

LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

SELF-PRESENTATION, NETWORKING, PLAYING, AND PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

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Playing Massively Multiplayer Online Games: A Dangerous Time-Consuming Leisure?

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ABSTRACT

Individuals are at risk when they use the internet. Video gamers playing online games are at risk when they play too much. What is too much? The amount of time is often used for assessing the border between a safe and a potentially dangerous gaming practice.

Quantitative research on addiction to video games uses the amount of time played as a strong indicator to foresee problematic behavior. Easy to measure and easy to ask, the amount of time played appears to be the perfect indicator for any potentially harmful practice. Gamers are even classified according to playing time. The scholarship strongly indicates a link between time played and the prevalence of problems.

However, the massive number of video gamers in today's world does not coincide with a huge threat of gaming addiction. Why not? Among intense gamers, most drastically reduce the time played or even suddenly stop. Although time played is an indicator for problematic play, why do some gamers play intensely without encountering any issues?

This chapter argues that intense gaming does not encroach upon gamers' lives because gamers prioritize their activity according to their available time, their social life, and their commitments.

To better understand this moment of rupture in intense playing, 20 in-depth interviews were carried out with intense and former intense players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG). Results showed that intense players handle their activity because video gaming is a passion resulting from a history of play. Then, the integration of their gaming into their lives is related to the overall

amount of free time, not just the time played. Last, gamers strongly advocate for their autonomy to make choices and to commit to their engagements. Video gaming is a passion that is lived with ups and downs, that is as necessary as the air we breathe, and that makes the players' hearts beat.

Keywords

leisure, online gaming, third place, MMOG, intense gamers, addiction, time

INTRODUCTION

The use of the internet has become overwhelming in contemporary life. It is as much for working purposes as personal. Consequently, individuals can enjoy the advantages of the internet at any time, even as a leisure activity. According to leisure studies research (Blackshaw, 2010; Blackshaw & Crawford, 2009; Rojek, 1995; Smith, 1990), defining leisure is a subtle exercise because of how people imagine their time and dedication to it. Etymologically, leisure has three different meanings, two in Latin and one in Greek. In Latin, the word comes from *licere*, which means “being allowed to”. The current meaning evolved from that original idea to stand for the time needed to do something without any constraints. This newer definition suggests the notion of freedom, a time an individual can use for any allowed activity. The Greeks said that leisure comes from *skhole*, which is an “ideal state guided by the appreciation of moderation” (Blackshaw & Crawford, 2009, p. 118). Leisure for the Greeks is an important use of the time free from work. The emphasis is placed on the purpose of the activity undertaken during this time of leisure. Aristotle included leisure in his three goals of human life along with happiness and theoretical wisdom (Smith, 1990, p. 179) and by doing so Aristotle significantly enriched the purpose of leisure.

Century after century, the meaning of leisure did not change much, but the Roman Empire reshaped it and the idea was first transmitted by the Catholic Church and then slightly modified by the Protestant Church after the Reformation. Over time, leisure remained a free time from work. Free time activities were an important concern of the church especially when money was involved (Robert, 1991).

Following the church control over leisure activities, time is a sensitive topic in capitalist societies, too. Indeed, time has to be efficiently used to produce something that will provide money; wasting time is not permitted. As Rojek claimed in his book *Decentering Leisure* (1995), leisure is related to the context – notably with gender, social class, and aging factors – in which the individual

lives. To sum up, leisure is here defined as a meaningful activity chosen by individuals, according to their context of living, to spend their free time.

A public concern has grown with the increasing use of the internet regarding time allocation. Online gaming lies among these internet-related activities (Beranuy, Carbonell, & Griffiths, 2012; Chai, Chen, & Khoo, 2011; Haagsma, Pieterse, Peters, & King, 2013; Lee, 2011).

However, the literature about addiction to online games strongly underlines the amount of time played as a predictor for addiction (Haagsma et al., 2013). Researches differently assess the “too much” time spent playing. For instance, Hussain and Griffiths state that playing more than 30 hours a week is excessive (2009, p. 748) while Wan and Chiou put that line at 48 hours a week (2006). For young users, Gentile mentioned 24 hours a week as a gate to pathological gaming (cited by Messias, Castro, Saini, Usman, & Peeples, 2011). How much time played is too much?

According to these researches there would be a time when gamers are addicted to their favorite activity. What about intense players giving up on their own? How do they manage their activity in their lives?

