

Meta-Gaming Real Life: Evaluating Offline Change with Online Theory

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Short Abstract:

This paper uses digital games research and theory to analyze social changes that have occurred with the rise of digitalization and online interaction. Specifically, I look at the Financially Independent Retire Early (FIRE) movement, the rise of digital currencies, stock market phenomena with digital trades, and remote work and online learning. By connecting these “real-world” occurrences to the “digital-world” experiences that have been researched in the past, I attempt to explain their roots and trajectories. By doing so, I propose that there is important toolset available for us to be able to predict further social changes and perhaps avoid problematic.

Extended Abstract:

As the world quickly changes towards a digitalized and even virtual reality, the pursuit of a meta-reality has become the newest craze. From the company Meta’s pursuit of AR/VR systems, to a rise in the use of remote medicine and remote learning, to the rise in popularity of digital currencies and even temporarily the non-fungible token (NFT), there has been a widespread, almost fantastical drive to understand the meta-world. As pointed out by so many, however, a meta-realm is neither a future nor a fantasy; instead, it’s been a real thing established in different forms for many years now (Milik, 2017). From the virtual world of Second Life (Boellstorff, 2008), to the real economies of EVE Online (Johnson & Mejia, 2017), to the very real relationships formed in many different online spaces (Lo, et al., 2005), the experiences of meta-realities have been studied by digital games researchers for just as long.

The past existence of these meta-worlds, however, does not take away from the fact that society is shifting greatly towards a digitalized concept of reality and there is much confusion about how these changes will affect “the real world,” or society in general. This paper looks at some recent patterns that have arisen in different parts of United States society and tied them to existent digital games research to show how many of these patterns can be understood through theories and concepts developed in the past. Specifically, I aim to use the concept of “meta-gaming” (utilizing optimal strategies for play), in describing some offline systems, such as the FIRE (Financially Independence, Retire Early) movement (Rieckens, 2019), digital currency banking, the stock market phenomenon of taking a stock “to the moon,” and the acceptance of work from home and remote learning systems.

As more and more social groups form around particular interests in different online forums and networks, there have been many movements aimed towards changing society’s views on certain topics. The “anti-work” subreddit, for instance, became famous for its ties to the early stages of the “great resignation.” One such online social movement is the FIRE movement, which

encourages its users to specifically focus on maximizing their economic strategies to be able to retire early with enough wealth to sustain themselves. This amount is sometimes referred to as “f*** you money,” indicating what that user is able to tell their employment when quitting. The FIRE system, when described to new users, however, sounds exactly like any meta-game discussion on a game subreddit, especially like on an ARPG like Grim Dawn. The users there will say that there are exact steps that can be taken in an exact way that will create the perfect outcome, and that it requires a user to sacrifice in the short term to become powerful in the “end-game content” (or retirement). For FIRE users, money isn’t a resource to be used, but instead it’s a measurable value of per-hour investment, with descriptions almost sounding like DPS (Damage Per Second) descriptions of gameplay.

By focusing so specifically on optimal play, meta-gamers are known to take very painful routes to accomplish their goals. Meta-gamers have been known to “grind” (perform boring and repetitive actions) for days at a time to be able to exploit a good loot drop before it is fixed to maximize their returns, and to choose to sacrifice themselves and even other people to be able to keep that optimization going (Milik, 2016). When transferred offline, however, this movement can have very significant impacts. Many FIRE posts will encourage users to make huge sacrifices to their quality of life for long-term gain, and to be particularly permissive of businesses who might treat themselves and others poorly, as long as they are able to keep “on track” to their financial destination. Offline interaction is far more nuanced and complicated than that of a digital game and trying to use that same mindset can cause problems with family, with personal health and wellbeing, and with the overall focus and maintenance of the society and economy around them.

The meta-gaming system has created very real changes to the world economy. Specifically, the growth of digital currencies (most recently crypto currencies) and NFT (non-fungible tokens) have changed the way that individuals perceive money and its value. Because digital currencies only exist in a digital wallet and are defined by their inherent volatility, people who use these systems often have a less bounded concept of risk for their investments. This kind of mindset can be tied to gambling systems, both offline and online. There is an important step in a casino – the conversion of real currency into a token or chip in order to play. The money then changes from being an object with social economic value, into an object meant for play and for risk (Guseva & Rona-Tas, 2001). Players are willing to take much larger gambles when using these types of symbols. It should be no surprise then that with the rise of digital investments the American economy starts to see movements towards more rewarding but riskier investments (Ferguson, et al., 2011). The stock of Gamestop for instance, was pushed as an inherently risky investment, but if users would keep with it they could take it “to the moon,” and trick the system by taking it meta. The trick worked for many people, and created a movement towards trying to trick investment systems in other ways. When tied to digital currencies, the stage was set for an NFT movement where small investments could be seen to gain huge profits in a short time. This meta-gaming concept of tricking the system to personally benefit has been studied in many digital economies, but the most relevant examples come from the economic system in EVE Online. A world-spanning game with a single server, the EVE economy managed to tie together hundreds of thousands of players all working within a capitalist system of investment and trade. Using the

game's currency, some players managed to create complex banking and gambling systems that managed to give other players great returns and optimized use of their resources. EVE Online is also, however, a completely free-market system, with no regulations or control of trades. Every single major bank in EVE and most gambling systems have eventually closed their doors and had the head individual take all the currency (Milik, 2020). In the end, the optimal play in any economy is to take everything and give nothing. In an offline economy with government regulations, this behavior is impossible, but as digitalization allows for less regulation, it becomes more possible and more likely, specifically with the current downturn of digital exchanges, where the companies are stopping withdrawals and keeping investments in-house.

The acceptance of meta-realities also creates new opportunities to create positive change and potentially include new populations in certain social systems. Especially after the quarantine period of Covid-19, society has become more accepting of meta forms of interaction, most specifically in terms of work-from-home and remote learning for schools (William, et al., 2022). Whether by necessity or by choice, there have been large inroads towards creating and using digital systems to tie together working groups or classrooms into a meta-stage where tasks can be accomplished effectively. These systems are not perfect, but they also provide opportunities to be able to incorporate individuals who might otherwise have a harder time connecting into these systems – remote work creates more job opportunities in rural neighborhoods which have historically had little access to employment and remote learning has allowed immunocompromised children to be able to interact more with their classmates.

That does not mean that the change towards a meta version of interaction is only positive. The cost of meta-gaming in digital games is an increase of stratification; in PvP the drive is to limit the assistance to the “weak” so that the “elite” player can have higher numbers (and have better reputation) whereas in co-operative and PvE environments the social pressure to fit meta-narratives can be so high that people who refuse might be completely ostracized from engagement. These systems, when tied to such important locations of socialization such as the school and the workplace, can create problematic systems that exacerbate inequalities in society. Worse yet, by being so tied to online relationships, which are more limited in scope, it can be very hard to change social ties when one of the members is a negative influence.

Digitalization and a movement towards online interaction are inevitable changes that will continue to occur in our society. By studying digital interaction in games and social media from the past, we as digital researchers have a toolset to be able to predict how these changes will impact us, and hopefully create optimal meta-realities of our own.

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