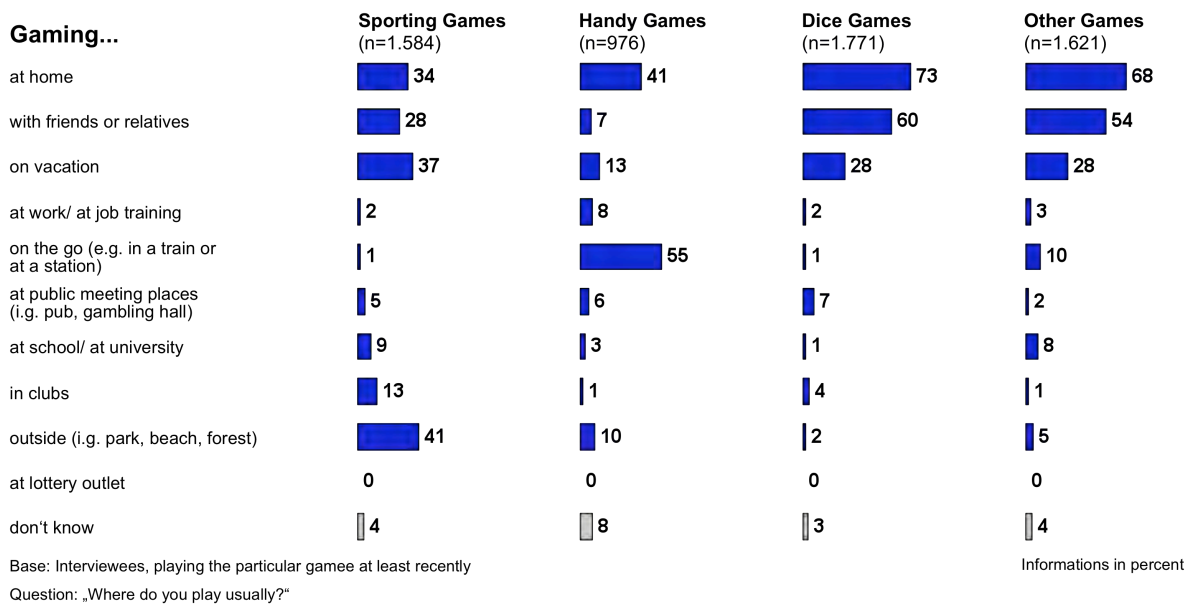


Fig. 10. Where do people play II (source: gameslab)

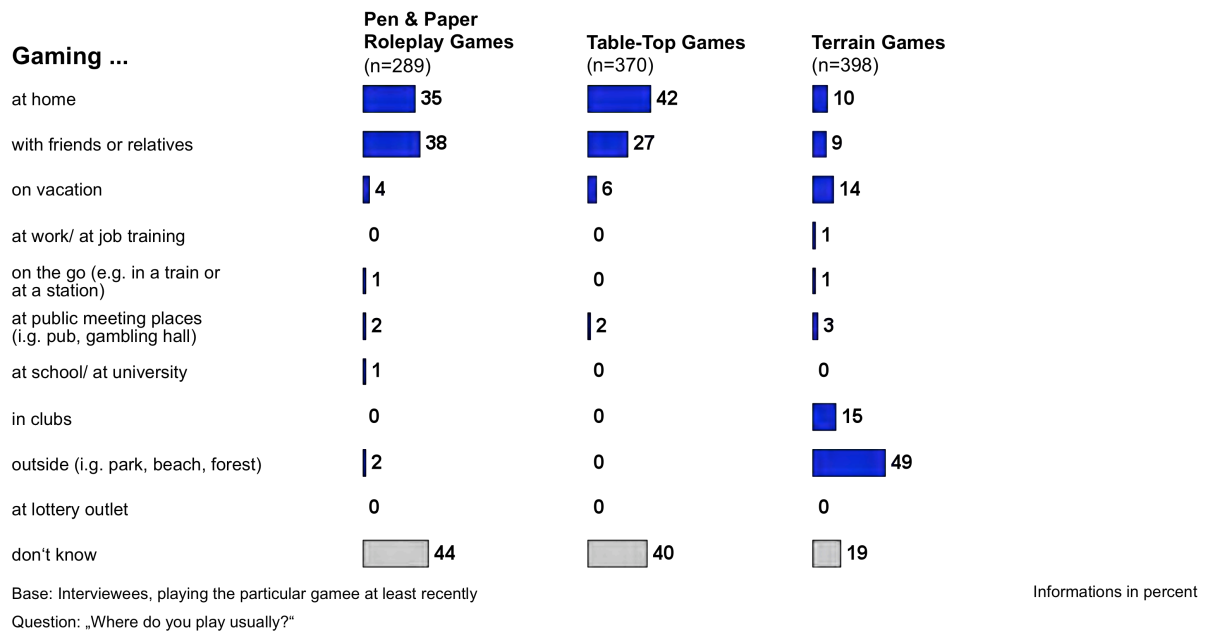


Fig. 11. Where do people play III (source: gameslab)

