



## The role of trait emotional intelligence in gamers' preferences for play and frequency of gaming

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of trait emotional intelligence (trait EI) in gamers' preferences for play and frequency of gaming in a sample of 1051 young adult US/European gamers, who play frequently the online massively multiplayer game, World of Warcraft (WoW). Trait EI was shown to predict social and achievement preferences for play as well as frequency of gaming. In particular, trait EI was positively correlated to a preference for social practices per se and negatively correlated to a preference for achievement-oriented, instrumental practices. These findings advocate that gamers' preferences for play are in accordance with their emotion-related personality characteristics. Trait EI was also negatively associated with frequency of gaming suggesting that lower scorers on trait EI are more likely associated with more frequent game use.

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### 1. Introduction

Digital games comprise a highly popular recreational activity among all ages. Within the last 10 years, computer and video games sales in US almost doubled exceeding the 11 billion dollars (ESA, 2010). The number of subscribers of online games such as the World of Warcraft has reached the 2 million in Europe, 2.5 million in America and 5.5 million in Asia (Woodcock, 2008). Such a widespread use has raised the interest of both the academia and the industry to explore the factors reinforcing game participation. These studies have been focused on the identification of specific design features which reinforce game uses such as fantasy and multiplayer features (e.g., Burn & Carr, 2006; Wood, Griffiths, Chappell, & Davies, 2004). However, comparatively little research has been conducted on analysing gamers' personality traits and their relationship to either game preferences (Chen, Tu, & Wang, 2008; Ravaja et al., 2004) or frequency of gaming (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005; Parker, Taylor, Eastabrook, Schell, & Wood, 2008; Peters & Malesky, 2008). This study contributes to this line of research by examining gamers' personality traits. In particular, trait emotional intelligence (trait EI) and its relationship to both preferences for play and frequency of gaming are examined.

In this paper 'play' refers to online gaming, specifically Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).

MMORPGs are online game worlds inhabited simultaneously by hundreds of gamers that interact within the same space. Gaming in this context, is based on the constant progression and growth of the characters each gamer is controlling. The choice of action is decided by the gamer (Juul, 2005). Single play mode is no longer a viable option when gamers reach a certain point in the game, due mostly to a higher level of difficulty (Wolf, 2007). Gaming becomes intensively social when advanced gamers need to form groups (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006a). Statistics reveal that the top selling MMORPG is World of Warcraft (WoW) (ESA, 2009). The rich social culture that has been developed around it has been the focus of research for the past few years (e.g., Ducheneaut et al., 2006a; Guitton, 2010; Lindtner et al., 2008; Nardi & Harris, 2006) making it an appropriate game for this research.

#### 1.1. Trait EI

Trait EI refers to individuals' self-perceptions of their emotion-related abilities and behavior dispositions (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). It is a self-reported personality construct which assesses well-being, emotionality, sociability and self-control (see Table 1). Trait EI is conceptually dissimilar from ability EI (e.g., Joseph & Newman, 2010; Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, 2007), which refers to a set of cognitive abilities evident in a series of emotion-related skills that can be measured through maximum performance tests (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Scoring problems entailed in the use of maximum performance tests for measuring

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**Table 1**  
Description of the TEIQue-SF.

Scale description	
TEIQue-SF	Assessing self-perceived abilities and behavioral dispositions
Well-being	Concerns generalized sense of well-being and fulfillment about life (e.g., I generally do not find life enjoyable)
Self-control	Concerns control over urges and desires (e.g., I usually find it difficult to regulate my emotions)
Emotionality	Concerns emotion-related skills and personal relationships (e.g., Many times, I cannot figure out what emotion I'm feeling)
Sociability	Concerns social relationships and social influence (e.g., I can deal effectively with people)

Note. In parentheses are sample items.

ability EI restrict the validity of this construct (Freudenthaler & Neubauer, 2005).

By conceptualizing emotional intelligence as a personality trait rather than mental ability, different measurement approaches are applied leading to different outcomes (self-reported measures versus maximum performance tests). In terms of the construct's incremental validity, the existence of trait EI within both the Big Five and the Giant Three as a distinct dimension at the lower-level of hierarchical trait taxonomies has been confirmed (e.g., Petrides, Furnham et al., 2007). Incremental trait EI effects beyond other emotion-related variables such as social desirability and alexithymia (Mikolajczak, Luminet, Leroy, & Roy, 2007; Mikolajczak, Menil, & Luminet, 2007) have also been established.

