

Games of Social Control: A Sociological Study of Addiction to Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

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INTRODUCTION

Gaming as a mainstream activity is becoming increasingly popular. Most recent multiplayer games, such as *Destiny 2*, *Final Fantasy XIV* and *Overwatch*, are or have online spaces that exist independently of gamers. Here, gamers socialize, cooperate, and compete. According to the ESA, “53% of the most frequent gamers play multiplayer games” and they do so for “at least once a week, spending an average of 6 hours playing with others online and 5 hours playing with others in person” (2017, 4, 8). With regard to massively multiplayer online role-playing games the average is even 23 hours per week with sometimes continuous gaming sessions of at least 10 hours (Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell, 2004; Hussain and Griffiths, 2009; Yee, 2006). Statistics like these, however, have led to “media panics” (Drotner, 1999) in the public debate and academia with regard to excessive and compulsive gaming (Cover, 2006; Ferguson, 2017; Nielsen, 2015).

Most of the studies concerning gaming addiction come from social and media psychology and hence focus on psychological dispositions to explain the seductions of gaming. These studies tend to conclude that low self-esteem and weak social relations explain compulsive gaming (Blinka and Mikuska, 2014; Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Domahidi, et al., 2014; Trepte et al., 2012; Zhong, 2011). This PhD project starts from a critique on this dominant social psychology approach in the literature on game addiction and, in particular, the claim about the weakening of social bonds through gaming. Elaborating on research emphasizing

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the social character of gaming (e.g., de Wildt and Aupers, 2017; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2006), it theorizes that social networks developed in and around games and the social pressure these networks exert over individual players, account for much of the neglect of (non-gaming) friends, family, school and work and can cause compulsive and excessive gaming.

Thus, this research aims to complement existing psychological explanations with a sociological one for compulsive gaming. To gain a better understanding of why gamers are sometimes neglecting offline social relations (i.e., with non-gaming family and friends) and obligations (i.e., school and/ or work) we have to take the social networks of gamers serious. Just like in offline social networks, gamers, arguably, develop meaningful social relations in and outside games that simultaneously shape social responsibilities and moral obligations. The goal of this study is, therefore, to systematically map these secondary social networks, to analyse if and how they exert social control over individual players and in what particular ways they compete with/ impede on social networks with non-gamers. Taking this into consideration, the research question of this PhD project is threefold: 1) How are players socialized in and outside the game and how do they develop a social identity as a ‘gamer’? 2) In what game-related social networks and secondary institutions are they embedded? 3) How and why do these impede on/ compete with social networks of non-gamers?

This research is qualitative and inductive and the main explanatory concept is social control, which entails shared cultural values that restrict individual agency and forces people in a group to think, act, and feel in a particular way (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This study focuses on different aspects of social control, specifically: socialization, social identity formation, the dynamics of social capital, and the influence of in-game institutions. Methodological wise, the research question will be answered by selecting high-school and university students in Flanders and the Netherlands who are players of online multiplayer games and who admit that they sometimes neglect offline social life and obligations. In addition, adolescent players in clinics for treatment of ‘game addiction’ (e.g., van Rooij and Kardefelt-Winther, 2017) will be selected in the Netherlands. The study consists of two different phases. The first phase consists of three steps. Step 1 is to distribute a survey among high school and university students to select respondents and to approach clinics to find players willing to participate. Step 2 is to conduct in-depth interviews and social network analysis (SNA) to map the social relations of the respondents and to examine if online relations are as (or more) important than offline relations and whether there are conflicts between these different social networks. Practically this also means that ‘ego networks’ (e.g., Dobbie et al., 2017) are visualized by using data visualization software. Finally, step 3 ideally consists of participant observations by taking part in respondents’ guilds or in-game groups. Hereafter, in the second phase of the study, non-gaming parents and/ or friends are interviewed individually and in a mini-focus group with their gaming child/ friend to assess the tensions between social networks of gamers and non-gamers.

BIO

Cindy Krassen is a PhD-candidate at the Institute for Media Studies, Department of Communication Science, at the KU Leuven. She is interested in game addiction from a sociological perspective, the social aspects of games and gaming, and the political economy of the (console) game industry. Her PhD-project, funded by the FWO, focuses on the social dimensions of games and in particular social networks in and around Massively Multiplayer Online Games. The project examines the social pressure these social networks exert on individual players and how this may account for excessive and compulsive gaming.

Stef Aupers is a Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He published widely on religion, spirituality and conspiracy theories in modern society and, particularly, on the popularization and mediatization of these cultures through information and communications technology (ICT). Aupers has published in journals like *New Media & Society*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Public Understanding of Science*, *Cultural Sociology*, and *European Journal of Communication*.

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