Some of the results we can see: Digital Games are mostly played at home, board games and card games are often played with friends and relatives at their homes; board games and card games are not accidentally called „social games“ (in German: „Gesellschaftsspiele“). Not surprising: sportgames are mostly played outside, Handy-Games are played on the move. Pen & Paper-Roleplaying-Games and Table-Top-Games are mostly played at home or with friends and relatives at their homes.

Interesting might be the fact, that anyhow 21 % of digital gamers like to play with friends and relatives at their homes. One of our theses at gameslab observing trends of gaming is, that this is a greater number of „social“ gamers than in former years.

The following figure 12 shows, that especially younger digital gamer play much more often in social context than the elder ones:

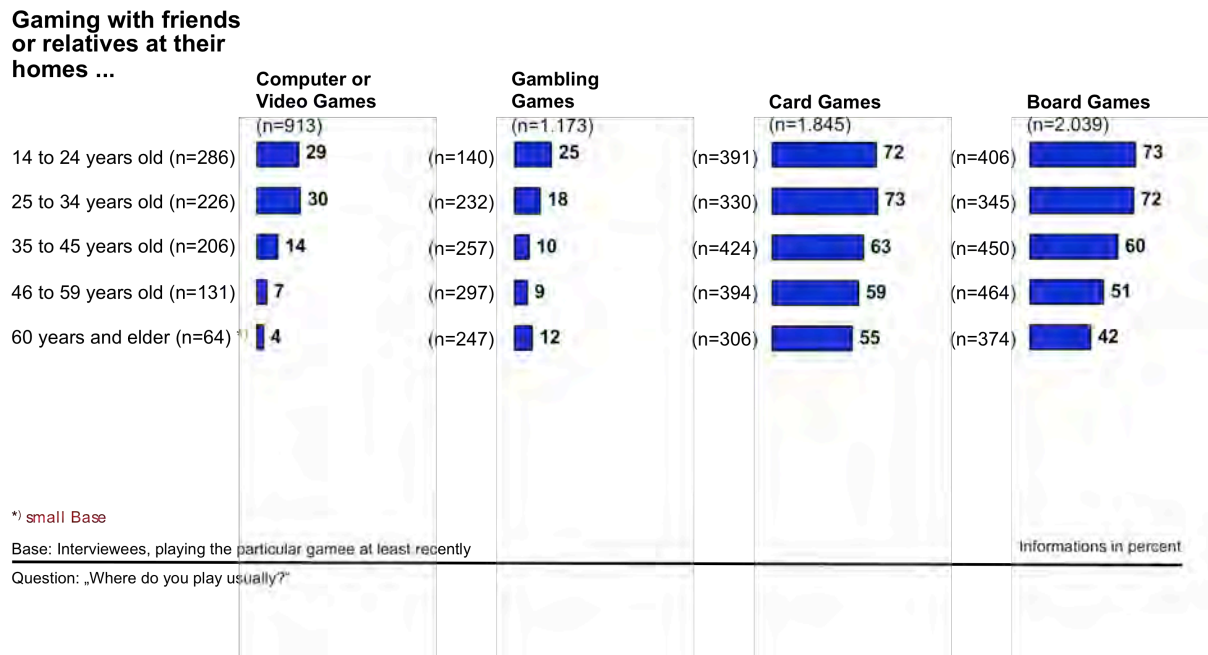
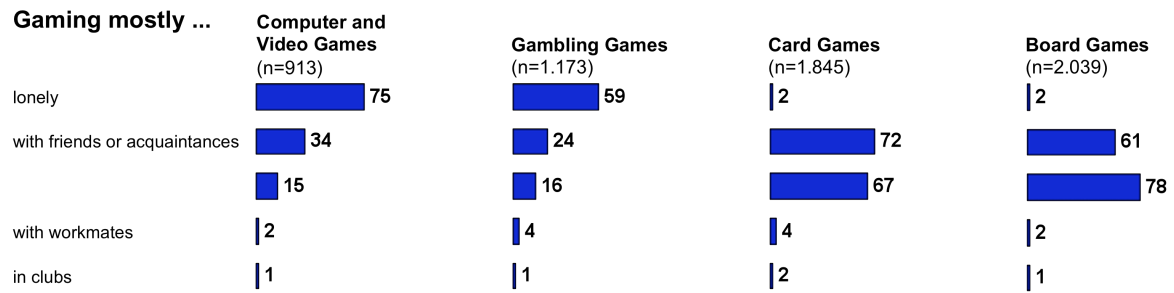


