

Playing with Needles: Playful Participation in Online Communities

Torill Elvira Mortensen ¹

¹ Nord University

Torill.mortensen@nord.no

This paper is a study of online play in crafting communities dedicated to knitting and crocheting.

Knitting is often thought of as production relaxation or well-being, a craft performed by an aging woman with a lot of leisure. We rarely think we are looking at an active, creative, playful and competitive player.

In literature of creativity and play, we see knitting discussed as a flow-activity (Lampitt Adey 2018), as a way to connect with our environment and with others (Gauntlett 2018), as activism (Black 2017), or as therapy (Corkhill, Hemmings et al. 2014) rather than a playful practice. There are some mentions of knitting and play with food (Kouhia and Janhonen 2019), or knitting as play and performance (Gilson 2022), which is however still about activism rather than playing with the needles.

For this study I have been part of knitting communities on Ravelry.com, a social media, marketplace and pattern archive for yarn crafts, and on reddit.com, specifically r/knitting. These are international knitting communities, Ravelry with 9 million members, and r/knitting with 488 000.

On r/knitting there is not a lot of playfulness, as it is mainly used by new knitters to ask for support, but there is a certain level of performativity in how finished projects are being presented for appreciation. There is however an inherent sense of competition as the reddit upvote system will lift some projects into the "hot" category.

On Ravelry there is a lot more direct play. Sullivan, Salter and Smith have previously described several typical games for crafters (Sullivan, Salter and Smith 2018), but in this paper I will specifically focus on the playfulness of groups on Ravelry, and how digital media is a vital aspect of their playful behaviour, integrating their crafting with digital play.

Playful categories are cosplay, role-play, competition in teams, competitive progress play, cooperative play, and different types of absurd, counter- and carnivalesque play. Among the massive amount of objects that are designed, promoted, sold (mainly patterns) and created on this website, there are also transgressive objects, problematic statements and behaviour, such as provocations, cheating and sabotage (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020).

Knitters, predominantly women, who regularly use and communicate through Ravelry are digitally literate, and they continuously reference popular online culture, including games, but they are an under-represented group when we talk about play in leisure. Looking at how playfulness is expressed in this community teaches us about how women play with a skill and material that they are comfortable with, playing with others who understand the level of skill necessary for the speed, quantity and quality of their creations.

I am using digital ethnography (Boellstorff, Nardi et al. 2013, Pink, Horst et al. 2016) for the study, participating and crafting alongside of crafters over time, to understand the skill level and the community codes and cultures facilitating playfulness. Digital ethnography is a method with strong roots in game studies, utilised early on in the study of virtual worlds, and later developed further to study the use of digital platforms and to participate in online or digitalised communities.

While this is not initially designed as a gender study, the overwhelming amount of female participants in the groups I engage with in this study ensures that the paper will document a very gendered type of playfulness and leisure activity, and the gender aspect makes the findings in this study stand out. It documents the play of women who may not be visible in other play communities, as their playful engagement is otherwise registered as leisure production and well-being, masking the play.

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