Although the literature repeatedly delivers warnings against the risk of intense video gaming, this chapter supports the notion that intense gaming does not encroach upon a player’s social life because gamers explain how they prioritize their activity according to their history of play, their available time, and their commitments. Intense players manage to organize their gaming life in a balanced fashion because playing is part of their life history. In fact, playing games was first introduced into their lives in a family setting before it becomes a personal experience. Intense gamers also adapt to their overall free time. There are times in their lives more prone to playing and there are times in the day devoted to gaming. Last, intense gamers claim their ability to decide for themselves by making choices proving their autonomy and their sense of priorities.

RESULTS

The argument stated in this chapter is supported by evidence garnered from qualitative research that collected 20 in-depth interviews with intense online gamers (MMOGs) in order to circumscribe the borders of the gamer social life. The aim of this research was to map the social process of attachment to virtual relationships. Participants were recruited with snowball sampling.

The focus was more on playing activity than on the game itself, and concentrated on the impact of gaming within the gamers' social lives and their global socialization. In addition, another objective was to pinpoint the pivotal moment during which ex-gamers realized that they wanted to stop playing heavily, and then identify the reasons.

The hypothesis formulated that gamers have a "career" of gaming that drives them to behave in a certain way. In order to highlight this movement, interviews touched on products they used, the situation in which they started playing, who offered them their first games and console, and whether they played with parents and siblings. The goal underpinning the collection was the identification of part of the primary socialization in their gaming history as well as any social tension related to their gaming activity. Furthermore, the dedication of gamers to other leisure activities was taken into account. For instance, we asked if heavy gamers gave up practicing a sport they liked or an activity they valued in order to create more time for playing video games.

Then, they explained their shift from single player games to online games and MMOGs. One specific MMOG was chosen by the gamer and they explained the reason. Interviews thereafter concentrated on the gaming activity related to this specific MMOG. Gamers talked about their social lives in the game and out of the game. They described their avatars and how they feel about them, and what they like and dislike in their in-game and out-of-game social life. For deeper reflection, gamers were asked if they had ever wished to engage in only one world, either the flesh or the synthetic world. Gamers talked about possible conflicts or troubles due to their gaming, and any solutions they had developed. Addiction was discussed so as to gather data about what gamers would call addiction, what their opinion about a possible addiction to video games was, and about how media relayed the topic. Finally, ex-gamers were asked to talk about the time they drastically reduced their gaming. Current gamers instead mentioned how they envision life without video gaming.

The interviews lasted from 1 hour, 45 minutes to 2 hours, 50 minutes. Phenomenology was adopted for designing this research. During the analysis, I tried to identify emerging themes. Then, those themes were classified under two theoretical patterns to explain how gamers maintain the balance between their social lives. The first pattern envisioned video gaming as a leisure activity like any other leisure, which forms part of gamers' daily lives. The second pattern presented video gaming worlds as virtual third place in the overall social lives of gamers.

A HISTORY OF PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

Playing Video Games is a Family Business

As a continuum of toys and child play, video games are introduced to the household by family members. The first video games experienced by the sample respondents aged 18–57 were published during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Participants confessed two sources for their first games: their parents and relatives of their parents. When the purchase of the first video game was the result of children's supplications, parents or relatives were still the ones who made the decision to introduce the leisure into the household. As with any other leisure, video gaming is conditioned by the social factors of the family household. Not only do video games have a cost, but they also require an electronic device. The technological aspect of video games makes middle class families more likely to adopt this leisure (Vincent, 2011).

In Australia, the installation of a reliable internet supply enjoyed tremendous costs, owing to the size of the country. As a result, Australian video gamers often had to wait for a long time to enjoy a quality connection. Respondents recalled their frustrations as they wanted to take part in the world community of online gamers. Eventually, internet providers in Australia properly covered the country and Australian players could go online. A part of the interviewed gamers shed light on this moment in their gaming history by stressing that embedding the internet connection in their playing activity reshaped their entire relationship to playing video games. Indeed, they underlined the opening of the new world of online games. Additionally, half of the players interviewed diminished the importance of the internet connection in their gaming history as they gave priority to the experience of playing with significant people.

The content of the interviews clearly demonstrated the importance of parental feelings regarding video gaming. In fact, when parents introduced video games to their household with a positive mindset that held video games as a tool for having fun, children were more likely to develop a healthy relationship to their beloved games. Recently, research showcased that games are now used in Australian families even as a mediator to communicate and form in-family memories (Brand, Lorentz, & Mathew, 2014, pp. 19–20).