Moreover, a growing number of studies relate trait EI to different variables demonstrating criterion validity. Trait EI has been positively associated to, for example, life satisfaction (Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007) and adaptive coping styles (Petrides, Pita et al., 2007) while it is inversely associated to maladaptive styles (Petrides, Pita et al., 2007; Petrides, Pérez-González et al., 2007) and depression (Mikolajczak et al., 2007). In contrast to high trait EI scorers, individuals with low trait EI are more likely to experience "personality disorders" (Petrides, Pérez-González et al., 2007).

### 1.2. Preferences for play

Preferences for play refer to gamers' preference for certain types of play within MMORPGs. The three major preferences for play are (a) social preferences – gameplay focused on socializing, teamwork and creating relationships, (b) achievement preferences – gameplay involving advancement, competition and an interest in game mechanics and, (c) immersion preferences – gameplay that involves role-playing, discovery, customization, and escapism (Yee, 2006, 2007) (see Table 2 for a detailed analysis). These types of play have been structured into a scale (Motivations of Play scale; Yee, 2006, 2007) which was emerged after a series of online surveys with a large number of MMORPG gamers.

### 1.3. Frequency of gaming

Frequency of gaming refers to the intensity (days per week) and duration of gaming (hours per day playing games generally and hours per day playing explicitly WoW).

### 1.4. Trait EI and preferences for play

The relationship between personality traits and game preferences is not well-documented in the literature. Studies identified report both on digital and non-digital games advocating that preferences for play more likely accord with personality characteristics. An examination of board-based chess showed that children

scoring lower in agreeableness are more likely to be attracted and play chess (Bilalić, McLeod, & Gobet, 2007). Given the competitive and aggressive side of chess this preference fits well with gamers' personality and their tendency to being more self-interested rather than socially concerned and empathic. Similarly, high impulsive sensation seekers were found to choose dangerous and exciting games due to the satisfaction of the need for thrill characterizing high sensation seeking (Ravaja et al., 2004). The exploration of online gamers' personality and life satisfaction also revealed that online gamers could be more satisfied when playing games that accord with their personality traits (Chen, Sun, & Hsieh, 2008). Likewise, studies examining broad internet use showed that higher scores on extraversion, agreeableness and openness relate to preferences for two-way collaborative online discussions, whereas one-way communication styles that do not solicit reaction are preferred by low scorers in the aforementioned traits (Chen & Caropreso, 2004). To the best of authors' knowledge, no studies were found examining trait EI and preferences for play. With this study we try to contribute to this gap by reporting the relationships between gamers' trait EI and preferences for play as a means to understand the personality motives underlying gamers' preferences. These relationships can be usefully explored in MMORPGs since these games support the creation of multiple social and emotional bonds (Yee, 2007) and allow the gamers to determine their preferences for play. In this respect, they are suitable spaces for individuals to express themselves and their emotions.

It is hypothesized that trait EI will be positively related to social preferences for play (H1). Specifically, it is expected that gamers with higher scores on trait EI, thus those who perceive themselves as being more confident within social conditions and in developing meaningful relationships, will be more interested in socializing, group work and creating online relationships. Given the intense social nature of these preferences for play, more socially and emotionally inclined individuals will more likely become involved into practices that match with these emotional characteristics. On the contrary, it is hypothesized that trait EI will be negatively related to achievement preferences for play (H2). Gamers with lower scores on trait EI will more likely be prone to achievement preferences for play. These preferences for play are mostly self-oriented; gamers are focused on advancing their game characters, competing with others, and spending time learning about game mechanics. Considering that lower scorers on trait EI experience more social discomfort and reservation, achievement preferences for play may contribute to their becoming self-sustained individuals during gameplay thus minimizing the need for social interaction and support. Immersion preferences for play (i.e., discovery, role-playing, customization and escapism) were considered to be of less relevance to the trait EI theory, thus, not included in the hypotheses.

### 1.5. Trait EI and frequency of gaming

The relationship between self-report emotional intelligence and frequency of gaming was first examined by Parker et al. (2008). Lower scores on emotional intelligence and, in particular, less fulfilling interpersonal abilities were found to explain online game overuse mostly for younger groups. Peters and Malesky (2008), however, noted that not all frequent gamers demonstrate problems with games but only those gamers with lower scores on agreeableness and higher scores on neuroticism. Social anxiety and lower levels of life satisfaction were also found to be related to prolonged time spent on gaming (Liu & Peng, 2009; Lo et al., 2005). In addition, MMORPG gamers, by perceiving games' sociality as more pleasant and rewarding than in real-life, tend to game more intensively compared to offline video gamers (Brian & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). Such propensity can be explained by the fact

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