

# Pressure to Play: Socio-Technical Pressure in Online Multiplayer Games

**Cindy Krassen**

KU Leuven, Institute for Media Studies  
Parkstraat 45 – box 3603  
3000 Leuven, Belgium  
+32 16 37 21 36  
[cindy.krassen@kuleuven.be](mailto:cindy.krassen@kuleuven.be)

**Stef Aupers**

KU Leuven, Institute for Media Studies  
Parkstraat 45 – box 3603  
3000 Leuven, Belgium  
+32 16 37 23 07  
[stef.aupers@kuleuven.be](mailto:stef.aupers@kuleuven.be)

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## INTRODUCTION

Popular video games are the staple of moral concerns about increased playing time, ‘game addiction’ and, consequently, the neglect of social relationships, school and work. Many academic studies focus on psychological dispositions of individual players to explain the seductions of playing games, particularly Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) that have a high average of playing time (Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell, 2004; Hussain and Griffiths, 2009; Yee, 2006a). These social psychological studies claim that, once played, such online multiplayer games are particularly addictive for youngsters with social anxiety, low social self-efficacy and weak social relations (Blinka and Mikuška, 2014; Caplan et al., 2009; Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Domahidi, et al., 2014; Kuss and Griffiths, 2012; Trepte et al., 2012; Zhong, 2011). In critical debate with such studies, this paper aims to develop a sociological explanation for excessive and compulsive gaming. It is a mainstay in the literature on video games, that they are not individually played but increasingly revolve around multiplayer experiences: from MMOs like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and Multiplayer Online Battle Arena’s like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) to shooters such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) and the popular *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) – contemporary games are social platforms and motivate the dynamic formation of social capital and in-game communities (e.g., Blinka and Mikuška, 2014; Gray and Huang, 2015; Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006; Williams et al., 2006; Taylor, 2006). Although such social bonds between players are generally considered ‘light’, ‘informal’ and ‘voluntary’, this study hypothesizes that game-related networks may also exert social pressure on individual players which incites or forces them to play. In addition, we theorize that game design may reinforce this social pressure since sociality is, in fact, “engineered by the architecture of the environment” (Yee, 2006b: 3; see also Smith, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006; Taylor, 2006) and

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cooperating with others in the game is indispensable if one wants to progress in the game world (e.g., Aupers, 2011; Yee, 2006b).

Based on these theoretical assumptions, our research question is: In what particular ways do game communities exert social control over individual players and what is the role of game design therein? By empirically studying this mechanism of, what we call, *socio-technical pressure*, we aim to develop an alternative account for alleged ‘game addiction’ amongst adolescent players and explain why they neglect primary social relationships, study and work. To answer our question, the first author interviewed 21 Flemish and Dutch ‘heavy’ gamers who play(ed) more than 7 hours a week, as according to the FLEGA (2016) this can be considered as ‘heavy gaming.’ These respondents were between 19-33 years old and they admitted that they neglect(ed) study and/or relations with family and friends. Based on the interviews we argue for a typology of three types of socio-technical pressure on a continuum. Firstly, we distinguished *socio-technical persuasion* amongst friends. Game friends are part and parcel of a network (apps, social media platforms) through which they mutually and repeatedly persuade each other to “come online right now and play” or to “play just one more match”. Such requests are particularly prominent when games require a particular group-size (i.e., *Call of Duty*) or a strict division of labor between players (i.e., *World of Warcraft*) so the individual player becomes responsible for (the achievements of) the in-game group as a whole. Secondly, we conceptualize *socio-technical obligation*. When players become members of more formal groups – often large guilds, clans or game communities including strangers – they feel the obligation to play because there are playing schedules, “trainings” (*Medal of Honor* (Danger Close & Dice, 2010)) to attend and “raids” in which each player has a role or task (i.e., *World of Warcraft* or *League of Legends*). Design, division of labor and hierarchical relations in such groups socially reinforce a sense of obligation amongst members. Thirdly, at the end of the continuum, we distinguish *socio-technical coercion*. In this type, players are explicitly forced to be online at particular times; they are monitored, controlled and disciplined through surveillance software, reward systems and performance metrics. Ultimately, they are threatened to be expelled from the game group (i.e., by guild or group leaders) if they do not perform well.

We conclude that these three socio-technical mechanisms are in part responsible for neglecting study and/or relations with family and friends. Complementary to psychological explanations emphasizing insecurity, low self-esteem and weak social networks, the analysis demonstrates that technologically enhanced game-networks put pressure on individual players and, in doing so, compete with offline social networks of non-gaming friends and family, and institutional obligations such as study and work.

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