



# Online gaming involvement and its positive and negative consequences: A cognitive anthropological “cultural consensus” approach to psychiatric measurement and assessment



Jeffrey G. Snodgrass<sup>a, \*</sup>, H.J. Francois Dengah II<sup>b</sup>, Michael G. Lacy<sup>c</sup>, Andrew Bagwell<sup>a</sup>, Max Van Oostenburg<sup>d</sup>, Daniel Lende<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Anthropology, Colorado State University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology, Utah State University, United States

<sup>c</sup> Department of Sociology, Colorado State University, United States

<sup>d</sup> Northwest Fisheries Science Center, Seattle, WA, United States

<sup>e</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of South Florida, United States

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## ABSTRACT

We employed ethnographic methods more attentive to insider gamer perspectives to develop culturally-sensitive scale measures of online gaming involvement and its positive and negative consequences. Our inquiry combined relatively unstructured in-game participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and a web survey. The latter derived from both ethnography and theory, and contained 15 involvement items and 21 each for positive and negative consequences items. Cultural consensus analysis revealed broadly shared understandings among players about online gaming involvement and its positive consequences, but less agreement about negative scale items. Our findings suggest the need for caution in employing current tools to assess “addictive” and “disordered” gaming, as our gamer respondents judged commonly used scale items, such as cognitive salience, withdrawal, and tolerance, as not fitting with their own understandings and experiences. We argue that our approach, rooted in gamers’ actual experiences and also current theory, contributes to more valid psychiatric assessments of online gaming experiences, though more research is needed to refine the new measures we present.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers propose “internet gaming disorder” as characterized by excessive or poorly controlled behaviors, preoccupations, and urges regarding online gaming that lead to distress or impairment (Pontes & Griffiths, 2015; Pontes, Kiraly, Demetrovics, & Griffiths, 2014). They suggest that distressful patterns of internet use, like other behavioral addictions, can be usefully classified with alcohol and drug use disorders, as they share common characteristics related to salience, mood modification,

tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse (Block, 2008; Griffiths, 2005; Király, Griffiths, & Demetrovics, 2015; Petry et al., 2014; Pontes et al., 2014). However, researchers have questioned the validity of measures assessing problem gaming according to standards established for disordered behaviors related to substance use and gambling, arguing that the parallels between gaming and such behaviors have been assumed rather than established (Griffiths et al., 2015; Kardefelt-Winther, 2015a, 2014a; Van Rooij & Prause, 2014). Some thus argue that new approaches to assess problem gaming, resting on theory-driven research into the actual experiences of gamers, are needed to properly measure such problems and distinguish them from highly engaged but pleasurable play (Billieux, Schimmenti, Khazaal, Maurage, & Heeren, 2015; Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Kardefelt-Winther, 2015b, 2015a).

Here, we describe the development of alternative scales that

\* Corresponding author. Department of Anthropology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1787, United States.

E-mail address: [Jeffrey.Snodgrass@Colostate.edu](mailto:Jeffrey.Snodgrass@Colostate.edu) (J.G. Snodgrass).

can be used to assess both what we call intensive online gaming “involvement” and the positive and negative consequences resulting from such play. Our psycho-cultural approach builds upon Yee’s well-established understanding of online gaming involvement, with *achievement*, *social*, and *immersion* motivations shaping online play’s pleasures and perils (Yee, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), a scheme based on foundational work by Bartle and further validated in other research (Bartle, 1996; Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Snodgrass, Dengah, Lacy, & Fagan, 2013; Snodgrass et al., 2012). Taking seriously gamers’ own reports on positive and negative experience, we use the “cultural consensus” (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986; Weller, 2007) approach from cognitive anthropology to empirically investigate how players’ experiences are elaborated and instantiated in shared community-specific frames of meaning and behavioral scripts, which establish the cultural norms and standards through which gamers assess and interpret their online experiences and activities.

In our study, we use ethnographic methods to gain insight into cultural insider idioms of pleasure and distress (Kleinman, 1988; Nichter, 1981). Iteratively combining participant-observation, semi-structured interviews loosely following the McGill Illness Narrative Interview format (Groleau, Young, & Kirmayer, 2006), and a web survey, we arrive at 15 gaming involvement and 42 positive and negative consequences items (21 items for each of the two scales), which we test for cultural salience among gamers with consensus modeling. Overall, we suggest that these survey items are frames of meaning that both motivate cultural insiders (D’Andrade & Strauss, 1992)—here, gamers—and also provide them and researchers alike with a foundation from which to assess gamer community experiences as being alternately worthy or impaired. As such, they provide a window into both pleasurable and also potentially “disordered” gaming experiences that are recognized by gamers themselves as salient and sensible and thus possess what researchers would refer to as *face* or *ethnographic* validity (Kardefelt-Winther, 2015b).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. “Internet gaming disorder” (and its critics)

