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Games of Social Control. A Sociological Study of 'Addiction' to Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games

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Abstract
Research report on games and social control.
Keywords: Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games, MMORPG, social control, socialization, gamer identity, game subculture, social networks, guilds, game communities, gamevironments

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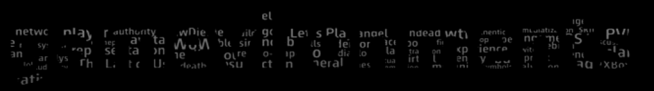
Introduction and Research Question

This research report presents a research project on games and social control. Deviating from psychological studies on alleged 'addiction' to Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), often concluding that low self-esteem and weak social relations explain compulsive playing, this project theorizes that game-related social networks and the social pressure these exert over individual players, accounts for much of the neglect of (non-gaming) friends, family, school and work. The project is funded by the Flemish Research Foundation (FWO) in November 2016 and will be executed in 4 years at the Institute of Media Studies, Leuven University by Stef Aupers (promoter) and Cindy Krassen (PhD student).

Over the last decade, playing computer games has become a major activity amongst youngsters – more so than watching movies: the Entertainment Software Association

reports a total U.S. consumer spend on the games industry of $21,53 billion (ESA 2014), compared to a movie industry revenue of $10.9 billion (MPAA 2014). Accompanied by this popularity and increased play time, gaming has become the staple of 'media panic' in the public debate and academia alike (Drotner 1999). This is particularly the case with Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games – persistent, three-dimensional environments on the internet that are played by millions of players worldwide and are often referred to as 'virtual worlds' (Bartle, 2004) or 'synthetic worlds' (Castranova 2005). In comparison with console games, the average playing time of popular MORPGs like *Guild Wars* (2005), *Rune Scape* (2001), *Everquest* (1999) or *World of Warcraft* (2004) is high – 23 hours a week – while about half of the players admits to be 'addicted' when, asked in a yes/no question, and 8 percent report to have neglected school, family and / or health due to their gaming activity (Yee 2006, Suárez, Thio and Singh 2013). About twenty percent of all players admitted that playing MMORPGs has a distinct negative influence on their social relations in everyday life (Griffiths, Davies and Chappel 2004).

Most of the studies focusing on 'addiction' to MMORPGs come from social and media psychology and hence focus on psychological dispositions to explain the seductions of playing MMORPGs. They generally demonstrate that, once played, MMOs are particularly addictive for youngsters with low self-esteem (Yee 2002, Ko et al. 2005, Wan and Chiu 2006, Bessiere et al. 2007, Hsu et al. 2009), who are introverted (Ng and Wiemer-Hastings 2005, Huh and Bowman 2008, Peters and Malesky 2008, Caplan et al. 2009, Kuss and Griffiths 2012), and have weak social bonds (cf. Hussain and Griffiths 2008). Our research starts from a critique on this dominant social psychological approach in literature on game addiction and, particularly, the claim about the weakening of social bonds through gaming. Although assumptions that games "lead to children becoming socially isolated" since



"the computer destroys social relations" (Jesse, cited in Newman 2004: 146) may be valid for 'single player' games on the X-Box, Play Station or 'casual games' on the smartphone, they are difficult to sustain for the popular genre of MMORPGs where sociality is, in fact, "engineered by the architecture of the environment" (Yee 2006: 3, see also Taylor 2006) and cooperating with others in the game is almost indispensable if one wants to progress in the game world (e.g., Aupers 2007, 2011, Yee 2006). From a gamer's perspective, sociality is among the most important motivations to play (e.g., Bartle 2004, Brown 2015, Steinkuehler 2004, Taylor 2006, Williams et al. 2006, Yee 2006). As Taylor concludes, "the sociality of the space is not simply a matter of players talking to each other but a web of networks and relationships – sometimes weaving between on- and offline, in-game and out-game (..)" (Taylor 2006: 30-31).

