Dispelling the myth of the socio-emotionally dissatisfied gamer

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between digital gaming and gamers' psychological well-being has been an issue of concern in public and academic communities. Theorists advocate for the compensation hypothesis, arguing that real-life dissatisfaction such as social disintegration, reinforces motivation for gaming. Hence, the profile of the typical gamer has been one of emotionally and socially dissatisfied young individual. Considering for the fact that gaming is an increasingly social activity practised along with other individuals, this paper aims to evaluate the validity of these concerns by examining the Basic Psychological Needs (BPNs; Deci & Ryan, 1985) of 1298 World of Warcraft (WoW) gamers, viz gamers of a popular, massively multiplayer online game. Data collected from a large-scale online survey, revealed significant but weak associations between BPNs and gaming suggesting that gaming is less likely to be associated with gamers' real-life socio-emotional status. The analysis of BPNs mean scores reinforced further this finding; the relatively high BPNs mean scores demonstrated that gamers' Basic Psychological Needs are reasonably satisfied. Yet, in an attempt to identify the factors explaining game involvement, participants' self-reported reasons for gaming were thematically analyzed. It was revealed that gamers are avidly social individuals. Their gaming practices are primarily reinforced by social interaction in the form of either competition or collaboration.

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1. Introduction

Digital games comprise a widespread recreational activity. Recent statistics indicate that the average US house owns at least one dedicated to gaming console, pc or smartphone with the average game player age to reach 30 years. A great 62% chooses to play games with others, in person or online (ESA, 2011). The popularity of digital games has raised concerns in the public and scientific communities in terms of their relationship to gamers' well-being. Involvement in gaming activities has been viewed as a compensation for real-life inefficiencies such as poor relationships, lack of social skills and loneliness (e.g., Caplan, 2005). The gamer is portrayed as an emotionally and socially dissatisfied individual whose status of well-being reinforces gameplay. In particular, systematic gamers have been viewed as individuals, whose life is dominated by gaming, experience unpleasant emotions and physical effects when not gaming and conflicts with their surroundings due to their involvement in gaming (Charlton & Danforth, 2007). This depiction of gamers contradicts with studies exemplifying the social nature of gaming as evident in, for instance, in-game group work, collaboration, socializing, forums sharing game-related information (e.g.,

Herodotou, Winters, & Kambouri, 2012). This evidence advocates for gamers as being socially confident individuals.

This paper aims to shed light on this controversy by examining gamers' Basic Psychological Needs (BPNs; Deci & Ryan, 1985) and their relationship to preferences for play and frequency of gaming. By being an indicator of individuals' well-being, the concept of BPNs will offer insights on the gamers' psychological well-being, thus illuminate whether gamers are more likely individuals experiencing real-life dissatisfactions (e.g., Charlton & Danforth, 2007). Examining the relationships between BPNs and gaming practices will contribute to understanding whether gamers' psychological well-being reinforces gamers' preferences for play and duration of gaming, and to extend whether gaming is a compensation for real-life inefficiencies. The focus of analysis is a specific game genre – Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing games (MMORPGs) and specifically the game World of Warcraft (WoW) (see Section 2). A large scale online survey examining BPNs and gaming practices was conducted. Data collected from 1298 gamers provided interesting insights.

2. The game genre under examination

The game genre under examination is Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing games (MMORPGs). MMORPGs are

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online computer-based games where gamers through their persona – avatar interact simultaneously within a virtual universe. MMORPGs comprise convenient spaces for ongoing, synchronous, social associations among a massive number of gamers. Their flexible design is more likely to accommodate gamers' individual differences, by offering diverse venues for gameplay and by allowing gamers to generate their own forms of gaming (see Taylor, 2006b; Thomas & Brown, 2007). Variance from psychological characteristics is stronger within relatively unstructured and ambiguous situations (Mischel, 1998). Greater game enjoyment is experienced when game requirements permit a high degree of freedom, thus, allow the gamers to create personas – avatars similar to their personality (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). The game World of Warcraft (WoW) – utilized in this study – is one of the most popular MMORPGs available at the moment in the game market (Quillen, 2008).