Fig. 12. Gaming with friends or relatives at their homes (source: gameslab)

So it seems to be a realistic projection, that the number of digital gamers playing in social settings will increase within the next years, because the new generations of digital gamers like to play with friends or relatives and they are used to and they have access to the required technical resources.

In fact, the number of digital gamers playing in some kind of society is even greater than shown in figures 9 to 12, because they only rely on being physically together with others while gaming. They do not consider that many digital gamers play together being at different places but being connected via internet. Figures 13 gives an impression about that: the number of digital gamers playing with friends, acquaintances, family, their children or workmates is much higher than 21 %⁶.



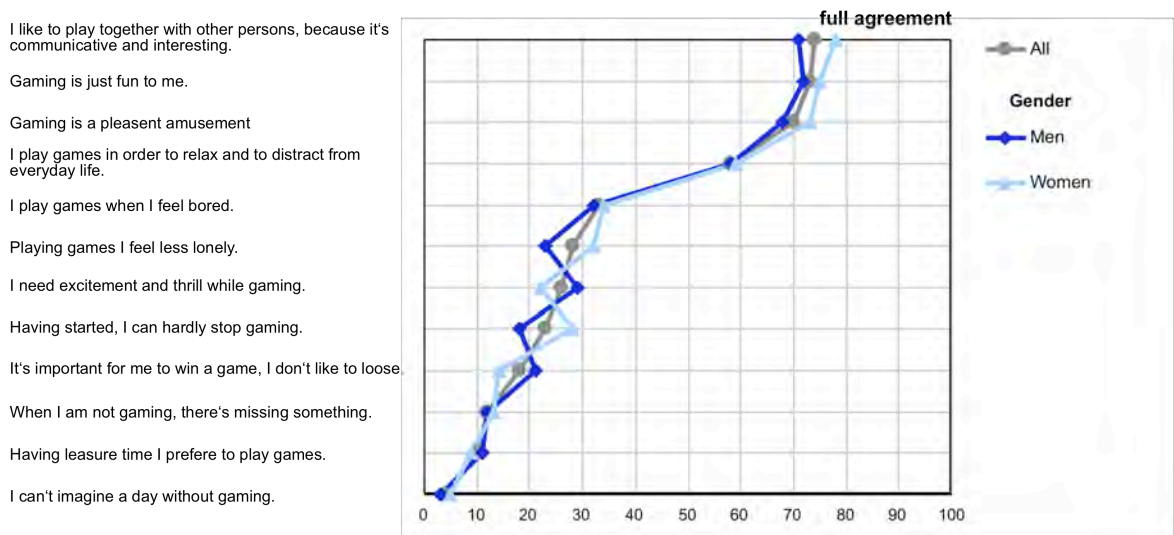
Base: : Interviewees, playing the particular gamee at least recently
 Question: „With whom are you playing mostly?“

Informations in percent

Fig. 13. Gaming lonely or with whom? (source: gameslab)

But as we can see: A very great number of digital gamers prefer to play lonely. Only handy gamers play even more lonely: 92%. Because of comming up new technologies and gaming concepts supporting interaction of multiple users it is quite probably, that there will be much more social gamers in the next years – depending on attractive charges offered by telecommunication providers.

Our next question was about the motivation to play:



Base: Interviewees, playing at least one kind of game recently (n=2.114)