Given the sheer uncontested social nature of MMORPGs, this research project aims to complement a psychological explanation with a sociological explanation for the alleged 'addiction' to MMORPGs. To gain a better understanding of why gamers are sometimes neglecting 'real' social relations (i.e., with *non-gaming* family and friends) and obligations (i.e., school, work) we have to take the social networks of gamers serious. Just like in 'real' social networks, we hold, gamers develop meaningful social relations in and outside the game that, simultaneously, shape social responsibilities and moral obligations. The aim of the proposed study is therefore to systematically map these 'secondary' social networks, to analyze if and how they exert social control over individual players and in what particular ways they compete with / impede on social networks with non-gamers. The research question of this proposed study is threefold: How are players socialized in an on- and offline context and develop a social identity as a gamer? In what game-related social networks and secondary institutions are they embedded? How and why do these impede on / compete with

offline social networks with non-gamers?

A Theory of Games and Social Control

The study is mainly qualitative and inductive, yet departs from various 'sensitizing concepts' to underline its theoretical relevance and focus the data-gathering and analysis (Charmaz 2006, Glaser and Strauss 1967). The main, explanatory concept is **social control**. In general, social control is based on shared cultural values that restrict individual agency and forces people in a group to think, act and feel in a particular way (e.g., Berger and Luckman 1966, Houtman, Aupers, De Koster 2011). Social control may off course be exerted in a conscious or even instrumental way, like in the case of the game industry, through game design and marketing practices (cf. Aupers 2011, 2012, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009). In this study it is, however, primarily understood as the unintended and sometimes undesired outcome of collective social networks. We focus on different aspects of this type of social control: socialization, social identity formation, the dynamics of social capital and the influence of in-game institutions.

Socialization and Social Identity

First of all, research on socialization in media studies – for instance on the influence of film, television, advertising and games – is generally occupied with the relation between text and consumer; between 'coding' and 'decoding' (Hall 1980) or, more general, processes of internalization, 'appropriation' or 'cultivation' of media messages (Gerbner 1998). Given the social nature of MMORPGs, we will focus in this study more on interactions between gamers on the one hand and gamers/non-gamers on the other, and hence lean on sociological theories about socialization (i.e., Becker 1963, Berger and Luckmann 1966), 'social identity theory' (Jenkins 2010,

Tajfel 1981) and 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995).

Building on Howard Becker's classical study on the 'deviant careers' of marihuana users (1963), the project will consider 'addiction' of gamers not primarily a psychological phenomenon, but the result of social interaction with the 'in-group' (other gamers) and the out-group (*non-gaming* family and friends). From this perspective, the project first of all analyzes the process of (secondary) socialization by studying how players are initiated by 'significant other' gamers. We will accurately analyze in what particular ways the novice gamer learns game techniques and tricks, but also vocabularies, codes, rituals and all the other elements that make a 'good gamer'. On the one hand, this initiation occurs online: in the game world itself (i.e, by gaming friends, experienced players, in guilds), on game-related websites (i.e., *Reddit, GameSpot, InsideGamer* or *FaceBook* groups) or on 'video sites' where games are streamed and bloggers, vloggers, game professionals and 'game celebrities' share their expertise (i.e., *YouTube, Twitch*). On the other hand, socialization occurs offline: in informal meetings, game festivals, LAN parties and the like where gamers exchange information. The type of acquired knowledge on- and offline is considered 'ludo capital' (Consalvo 2007): it provides social status in the game world and, ultimately, aligns players with the norms and values in the game community (Taylor 2006). Through socialization, after all, gamers are expected not only to learn technical knowledge, but also develop a 'subcultural life style' (Thornton 1995) or social identity as a gamer: "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1981: 255).

In this study, then, we aim to unravel different types, mechanisms and sequences of (secondary) socialization. Studying this process is not restricted to the in-group of

gamers and their transmission of knowledge, but also involves the role of non-gaming family and friends. The acquirement of a 'social identity' in the gaming community, after all, implies an increased cohesive relation with the in-group, but simultaneously creates tension and conflict with the out-group: inclusion goes hand in hand with exclusion and a sharp distinction between 'Us' and 'Them' since "To say who I am is to say who or what I am not" (Jenkins 2008: 21; e.g., Tajfel 1981). Consequently, gamers may become overly critical of the imagined mainstream – i.e., school, parents and non-gaming friends. And vice versa: the out-group may increasingly stigmatize the gamer as 'nerd', or outsider' having a 'deviant career'. Even the frequently used term 'addicted' may be understood from in this perspective as merely a label to stigmatize the gamer as an 'outsider'. This process of 'mutual labelling' (Becker 1963), then, is both cause and consequence of socialization and social identity formation and will be empirically studied to fully understand the gradual shift of gamers to a 'deviant' position.