An expanding body of research examines uncontrolled and distressful use of online games, studied as a distinct type of problematic Internet use (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Seay & Kraut, 2007; Yee, 2006c). Related studies make a convincing case that some gamers get involved in online worlds in order to alleviate dysphoric moods and to escape life distress and that this attempt to compensate for offline dissatisfactions, failings, and problems can itself lead to negative outcomes such as excessive and problematic online gaming (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014a, 2014b; Snodgrass, Lacy, et al., 2014; Snodgrass, Dengah, & Lacy, 2014). Still, researchers estimate that only small percentage of online gamers play online videogames problematically—estimated at 5% in one global study (Pontes et al., 2014), and between 3 and 9% in others (Pontes & Griffiths, 2014; Rehbein, Psych, Kleimann, Mediasci, & Moble, 2010; Turner et al., 2012), variability due in part to the range of assessment tools and cut-off points used—in ways that compromise their ability to function in day-to-day life (Caplan et al., 2009; Pontes & Griffiths, 2014; Pontes et al., 2014; Rehbein et al., 2010; Seay & Kraut, 2007; Turner et al., 2012; Yee, 2006c).

Nevertheless, U.S. and world psychiatrists have yet to reach consensus on exactly what to call or how to parse—or even whether to recognize as a mental disorder—uncontrollable

and distressful online activity. In the DSM-5, the sole recognized “behavioral addiction” is “gambling disorder,” grouped with other formerly classified substance “abuse” and “dependence” disorders into a single “substance-related and addictive disorders” category. “Internet gaming disorder”—like other Internet-related problems—has yet to gain such a recognized status, instead being identified in an appendix of this manual (Section 3) as a condition warranting more clinical research before potentially being included in the main book as a formally recognized disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In part, this failure at official recognition reflects how games studies research has yet to produce a consensus on how to conceptualize, measure, or assess so-called problematic or disordered gaming, as illustrated by a recent lively exchange between a team of 14 researchers on the one hand, who point to an emerging consensus, and 28 on the other, who critique their ideas (Griffiths et al., 2015; Petry et al., 2014). Among other things, members of the second critical group of scholars point to the manner that we are still unsure whether online gaming problems should be modeled on other disordered behaviors related to substance use and gambling (Griffiths et al., 2015; Kardefelt-Winther, 2015b). We are also unable to properly distinguish “problem” online play from strong and healthy “engagement” and interest in gaming as a hobby, with the former potentially highly correlated with the latter but nonetheless distinct (Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2015; Hussain, Williams, & Griffiths, 2015; Kardefelt-Winther, 2015b; Lafreniere, Vallerand, Donahue, & Lavigne, 2009). This in turn produces in current measures various problems of content, face, and construct validity of “internet gaming disorder” as a clinical construct (Kardefelt-Winther, 2015c, 2015b). That is, it is still not clear whether the items or “components” typically used to assess problem gaming include the right ones and exclude the wrong ones (content validity), whether such items are perceived by gamers themselves to measure what they purport to measure (face validity), or most importantly whether commonly employed scales measure what they purport to measure (“internet gaming disorder”) rather than something else (like “engagement”) (construct validity). As such, some researchers have suggested that we need alternate approaches that are at once theory-driven and also place so-called gaming “disorder” or “addiction” within a wider array of online play experiences outside of seemingly problem play (Griffiths et al., 2015; Kardefelt-Winther, 2015c, 2015b).

### 2.2. Online gaming involvement and its positive and negative consequences

Yee relied upon quantitative analyses of large sample surveys, complemented by open-ended questions to survey items, to posit three principal overarching online gaming motivational components: *Achievement* (including motivations related to *advancement*, *mechanics*, and *competition*), *Social* (*socializing*, *relationship*, and *teamwork*), and *Immersion* (*discovery*, *role-playing*, *customization*, and *escape*) (Yee, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Other studies confirm Yee’s three factor motivational framework for MMO play and involvement (Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Snodgrass et al., 2012), including work of our own that modified Yee’s framework to better account for cultural factors (Snodgrass et al., 2013).

A range of studies have connected Yee’s three broad motivations to positive playing experiences. For example, McGonigal and others point out that overcoming challenges create important *achievement* experiences, which are integral to why many online and other games are experienced as fun (Charlton &

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