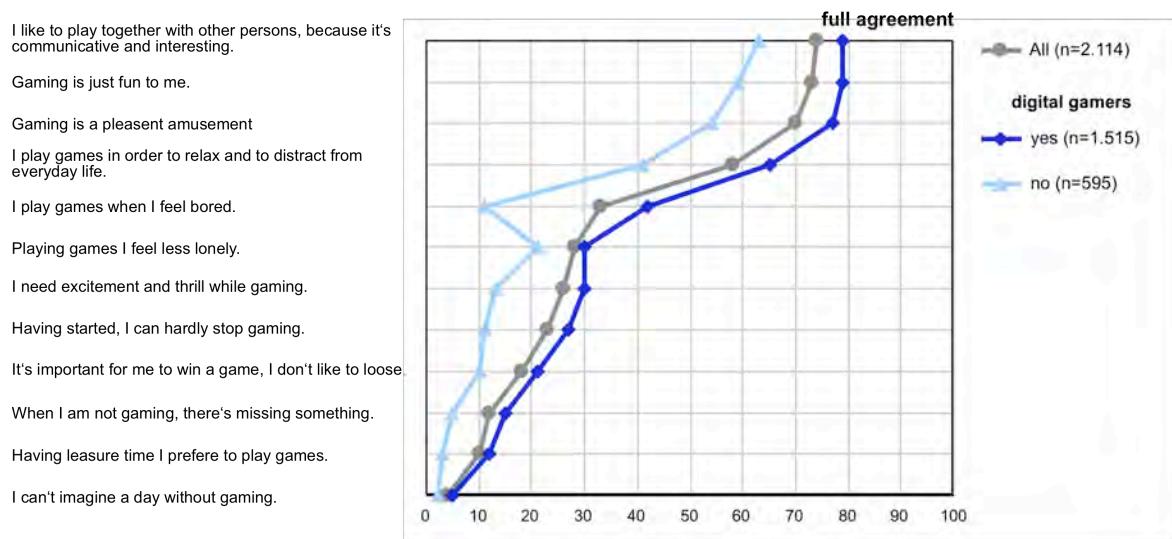
Informations in percent

Question: „Here you see some statements about gaming. Please note wether you agree more or less. 1 is „Full agreement, 2 is „(..).“

Fig. 14. Motivation of playing games – men versus women (source: gameslab)

Most people like to stress on playing together with others because it's communicative and interesting for them. There only a few diffences between men and women, especially men need the excitement or thrill and they don't like to loose, while women say that they feel less lonely while playing games and that it is difficult to stop gaming after having started.

Are there any differences between digital gamers and non-digital gamers about motivations?



Base: Interviewees, playing at least one kind of game recently (n=2.114)

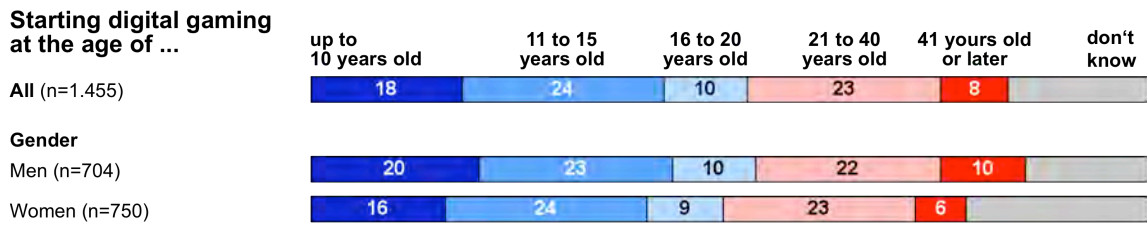
Informations in percent

Question: „Here you see some statements about gaming. Please note wether you agree more or less. 1 is „Full agreement, 2 is „(..“

Fig. 15. Motivation of playing games – digital gamers versus non-digital gamers (source: gameslab)

As shown in figure 15 digital gamers agree to each statement more than non-digital gamers. The differences between digital gamers and non-digital gamers are bigger than the differences between men and women. The most probable conclusion seems to be that digital gamers are more concious and more intensive about their motivations.

Figures 16 and 17 show when and how did digital gamers get into contact with digital games:

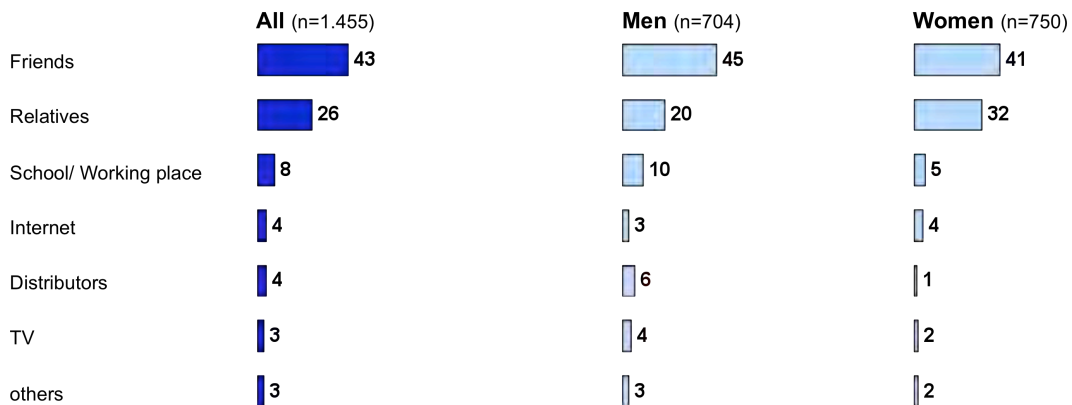


Base: Interviewees, who play at least one kind of computer or video game recently (n=1.455)
 Question: „At which age did you start to play digital games?“