Social Capital

Secondly, the online social networks of 'hard core gamers' and the social pressure they exert over individual players, will be extensively studied through the theoretical lens of informal social capital (Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1988, Putnam 2000). Ever since the work of Emile Durkheim, it is a mainstay in sociology that social capital – providing both meaning and instrumental advantages to the individual – has eroded in Western countries with the decline of traditional, cohesive communities (e.g., Putnam 2000). This much lamented development, scholars of MMORPGs conclude, is now compensated for in 'light' online networks that are "vital for community formation and maintenance" (Williams 2006: 14) and in which players are 'bonding' and 'bridging' (Putnam 2000): on the one hand MMORPGs confirm and strengthen already existing ties with family members and friends in the game while, on the

other, they are playing, chatting, socializing with strangers from around the world thereby bridging national borders and cultural differences (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006, Taylor 2006). This transnational character of games can even lead to a form of 'pop-cosmopolitanism' (Kuipers 2012, Steinkuehler 2007, Jenkins 2010) since players may collectively "embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience" (Jenkins 2010: 155).

Although such local and transnational bonds are, in the literature, generally (and optimistically) considered 'light', 'voluntary' and 'informal', we will particularly focus on the unacknowledged social pressure these networks exert over individual players. Starting from the theoretical model that there's a competition between social capital developed with gamers on the one hand and social capital with non-gamers on the other, the nature of the social relations between gamers will be analyzed and, particularly, if, how and why these latter relations breed social responsibilities, obligations and dependencies. It is important, from this perspective, to focus on a shift from voluntary 'weak' to demanding 'strong ties' (Granovetter 1973) that may accounts for much of the withdrawal from social networks with non-gaming friends and family. 'Professional' game relationships with guild members from other countries, for instance, may become strong, personal and meaningful relationships that need investments from allegedly 'addicted' gamers. In addition, online social capital is often extended to offline social capital, exemplified by meetings at game festival or LAN parties (Jansz and Martens 2005), frequent visits at home or even true friendship and marriages (Taylor 2006). Consequently, social capital with gaming relationships will increasingly compete with / impede on existing social capital with non-gamers. If this is the case, how it works and why, is an important objective of the study.

Secondary Institutions and Institutional Pressure

Thirdly, we will study the formation of secondary institutions and institutional pressure in MMORPGs. As noted, this genre of games cannot easily be understood as simple games: they are rather 'virtual worlds' (Bartle 2004) or 'synthetic worlds' (Castranova 2005) that are permanently online, change over time and contain full-fledged economies, social structures and cultures (e.g., Aupers 2007, Cornelliussen and Rettberg 2008, Nardi 2010, Nardi 2008, Taylor 2006). Not unlike 'real societies', MMORPGs contain both 'structure' (i.e., the organizations, procedures and rules designed by the producers) and 'agency' (the freedom for players to modify such structures and create new ones) (e.g. Giddens 1984). The structure in MMORPGs, may take the form of secondary institutions: 'guilds' are the in-game institutions *par excellence* as organizations in which players co-operate to beat monsters, earn points and upgrade their level. Like modern institutions, 'guilds' are designed to regulate human behavior in an effective way (e.g., Weber 1946), to motivate 'interdependency' (Elias 1970) and create 'division of labor' through well-defined roles, functions and tasks (e.g., Durkheim, 1984). Guilds in MORPGs, it has therefore been argued, turn voluntary play into an activity that resembles obligatory work in a modern labor organization (ibid Dibbell 2010, Harambam et al. 2011, Yee 2006).