The introduction of a classification of games in Australia in 1994 (Commission, 2012, pp. 47–59) reinforced parental responsibility regarding the purchase of video games appropriate for their children. In this respect, parents proved over the time studied to enjoy the better knowledge of the classification (Brand, 2012, p. 14; Brand et al., 2014, p. 24).

Growing-up video gamers reach a time when they do not play with their parents and when moved out from the parental house they handle their playing by themselves.

Playing Video Games Leads to Personal Experience

Even if the first video games are introduced by family members, the very experience of video gaming remains today a singular one (Brand et al., 2014, p. 18).

Respondents reported at length the collection of their favorite games, casting light on the experience lived rather than on the style of game. The charismatic pixelated character of *Mario* (in *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo, 1981) is familiar to all gamers and often appears on the list of favorite games played. Interviewed players avidly talked about their avatars created in online games. They were asked to concentrate on their favorite avatar and describe their relationship with it. The terms used suggested a deep friendship. These player comments largely confirmed previous scholarship on the avatar-player relationship.

Conflicts are part of the online gaming experience. First, conflicts can emerge from in-game interaction. Characters chosen in a game come with a range of actions that they are more likely to perform. Players often pointed out that their game experience was strongly conditioned by their avatar's abilities. A mage fulfills a specific role in the game life which differs from what a warrior does.

Second, a capricious internet connection may generate tensions in the gaming experience. Respondents overwhelmingly denied having encountered any significant tension as a result of an internet disconnection. They confessed being upset, but they explained that they simply moved to another activity, albeit with resignation.

Playing video games is originally a family experience before becoming a more personal activity. Like the nature of the experience, the amount of time dedicated to video gaming also evolves throughout the gamer life.

HOW DO YOU FIND THE TIME FOR PLAYING VIDEO GAMES?

The time dedicated to playing online games is almost systematically used to assess potential problematic gaming behavior. However, this work argues that intense gaming does not encroach on gamers' lives because the interviewed players explained that time played has to be contextualized. When studying time played, a distinction has to be made between times of life (e.g., childhood; adolescence; adulthood) and times of the day (e. g. leisure time and working time).

The Intensity of Play Changes During a Lifetime

Along with respondents' descriptions of their history of playing, variations in the intensity of playing emerged. Indeed, parts of the life span are more suitable, such as childhood and the teenage years, during which players enjoy more free time. Contemporary adulthood also presents moments for intense playing under specific conditions.

Childhood is characterized as particularly important regarding the amount of free time available to play. Indeed, play is an important aspect of development. Australian gamers mentioned a time when they played video games before going to school. Like other countries, Australian schools free their students early in the afternoon, thus providing an opportunity for play. For children not engaging in a busy leisure life, playing video games is available to kill time.

The teen period of the players interviewed is interesting for the widening of the range of games played. Adolescence is the peak for experimentation, when players seek their identity through different games and use gaming worlds for experimentation. Role-playing games offer fantastic conditions for identity exploration and experimentation. The teen period can be prolonged by giving birth to emerging adulthood. Playing inappropriate games is also viewed as emancipating for teenage gamers. In the sample composed of adults this aspect was, however, not mentioned.

One of the new characteristics of current adult life is the non-linearity of its professional history. Economic crises fostered a tense job market that left its mark on individuals' working lives. Periods of unemployment are today used by players to dedicate an important part of their time to their beloved activity: playing video games. The players interviewed stressed that the time freed by the end of studies or the loss of a job vacated an important time requirement. Consequently, players expressed their astute ability to justify their unemployed status by utilizing their online gaming as an office-hour activity. Thanks to internationally played online games, servers operate 24/7 and they are always full of players ready to share time and play. As demonstrated in other research, playing video games enhances self-esteem and is often used by players as a coping strategy. Indeed, players who emphasized that the internet had changed everything in their gaming experience shed light on the constant availability of other players online.

Playing Depends on the Time of Day

Video gaming is commonly attributed to the schedules of childhood and youth. Therefore, adults do not necessarily envision this activity as being worthwhile

during the day. Gaming has its moments in the day, and playing intensity varies according to the moment chosen.

Leisure is an extraordinary meeting place of the real and the unreal) an extraordinary meeting place of the serious and superficial. ... In other words, these leisure situations are realities in which the real and the unreal, the serious and the superficial, come together. (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 31)

Respondents stressed regularly that they play according to their other commitments. For instance, students pointed out that they balance their study time with their gaming activity. When an important exam is in sight they reduce their gaming. As this was raised earlier, the same happens with the unemployed. Intense gamers highlighted the volatility of their gaming activity.