Informations in percent

Fig. 16. How old are digital gamers at their „first time“? (source: gameslab)

Getting aware of digital games by...



Base: Interviewees, who play at least one kind of computer or video game recently (n=1.455)
 Question: „What or who first directed your attention to digital games?“

Informations in percent

Fig. 17. First contact to digital games (source: gameslab)

About 52 % of digital gamers started gaming being younger than 21; 24% started digital gaming in the age of 11 to 15; 18% started even earlier: being younger than 10. Most of the gamers got their first contact to digital games by friends or relatives. An interesting point might be that much more women (32 %) than men (20 %) get their „initiation“ to digital gaming by relatives. This points into the direction of (elder) brothers or maybe fathers. If people get into

contact to digital gaming by friends and relatives, the obviously next question is about the social environment of digital gamers: Are their friends or acquaintances playing digital games, too?

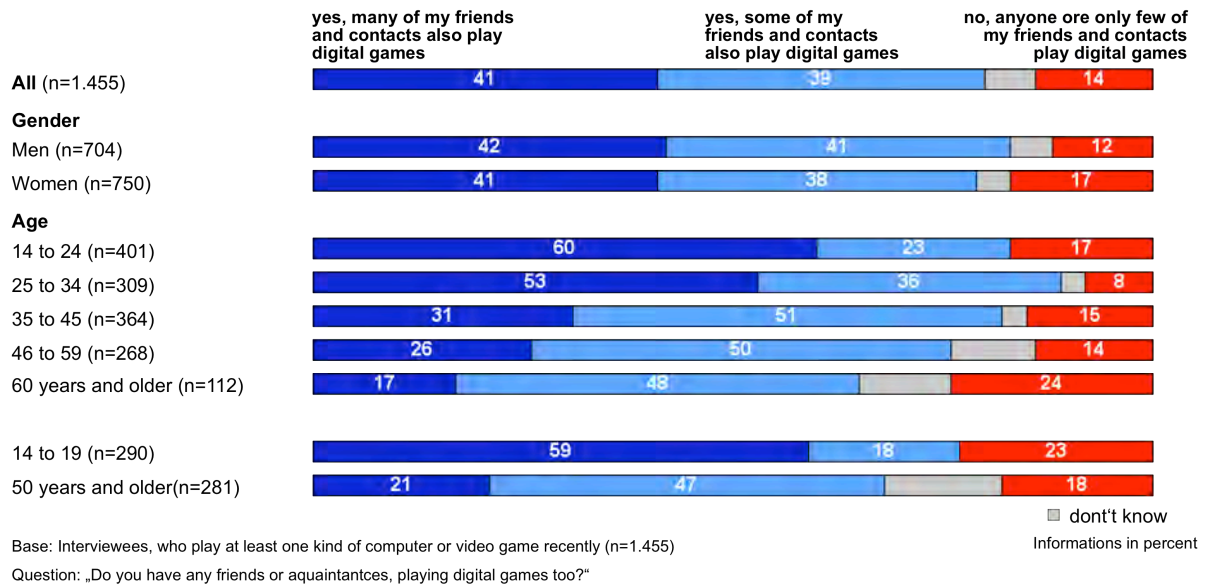
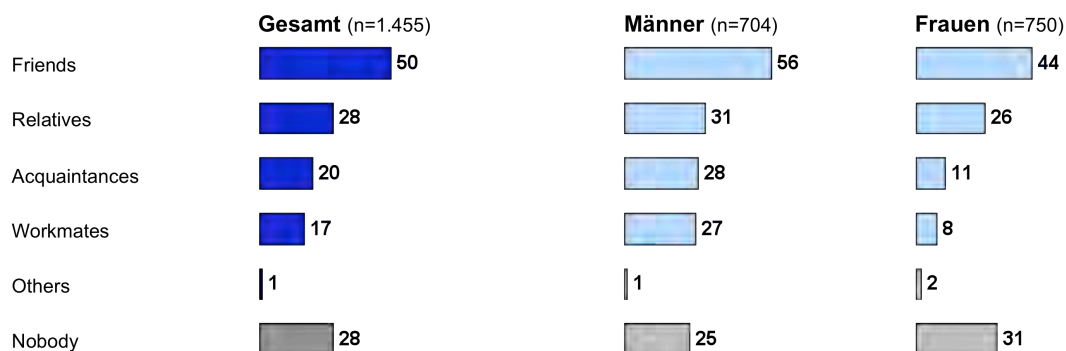


