



## Playing for social comfort: Online video game play as a social accommodator for the insecurely attached



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### ABSTRACT

Internet connectivity has changed the way video games are played by allowing individuals to connect worldwide in shared gaming spaces. These highly social environments allow players to connect, interact with, and learn from each other. However, there is a growing concern that these social environments also have the potential to displace real-world connections and interactions, contributing to a variety of losses in 'offline' sociability. The current study aims to elucidate what users may be gaining or losing (socially) as a result of continued participation in online video game environments, and what potentially underlies these social changes, by examining the associations between social skills and online video game involvement through the perspective of attachment theory. The results challenge the assumption that online video game play is inexorably associated with negative social consequences for the player and indicates the potential for online gaming spaces to serve critical attachment functions by providing a social outlet that promotes a sense of closeness, belonging, and security that satisfies attachment needs for those high in attachment avoidance.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the popularization of e-mail and online chat rooms, researchers have noted concern over the potential consequences of utilizing the Internet for social purposes. Due to lower social presence (Slouka, 1995; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) and the production of bridging rather than bonding social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Williams, 2007), Internet-based social spaces have come to be branded as "pseudo communities" that provide a superficial sense of social support and displace the time that could be spent fostering meaningful offline relationships (Beniger, 1987; Wellman & Wortley, 1990) by disrupting the time allocated for offline social activities (Nie & Hillygus, 2001; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000).

While these concerns have been raised in reference to a variety of Internet-based social services (i.e., chat rooms, social networking sites, etc.), online video games (OVGs) have been given greater attention as they uniquely provide a social space characterized by shared, playful, and often novel, activities. This difference is key, as

these shared activities contribute to the formation of long-lasting friendship bonds with sustainable levels of self-disclosure and intimacy not traditionally found in other mediated spaces (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Hsu, Wen, & Wu, 2009). The formation of such bonds could contribute to a preference for online interaction that is potentially greater than other mediated outlets, and, over time, lead to a variety of negative consequences for the user, such as declines in the size and quality of one's offline social circles (Bessiere, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2012; Kraut et al., 1998; Shen & Williams, 2010; Williams, 2006) and increased loneliness (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003).

Online games have also likely received particular attention due to the increased amounts of time that are being spent in these spaces. For example, a report by the Nielsen NetView. (2010) found that Americans spend substantially more time on the Internet playing online games (10.2%) than other online social tasks such as e-mail (8.3%) or instant messaging (4.0%). However, this report is likely an underestimation of the amount of time being dedicated to online game playing, as the same report states that 22.7% of the time spent on the Internet is dedicated to social networking websites, which are known avenues for online gaming. Patel (2011) found that up to 50% of Facebook users reporting that they sign into their account just to play games. Similarly, a recent industry report by SpilGames. (2013) found that individuals are spending more

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time playing online games than they do on any other source of online entertainment (e.g., *YouTube*, reading online news, etc.).

As the online gaming industry continues to flourish, the concern over the possible social impact of prolonged interactions within online gaming environments also continues to rise, particularly in relation to its potential long-term impact on a user's *social ability*, or social skills. Because increased OVG involvement has been shown to negatively impact one's level of offline social engagement (Bessiere et al., 2012; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005; Shen & Williams, 2010; Smyth, 2007; Williams, 2006), and having and maintaining face-to-face relationships is integral to developing effective social skills and learning socially appropriate behavior (Engles, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001), becoming socially disengaged or isolated from one's offline contacts due to OVG play could substantially hinder the development, or stimulate the deterioration, of effective "offline" social skills, for instance the ability to verbally engage others or manage one's social self-presentation in real-time (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Shen & Williams, 2010). As outlined by Kim et al. (2008), "the [use of] online games is associated with a decline in participants' communication ... and a decline in the size of their social circles, and because of this they become socially isolated and are no longer able to socialize in a normal way" (p. 215).