MMORPGs are characterized by social interaction identified both inside the game (e.g., in-game social encounters, socializing, and collaborative play) as well as around it (e.g., communication in physical spaces during co-located gameplay, online/offline game related discussions) (Newman, 2004; Taylor, 2006a). Gamers were found to be motivated by the potential to create long-term, meaningful relationships, socializing per se (i.e., helping and chatting with others) and collaborative play (Yee, 2006, 2007). The vivid online gaming culture developed around gaming was found to promote motivation due to gamers' productive practices such as game content modifications, video creations, and dedicated-to gaming forums (Bruckman, 1997; Burn & Carr, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). Sharing innovative knowledge among the online game community was found to intrinsically motivate gamers by eliciting feelings of joy, fun, pride, and satisfaction. Shared goals and social trust were salient factors driving gamers to voluntarily share their knowledge online (Hau & Kim, 2011). Overall, the blurring between online gaming and around the game reality works motivationally since gaming with significant others namely, online or real-life friends and family members, preserves game participation (Herodotou et al., 2012; Herodotou, 2010). Social interaction has been conceptualized as the antecedent of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) which in turn affects intention to play games (Lee, 2009). This line of research proposes that gaming is an intensively social activity, the social character of which reinforces game participation. However, what remains to be examined is whether intense involvement in gaming is actually an indication of gamers' less satisfied socio-emotional needs, namely whether gamers are individuals who experience real-life need inefficiencies and their gaming is an outlet to existing psychological problems.

3. The psychological profile of the gamer

Persistent involvement in gaming has been conceived as problematic and indicative of gamers' psychological inefficiencies. Researchers make reference to "video game addiction" and gamers as "game addicts" (e.g., Griffiths, 2000). The increasing number of studies examining games and "addiction" contributed to the construction of an antisocial profile for the gamers for persistent involvement in gaming argued to negatively impact the gamers' social lives (Griffiths, 2002). In addition, social concerns on games' risk of harm have increased. Public concern raised the possibility that online environments lead to "children behavior disorders, including social isolation" (Wartella & Jennings, 2000, p.43).

The notion that gamers are shy and lonely individuals originated from studies examining the internet as a medium including but not restricted to online games. Strong preference for solitary activities, restricted social outlets, lonely, shy and unattractive lives were found to synthesize the profile of online users (Young & Rodgers, 1998). The internet was viewed as a psychological escape from life's problems such as lack of friendships, depression and low self-esteem in times of emotional tension (Young, 1998). The lack of interpersonal competence in face-to-face interactions due to a lack of self-presentational social skills, along with the exposure to the internet "predisposes an individual to develop a preference for online, rather that face-to-face, social interaction, which then leads to compulsive internet use, resulting in negative outcomes" (Caplan, 2005, p.722). Individuals' deficits in social-control skills most probably leads to the identification of other communication channels in which individuals will be able to act more appropriately and effectively. The attracting possibility of the internet "becomes a buffer for threatening social interactions" (Davis, Flett, & Besser, 2002, p.332).

McKenna and Bargh (2000) instead of commenting on a lack of social skills leading to an excessive internet use choose the term social anxiety for describing merely the same phenomenon. Their central argument is that individuals who experience anxiety when interacting with other people have the basic needs for intimacy and belonging unsatisfied. Social anxious people are motivated to use the internet for it is a place where "many of the situational factors that foster feelings of anxiety (e.g. talking to someone face to face, having to respond on the spot with verbal exchanges) are absent" (p.67) and their feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy are thus increased. Kim and Kim (2002) refer to a feeling of alienation experienced while interacting with the society. This feeling of alienation causes anxiety which urge people to excessive internet consumption. Davis et al. (2002) labeling the phenomenon under discussion as "social comfort" demonstrated that this is related to problematic internet use. Lonely individuals make use of the internet for social comfort deriving thus feelings of safety and security without the threat of rejection. In brief, social anxiety, loneliness, and depression have been related to social skills incompetence in face to face interactions (Caplan, 2005) and a preference for online social activities.

Direct studies on gaming conceive systematic gamers as individuals with a life dominated by gaming, experiencing unpleasant emotions and physical effects when not gaming and conflicts with their surroundings due to their involvement in gaming (Charlton & Danforth, 2007). Examining online gaming and interpersonal relationships, Lo, Wang, and Fang (2005) replicated the causal relationship between poor interpersonal relationships and social anxiety which can lead to an increase of the time spend online and deterioration of real-world interpersonal relationships. Personality traits such as emotional intelligence – in particular a lack of interpersonal abilities, agreeableness, neuroticism, and less satisfied real-life (Herodotou, Kambouri, & Winters, 2011; Parker, Taylor, Eastabrook, Schell, & Wood, 2008) were found to relate to intense gaming.

Game enjoyment is closely related to the gamers' general wellbeing; Greater individual life satisfaction leads gamers to create avatars that resemble themselves (in terms of personality characteristics) which in turn reinforces greater identification and enjoyment (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). Although Yee's (2006, 2007) motivational analysis reflects the structure and content of the game rather than the underlying motives that promote participation in gaming (Rigby, 2004) when scrutinised further, it suggests that mastery practices such as achievement and competition can evoke a sense of accomplishment and pride which raises self-esteem and creates feelings of joy, thus motivating gaming (Oslo, 2010). The voluntary involvement in games reveals that gamers derive from it gratifications and pleasures that impact their psychology (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). Overall, these insights suggest that real-life socio-emotional inefficiencies (e.g.,