This is especially the case with 'raiding guilds – the most large, formal, hierarchical and competitive organizations in MMORPGs – that appeal to gamers with an 'instrumental' play style', i.e., 'power gamers' (Taylor 2006) or 'achievers' (Yee 2006). In this study we theorize that such guilds are not only providing possibilities for players, but limit their agency; that they are not only providing social pleasure, but also institutional pressure that impedes on the demands of primary institutions (i.e., school, work, etc.). This institutional pressure is often actively reinforced by 'guild

leaders': given the division of labor, they often demand responsibility to be online at particular 'raiding times' to fulfill their assigned role in the raid against monsters (e.g., Aupers 2008, Taylor 2006). This pressure to be online, is sometimes supported by player-produced software keeping track of members being on/offline and, in a neoliberal fashion, reinforced through the distribution of rewards, bonuses and punishment of exclusion from the guild (cf. Rettberg 2008, Taylor 2006). Secondary institutions like raiding guilds, then, exert social pressure over the individual gamer and thus contributes to the withdrawal from institutions and social networks in 'real' life.

In summary, we theorize that social control in the game network – enforced by socialization, social identity formation, social capital and secondary institutions – impedes on offline social networks with non-gamers. Players are hence subjected to a double form of social control. This theoretical model, based on a competition between social networks of gamers versus non-gamers, is at the heart of our project and informs our research design (see methods section below).

Scientific Relevance of Studying Games and Social Control

The research aims to contribute to the field in at least three ways. First of all, it contributes to longstanding academic and public debate about youngsters and their alleged 'addiction' to computer games – particularly MMORPGs. The project deviates from a dominant stance in social psychological studies focusing on psychological dispositions, often concluding that insecurity, low self-esteem and weak social relations, explain compulsive playing. The project turns this around: instead of explaining 'addiction' from the 'weak' social ties of players in 'real' life, it theorizes that 'strong ties' between players in the game may account for much of the neglect

of (non-gaming) friends, family, school and work. The study not only promises an empirically grounded sociological theory about the social pressure exerted by the social network of gamers but, based on that, opens up critical questions about the morally informed conceptualization of players being 'lonely' and 'addicted'.

Secondly, the project contributes to the academic literature on social life in online computer games. The last decade various important studies were published on the subject, but these were generally either quantitative studies assessing different types of guilds, social relations and play styles and relating them to demographic categories (age, gender, etc.) (e.g., Yee 2006, Ducheneaut et. al. 2005, Ducheneaut et al. 2006) or explorative, ethnographic studies (e.g., Taylor, 2006; Boelstorff 2008, Steinkuehler 2006, Williams 2006). The objective of the proposed study is to establish an extensive and systematically designed qualitative study in the field. It contributes in a methodological sense by combining 'social network analysis' – a method that is innovative in researching MMORPGs – with qualitative interviews with gamers and focus groups including non-gaming parents and friends. Theoretically speaking, this focus on tensions between social networks of gamers and non-gamers is new: in the attempt to debunk the persistent 'myth of the isolated gamer' (Newman 2004), game scholars (see references above) have optimistically written about how gamers freely bond with family and friends online and, vice versa, how online relations often extend to everyday life. Such studies generally show a blind spot for the tensions, conflicts and negotiations between hardcore gamers and non-gamers; between gamer networks and offline networks of non-gamers.

Finally, the research aims to contribute to a larger, longstanding debate about the status of social capital and community in contemporary Western society. Since the work of Emile Durkheim, it is a mainstay in sociology that 'social capital' (Bourdieu

1986, Coleman 1988, Putnam 2000), once strongly embedded in traditional communities, has eroded over the last decades in most Western societies. The rise and widespread application of the internet, however, has boasted academic debate about the transformation of social capital in and through online communities. Different scholars argue that we are witnessing the rise of new 'light' communities that, unlike 'strong' traditional communities, are highly voluntary, non-binding and consist of "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973). They are depicted as informal "third places" (Oldenburg 1997), "neo tribes' (Maffesoli 1997), "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993) or "light communities" (e.g., Hand and Moore 2006) that provide collective meaning but are, at the same time, instrumentalized by the "networked individual" (Wellman 2001). Using MMORPGs as a case study, it remains to be seen whether such generalized assumptions about the 'lightness' of communities is correct. Instead, a model is proposed in which social pleasure is accompanied by social pressure and social networks – mainly developed online – are fiercely competing with those in everyday life.