As video gaming is a social activity, the intensity of playing is also related to the intensity of the out-of-game social life. For instance, players mentioned that being single allowed them to play more intensely, whereas being in a committed relationship did/does/will diminish their playing time. The same contextual situation exists for mobile students and workers. When being uprooted from their usual social environment, respondents confessed to spending more time playing video games as a tool to interact with the friends they left behind. Consequently, usual times used for social life and/or love life are dedicated to playing games and in-game interactions.

The passion for playing video games expressed by some of the interviewed intense gamers can lead to a professional vocation. Respondents seeking jobs in the video game industry first studied in this area before working in the sector. The social environment of gamers supported this choice as soon as they recognized that the video game industry provides a number of jobs and professional opportunities. Then, video games are necessarily part of the daily life.

This decision shapes the life of intense gamers and respondents strongly claimed their right to do so: it is a personal decision. The freedom of choice, as it was called by intense players, proved the lucidity and maturity of the respondents regarding the running of their life activities.

PLAYING ONLINE VIDEO GAMES INTENSELY IS A PERSONAL DECISION

Intense video gamers specify their activity by stating that it is their choice. They claim the freedom to choose their leisure activity without being judged.

Intense Players of MMOGs Make a Call for Their Autonomy

At the beginning of this chapter, the introduction of video games into respondents' lives was understood to be the consequence of a parental decision. When growing-up children play games they are monitored by their parents. Their gaming practice is controlled by their parents, who express opinions about their children's activities. Players make the choice for video games and assume this choice. Indeed, they mentioned that even when their parents were reluctant about the idea of their child spending their time playing, players took on their activity and played anyway. At some point, reluctant parents capitulated and trusted their child instead. How intense players run their gaming activity is similar to the path to adulthood. By choosing to play, intense gamers become independent and assert themselves.

Along with their history of video games, intense gamers build a specific and personalized culture. By doing so, they detach themselves first from their family and then from their peers. Unlike the present-day, video games were not that popular when the gamers surveyed were younger. Therefore, intensely playing video games would put them into the "geek" group. Asserting their identity as gamers is part of their lives. The amalgamation of playing video games and being addicted to this practice is strongly contested by intense gamers, who do not deal with the people making it. When mentioning the question of addiction to video games and how players answer to others' criticisms, respondents replied that they don't react. If others react well to gamers coming-out and revealing that they are video gamers, then respondents enjoy sharing their passion for games with the new acquaintances.

Online gaming opened a new space to be shared by video game lovers. Players interviewed stressed the relief they felt for being among peers in online games environments.

I like the fact that other people are playing the game with me. ...I don't like PvP (Player versus Player) but enjoy being in a group and chatting while we do something. ...I sometimes play Sims 3, but that's rare, and usually only when I don't feel like playing WoW. It feels empty and quiet without people to chat to while I play. (Female, 22, Australian)

However, they also mentioned the presence of idiots with whom they did not want to deal.

I like this virtual life compared to my real life because I don't have to deal with people I don't want to. (Female, 22, Australian)

Playing an online game intensely is an experience close to joining a secret society, which is not that secret. Online game worlds work like societies or communities. There, players can fully express their passion and their identity as a gamer. Respondents pointed out the importance of being part of a group of gamers. Like with what other research found (King & Delfabbro, 2009), intense players enjoy the social status that comes with their in-game avatar activity.

When being asked about the weight of their in-game commitments, intense players explained that they chose to join the group and other players rely on their participation. Sometimes players leave the group without any notice. Respondents acknowledged their disappointment, but they confessed that they easily coped with it.

My friends in the virtual world were organized around shared activities, mostly PVP combat. We would chat about other things, but the focus of the relationship was on the shared game activities. ...I don't really consider WoW as being a different life, maybe just a different component of the same life. It's no different from being one person in the workplace, and another person who is a member of a political party for example. ... When I was still playing a couple of people quit. Some said goodbye, others just dropped out silently. I suppose I felt a little abandoned by those who just dropped out, because even though the subject matter of the relationship was shallow, the friendship still seemed real. (Male, 35, Australian)

When interviewee priorities change, their gaming practices evolve, too. As adults, players questioned in this research asked for independence in monitoring their lives.