Fig. 18. Social environment of digital gamers (source: gameslab)

Not suprising: The answer is yes. The younger the digital gamers are, the more they are surrounded by other digital gamers. If gamers live in a social environment of gamers, do they talk about gaming or is digital gaming something they don't talk about?

Talking about digital games with ...



Base: Interviewees, who play at least one kind of computer or video game recently (n=1.455)
 Question: „Are there persons in your environment to talk about your interests in digital gaming? If there is anybody to talk, who is that person?“

Fig. 19. Talking about digital gaming (source: gameslab)

Half of the digital gamers talk to friends about their interests in digital games. – Men are talking significantly more than women. 28 % don't talk to others about gaming.

What about the digital gamers, who don't talk about: Would they like to have someone to share their interests? Most of not-talking gamer say they don't want to talk about:

Would like to talk ...

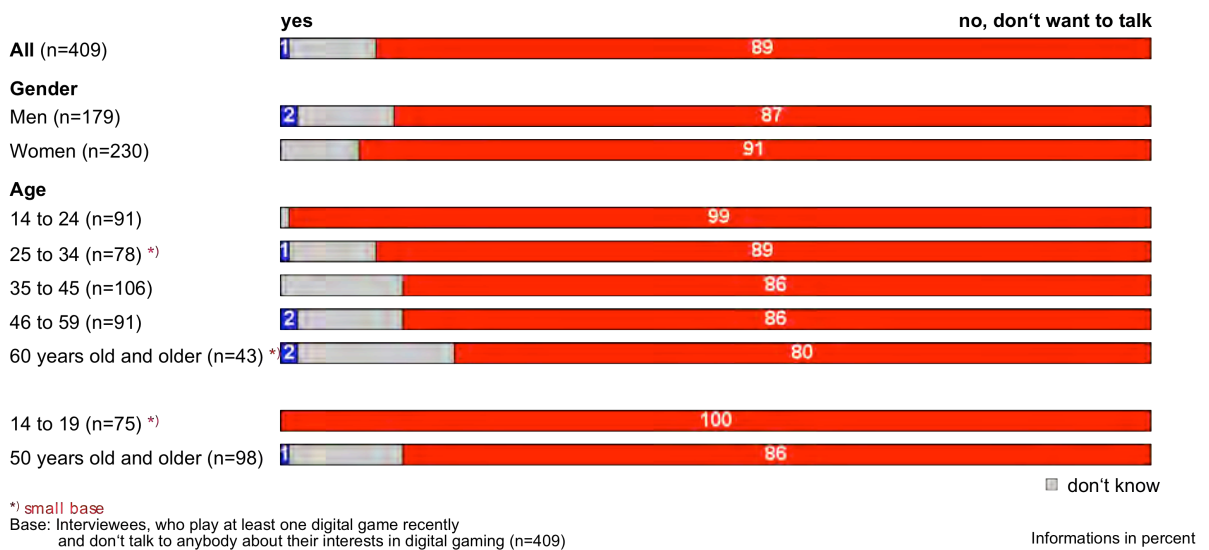
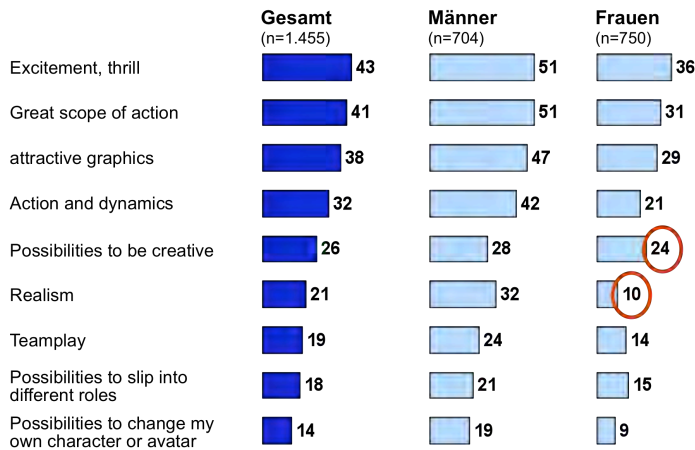


Fig. 20. Interest of talking (source: gameslab)

Besides from socializing people have different interests why they are playing digital games: excitement, attractive graphics and so on. Figure 21 shows the range of most interesting features:

In digital Games are most important ...