At first glance, these claims may seem misguided, as online video games appear to be ideal spaces for cognitive-social learning (Bandura, 1962; Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986) as they provide a venue for social observation, rehearsal, and feedback. For example, Steinkeuhler and Williams (2006) have suggested that the social immersion provided by online games could lead to an increase one's overall sociability by expanding and diversifying one's world-views. Similar arguments have been voiced by Young and Whitty (2012) who believe that virtual worlds hold great potential for the psychological growth of its users. Some of these hypothesized social benefits of online games have also been documented empirically. For example, it is well-known that online video games often facilitate social interaction between players (Chen, 2009; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003; Moore, Ducheneaut, & Nickell, 2007; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), which can help to stimulate the formation of close, intimate friendships (Domahidi, Festl, & Quandt, 2014; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Pena & Hancock, 2006; Williams, 2006; Yee, 2006). Additionally, cooperative play with others (both off- and online), even within violent video games, has been found to be associated with increases in pro-social behavior (Barlett, Anderson, & Swing, 2009; Ewoldsen et al., 2012; Gentile, 2011; Gentile et al., 2009). The positive social influence of video game play can also extend outside the context of gaming itself. For example, Domahidi et al. (2014) found that online game players often transfer their in-game, online friends into offline contexts, leading to an expansion of the size of their friendship circles. Similarly, Gentile et al. (2009) found that elementary school children who played pro-social games (i.e., games in which players help other players more so than hurt or kill other players in the game) at the beginning of the school year were more likely to display helpful behaviors later in the year. A recent report by Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014) provided an overview of the research in this area and concluded that the immersive, playful, social spaces of video games hold the potential to promote the learning of a variety of social skills, such as pro-social behavior (Gentile et al., 2009) and cooperation (Ewoldsen et al., 2012), as well contribute to increases in one's general sociability through increased participation in civic activities (Lenhart et al., 2008).

While this research seems to dispute some the concern surrounding the detrimental social impact of video game play, it does not invalidate the possibility that through prolonged play other social abilities may deteriorate or fail to properly develop. The

disparities between online and offline social communication (e.g., lack of non-verbal cues, absence of time constraints in sending and receiving messages, etc.) may not reduce online games' viability as a social learning space for skills such as pro-social behavior and cooperation, but may be limited in its ability to support other valuable social skills. For example, the ability to verbally engage others (i.e., social expressivity) in real time is integral for initiating and guiding face-to-face conversation (Moore et al., 2007; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). However, in the text-based communication systems often found in online games, one cannot achieve these traditional pairs of actions (i.e., question-answer) (Garcia & Jacobs, 1999); an individual receives a message from their communication partner in its entirety, which they must read and interpret prior to formulating a response (Halloran, 2011). This expectation of asynchronicity grants players communicative flexibility in regards to message construction by providing considerable leeway in the immediacy of responses to any incoming communication. The game environment further accommodates this flexibility, as engagement within game-related tasks may further delay (or provide an excuse for delaying) communication. This absence of time constraints in sending and receiving messages within online gaming environments affords players the opportunity to carefully craft, edit, and re-edit, any outgoing messages (Chan & Vorderer, 2006), providing a variety of self-presentation strategies not available in the offline world. Without the ability to observe, rehearse, or receive feedback on the use of this particular skill, one's proficiency in enlisting it may atrophy. Alternatively if an individual had not yet mastered this ability, prolonged interaction within a space where it is not necessary for effective socialization may thwart its development.

There is evidence to support this possibility, as more involved video game players have been found to exhibit a greater concern for social norms and public appearance, a lower verbally fluency, and a reduced ability to engage others in conversation, effectively express emotions, and/or adapt to social situations (Chiu, Lee, & Huang, 2004; Griffiths, 2010; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2013; Lemmens et al., 2011; Liu & Peng, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. For example, researchers have uncovered inverse relationships between Social Expressivity (e.g., the ability to engage in verbal discourse Riggio, 1989) and OVG play (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2013; Lemmens et al., 2011), suggesting that online game players have difficulties engaging others in social conversation and exhibit a lower verbal fluency. Through prolonged engagement, a deterioration of the skills associated with Social Expressivity (SE) is believed to occur as players disengage from offline communication and become more reliant on the social success achieved within an environment where these particular skills are not required for effective socialization. Alternatively, if an individual had not yet mastered the skills associated with SE, prolonged interaction within a space where these abilities are largely accommodated for may impede its development. Significant relationships between OVG involvement and Emotional Sensitivity (i.e., the ability to receive and interpret the non-verbal communication of others) have also been documented (Kowert, Domahidi, & Quandt, 2014; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2013).

However, the ability for video game involvement to significantly contribute to individual change in and of itself is questionable, as many researchers have argued that relationship between video game play and outcome effects are grossly overstated, if evident at all (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Barlett et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2007; Gentile, 2011; Granic et al., 2014). Furthermore, the main effect of media use has historically been behavior reinforcement

<sup>1</sup> Kowert and Oldmeadow (2013) and Liu and Peng (2009) specifically evaluated differences within online playing populations, while the work of Chiu et al. (2004), Griffiths (2010), and Lemmens et al. (2011) did not specify whether their samples were drawn from an online or a general gaming population.

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