Intense Players Adapt Their Gaming to Their Chosen Priorities

The priority given to playing video games can, of course, change over time. By claiming the free use of their time, respondents showed that they are aware of the temporality of the intensity of their practice. Half of them talked retrospectively of times during which they played intensely, but those times were over at the time of the interview. Hence, light was shed on the specific moment when players decided to reorganize their priorities. Respondents mentioned two types of factors – internal and external – in their decision to reduce or stop their gaming activity.

The game played intensely can change in its nature following updates or even trends in gaming. For instance, a majority of former intense gamers of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) stressed the changes in the nature of playing this

game due to its huge success and the significant number of newbies (i.e., new gamers). Indeed, intense players no longer found what they were looking for. As a result, they left it and/or moved to another game of the same genre. Moreover, newly released games can also attract players who then decide to change to the new title. Plus, the enjoyment of the gaming experience is related to the gamer needs. If those change, the game experience is consequently impacted. Respondents said that they did accept others making the decision to leave, and they themselves did not stop playing. They emphasized the nature of the experience rather than the specific players.

Players do not attach to the game experience. If it no longer brings what they are looking for they adapt their activity as a result. When making this decision, there are external factors which can also influenced player decisions to leave the game.

As mentioned earlier, players looking for a substitute for their social life in playing online games do not feel the need when they have a fulfilling out-of-game social life. Often mentioned reasons why intense players reduce or stop their activity are being in a committed relationship, getting married, and/or having a baby.

I think in some ways I'm not really gaming that much now like two times a week is hmm I think if it became boring or they raised the cost to a certain amount or if I got so busy get married and have kids it will be like just no time for it. (Male, 42, Canadian)

Similar to this is the starting of a new school or a new job to which players want to give priority. Whether the time is not available anymore or if what they want is not that strong, the trigger for modification in the behavior remains the decision made by the gamer. In the words of surveyed players, balancing their situations is pretty simple as soon as they have made up their minds.

Overall, respondents demonstrated that balancing their lives is possible. Sometimes the desire for play is felt and players dedicate a significant number of hours to play. Sometimes another priority arises and players adapt their playing as a consequence.

DISCUSSION: TO BE (VIRTUALLY SOCIAL), OR NOT TO BE?

This chapter successively studied the history of play as a family business and then a personal experience; the free time available for play at specific times in life and at specific moments of the day; and the claim for independence of intense gamers with a search for autonomy and a sense of priorities. One cannot help but notice that intense players claim the possibility to monitor their lives

as it pleases them. They, indeed, manage to handle all their commitments since they organize their lives around their priorities.

Throughout this chapter it was presented that the lives of intense players of online games are whole, which is not reducible to the part dedicated to playing. Thus, the amount of time played does not matter so much, but the choices individuals make for it do.

Rojek (1995) added an important point to leisure studies by saying that the context in which a leisure activity emerged is essential and has to be understood in relation to the environment of the individual. The amount of free time available might influence the intensity of playing activity. So, on one side, there is work time, which modifies the free time available, and, on the other side, there is the individual free will to undertake an activity or not. Moreover, other factors – such as time and localization – could significantly impact the choice of activities. For instance, Australian children are prone to outdoor leisure related to the sea because they benefit from the geographic conditions of their country. Conversely, Canadian and Russian children will more likely ice skate. Besides, material conditions are typical of the society wherein individuals live and determine the genre of leisure activities. In fact, with the advent of television then computers, new leisure activities emerged, but first of all in the families who had such tools available.

In addition, the family environment also impinges greatly on individuals' choices because of parental encouragement and expectation. This is the reason intense gamers were asked whether they were sensitised to video games by their parents. In reality, a leisure activity is never really chosen by its young practitioner, and that is also the case for video gaming. In fact, family activities are part of the primary socialization imposed by parents.

In this way, documenting adult intense playing allows one to cast light on gamers' responsibility for their lives. As leisure is a freely chosen activity, this specific activity is meaningful for individuals. That is to say, this activity enhances individuals' lives, which is in agreement with the Greek definition of leisure. This is the reason scholars should ask gamers what their activity brings to their lives. It is no longer possible to research video games and video gaming without considering gamers' points of view and discourses (Lorentz, 2013).

Then, the common point among all gamers interviewed was the inclination to be social in their play, whether by sharing this activity with others in the same physical space or in the same gaming world. Therefore, intense players choose

a genre of social life built around video gaming. Then, the question remaining would be whether there is a point at which individuals are too social. With the development of technologies and the internet, individuals prove that while using different tools, they remain the same: social beings.

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