^{*)} shown are all points with at least 14% agreement
 Base: Interviewees, who play at least one kind of computer or video game recently (n=1.455)
 Question: „Which of the following aspects are most important for you as digital gamer?“

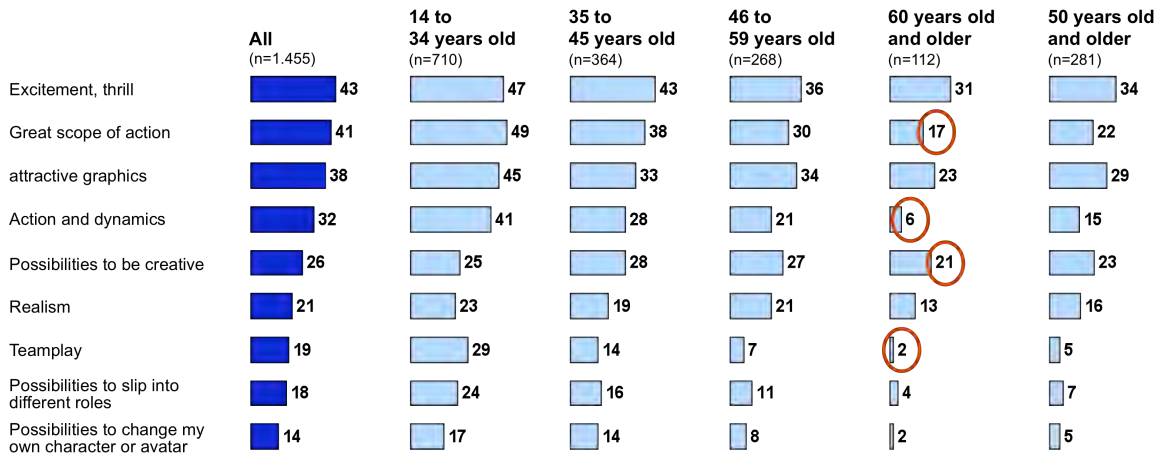
Informations in percent

Fig. 21. Most interesting features for digital gamers – gender [Interviewees were allowed to note more than one aspect] (source: gameslab)

Excitement, big scope of action and good graphics are most important. Men impress all aspects at least more than women. Most similarity between male and female interests is found in „Creativity“, least is found in „Realism“.

What about the influence of the age of the gamers on their interests why to play?

In digital Games are most important ...



^{*)} shown are all points with at least 14% agreement
 Base: Interviewees, who play at least one kind of computer or video game recently (n=1.455)
 Question: „Which of the following aspects are most important for you as digital gamer?“

Informations in percent

Fig. 22. Most interesting features for digital gamers – age [Interviewees were allowed to note more than one aspect] (source: gameslab)

Older interviewees at whole are less “enthusiastic” about each feature of digital gaming than younger people. It is significant that for them especially „action“ and „teampay“ are less important.

The next figure might be one of the most surprising for people who imaging digital gamers as nerds without any social contact:

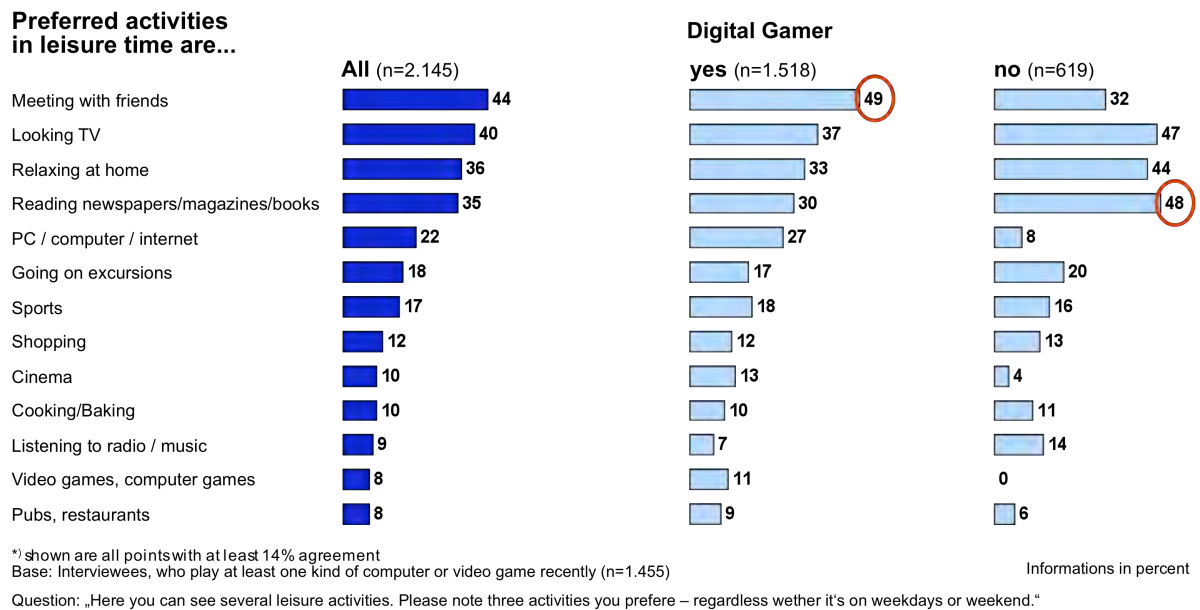


Fig. 23. Preferred leisure activities of digital gamers and non-digital gamers (source: gameslab)

For digital gamers the most preferred leisure activity is meeting friends – and for them it is much more important than for the people not playing digital games: It's 49 % to 32 %! Germans who don't play digital games prefer reading, looking TV and relaxing at home much more than meeting with friends. So there could be the conclusion, that not-digital gamers are the less social active part of German population. This thesis is supported by the fact that the most preferred leisure activity of not digital gaming people is reading newspapers, magazines or books which is definitely not a social activity. It's done alone, even more than looking TV and relaxing, which are activities at least some people are doing together with friends or relatives.

Another interesting point of figure 23 is that even for digital gamers playing video games or computer games ranges on position 9 of all preferred leisure

activities, a little bit less interesting than shopping and just a little bit more preferred than cooking or baking.

4 Conclusions

We had some more questions and a lot of more answers in our study „Gaming in Germany“, but I can't show all of it here. The main results about the relationship of gaming – digital and non-digital – and social activity, and the most important following theses are:

- Germans are gamers: 98 % of them play at least recently
- Most people play games in order to have communication or interaction with others, looking for social activity; this is true for both: analog/traditional and digital games.
- Nevertheless in both categories of games there are some, which are meant for playing lonely and not in society; such as: handy games, games of chance or some sports games
- Although there are many digital gamers preferring gaming lonely, there is a big number of them – which is increasing steadily – who prefer playing together with others and who use digital gaming as sort of social activity, social interaction and communication
- Digital gamers get into contact to video games or computer games by their friends or relatives; most of their social environment is gaming digitally too
- Many digital gamers talk to others about gaming
- For digital gamers the most preferred leisure activity is meeting friends; for them this is much more important than for people not playing digital games who prefer reading newspaper, magazines or books
- It is no longer the nerd who is the only one playing digital games; there is a clear shift to social active people playing digital games and looking for chances of cultivating social contacts by gaming

- New technologies and new concepts enable us to fit these sorts of demand; there is a pull for these new social kinds of digital gaming, because gaming as human activity is mostly meant doing something together with others
- In consequence our ideas of digital gaming will change: the future of digital gaming is enabling social interaction.

References

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- ¹ Origins of the pictures: fig. 1. Spielplatz Deutschland – Typologie der Spieler. Electronic Arts u.a. 2006, <http://www.presse.electronic-arts.de/publish/page205796005792144.php3?1=1&aid=162> ; fig. 2. <http://www.medical-tribune.de/patienten/magazin/19048/>; fig. 3. <http://www.computerbild.de/artikel/cbs-News-PC-Internet-Computerspiel-Umfrage-TNS-4743160.html>; fig. 4. http://www.focus.de/fotos/ein-junger-computerspieler-sitzt-bei-den-world-cyber-games-wcg-in_mid_444242.html, last visits 19-03-2010
 - ² For more information please have a look at www.games-lab.de
 - ³ In German: Europäischer Fonds für regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
 - ⁴ For realization of the questionnaire we engaged forsa Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statische Analysen mbH (Thank's for doing a good job!)
 - ⁵ ARD-ZDF-Online-/Offline-Studie 2009: <http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/index.php?id=189>, last visit 19-03-2010
 - ⁶ Please not, that it would not be correct to simply add the values for playing with friends, family, workmates etc., because interviewees were allowed to give more than one answer to this question.