Methodological Approach

To accurately answer the research question concerning the tension between social networks of gamers (question 1 and 2) and offline social networks of non-gamers (question 3), a sequential research design is set up in which both networks are included, every phase builds upon the former and different methods are mutually validating ('methodological triangulation', Charmaz 2006, Denzin 1978).

Phase 1 Social Networks of Gamers

The first phase of the study consists of three steps: 1) surveys 2) social network analysis (SNA) / in-depth interviews and 3) participant observation. To strategically

select the group of gamers that are allegedly 'addicted' to MMORPGs and neglect social relations in everyday life, which is about one fifth of players (Griffiths, Davies and Chappel 2004), we will first distribute a short survey amongst students on three high-schools in Flanders and three in the Netherlands. The survey – consisting of standardized questions about play time, types of games played, online guild participation, online group affiliation and, of course, neglect of 'real' social life (non-gaming friends and family), school and work – is primarily used to select about 40 gamers for the next step in this part of the study.

In the second step of the first phase, we will perform a social network analysis together with respondents. Using the software tool *VennMaker* (Gamper et al. 2012) we create a digital 'Ego network' of each respondent in which relations with individuals in the game-related network *and* social network of non-gamers are visualized in a concentric circle. Significant characteristics (strength, bonding, bridging) are integrated. This 'Ego network' has two functions in our study: it provides a first, descriptive map of the social network of gamers and the offline social networks of non-gamers and, most important, visualizes the competition between both. But the map will also be used as a tool to probe the respondents to talk about the meaning of these relations (cf. Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, McCarthy et al. 2007) and let them elaborate on the "stories behind nodes and edges" (Gamper et al. 2012: 195). In these in-depth interviews we will cover issues of socialization by letting respondents develop a 'game biography' – an 'oral history' (e.g., Van Otterloo, Aupers and Houtman 2011) through which we can reconstruct their development of a social identity as a gamer and a turn towards the gaming community. The 'Ego network' helps in pointing out the role of 'significant others' in the game – their influence in learning game conventions, vocabularies, codes, rituals – *and* the role of non-gaming significant others (parents and friends) and their moral judgements. In

general, we will use the map to delve extensively in the mechanisms of social control of the game related network – the online relations, the guilds, bonding with friends and family, the bridging and transnational relations, and the way gamers deal with this.

In the third step of phase one, we will do a case study of a large 'raiding guild' in a MMORPG played by a respondent. The reason for selection is theoretical: based on much of the literature (e.g., Aupers 2008, Taylor 2006, Yee 2006), we hypothesize that 'raiding guilds' exemplify a particular, more formalized, institutional form of social pressure in the game world.

We will therefore map its development, structure and goals and develop an insider perspective through participant observation, in accordance with well-argued conventions of 'embedded' or 'situated' play (cf. Aarseth 2003, Taylor 2006, Lammes 2007). Introduced by a respondent, the researcher will socialize, join raids and, in a later phase, will do several (skype) interviews with members in different layers of the hierarchy (i.e., guild member, officer, guild leader etcetera).

Phase 2: Social Networks of Non-Gamers

To further assess the tension between social networks of gamers and offline social networks of non-gamers in more empirical detail, we will, in phase two of the proposed research interview the parents of 15 selected gamers interviewed in phase one and, in the second half of the interview, include the gamers in the conversation. The result of this approach is twofold: interviews with parent alone deepen the understanding of the gamers' socialization – their perspective on the 'deviant career' of their child, the changing social identity and the (possible) increased tensions this motivated in the household. The 'mini focus group' including parents and children,

makes these tensions and conflicting definitions of the situation more manifest and, as such, provides significant insight in the tensions between the social networks of gamers and non-gamers. To extend this part of the analysis we will finally interview non-gaming (best) friend of 15 selected gamers, include the gamers and follow a similar procedure. The 'ego network', developed in phase one, can here also function as a tool for discussion between gamers and non-gamers.

In sum, the proposed research is primarily based on 'social network analysis', participant observation and about 80 in-depth qualitative interviews (40 with gamers; 10 with members of a 'raiding guild'; 15 with gamers and non-gaming parents; 15 with gamers and non-gaming friends). The qualitative data, i.e. the interviews, will be analyzed, based on the 'comparative method set out in 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2006) and using *Atlas.ti* software in the process of open, axial and theoretical coding.

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