Life phase and meaningful play[1]

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Introduction

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) is the genre most strongly associated with excessive playing and problem gaming, not least in discussions of whether Internet gaming disorder should become a new diagnosis (Petry et al. 2014; Griffiths et al. 2016). Research on excessive or problem gaming represents, in general, a divide in the academic community, largely due to different focus and theoretical framework. Within psychology, reward mechanisms and game structure have been emphasized as important factors, and a key idea is that interacting with the game may condition the player through rewards, which may lead to behavioural addiction (Charlton & Danforth 2007; King et al. 2010a).

Research employing a more context-sensitive perspective, like ethnographic studies, put more weight on the social sides of gaming and how this influences play practices (Taylor 2006; Karlsen 2009; Chen 2012). Here, excessive playing, like raiding, is researched from within the gamer culture, and the focus is on social activities and how they work within the techno-social environment. A third perspective, which is important when excessive gaming is discussed, focuses on how gaming is situated within the everyday life of the player.

Traditionally, games are described as spaces or activities with their own rules; as a 'magic circle' distinguished from everyday life (Huizinga 1938; Salen & Zimmermann 2004). Nevertheless, the membrane between the game and everyday life is porous and the meaning and significance the player finds in playing travel easily between the two spheres. My own interviews with hardcore *World of Warcraft* players, which this chapter is based on, provide many examples of how idiosyncratic elements from everyday life impact on playing motivation. Love sickness, health issues, physical isolation, a rough neighbourhood, analytical curiosity, competitiveness and social shyness – elements representing aspects as diverse as their physical, emotional, intellectual and social life – all have relevance for their motivation in playing. Meaning and motivation also

travel the other way – from the game to everyday life. For many adolescents, gaming communities and online games are important socialising arenas and playing provides activities and space for players to learn about themselves.

This brings us to an aspect of everyday life which is often overlooked when problem gaming is discussed, and which is the main topic of this chapter: how age and life phase influence how games are used and what function and meaning they have in a player's life. Here, I'm especially concerned with the role computer games play in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Life phases: social norms and cultural scripts

The age cohort around adolescence and early adulthood is where we find the largest percentage of people who play games (Vaage 2012). This is also the age group that is usually associated with problem gaming. The psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has dubbed this phase as 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2000). According to Arnett, in developed countries we have stopped entering an adult phase designated by marriages and children at the start of our twenties but, rather, have postponed these transitions until at least the late twenties. This, according to Arnett, 'leaves the late teens and early twenties available for exploring various possible life directions' (Arnett 2000: 471). Arnett defines the period between 18 and 25 years as the age of emerging adulthood and identifies 'love, work and worldview' as the most important areas that are explored during this period. Emerging adulthood is not a biological phase but a culturally and socially constructed phase where young people explore and experiment with their identity.

The transitions between life phases are more generally covered in life course theory, which focuses on how we are culturally scripted to follow specific life courses – for instance, how we move from education, to work, to having children. Life course theory emphasises that life courses are historically and culturally scripted and that parents have a central role in ensuring that their children come of age according to culturally-accepted trajectories (Kok 2007).

From a historical perspective, the phase of adolescence is relatively new. Stanley Hall's book *Adolescence* (1904)[2] is normally regarded as a cornerstone in the modern definition of youth. Adolescence is associated with the teenage years and is considered a transitional period from childhood to adulthood but can, physically, psychologically and culturally, start earlier or later. According to Drotner, adolescence is essentially a psychological age phase of 'tension and susceptibility at the threshold to adulthood, a phase, therefore, that adults have to carefully watch over and guide through' (Drotner 1999: 602).

Life phase is seldom a topic in psychological research on excessive playing but some researchers have suggested that we need more empirical research that examines why some individuals simply 'age out' of their problematic playing behaviour (King et al. 2010b). I believe a cultural perspective connected to life phases, as described by Arnett,

is especially relevant here. Arnett does not describe gaming or leisure time explicitly in his theory, but he suggests that media use might be important, as people in this age bracket spend more time alone than any other age category (Arnett 2000: 476). Not only are they spending a lot of time alone, they often also have quite a substantial amount of time at their disposal, with few responsibilities besides attending school. The combination of having a lot of time to spend on individual interests and a social and cultural acceptance of identity experimentation can be a powerful combination.

Meaningful play: self-reflection and identity

In the following I will use Arnett's term emerging adulthood as analytical lens on my interviews of hardcore *World of Warcraft* players. I will start with the story of Erik, aged 22 at the time of the interview. He started playing *World of Warcraft* at the age of 18 and played excessively in periods lasting from a few months to a year. In the periods with most intensive playing, he played for 14-16 hours each day. These periods resulted in burnouts where he stayed away from the game for weeks or months. When he first started to play, he lived at his mother's house, and his gaming habits led to conflicts with her. Being unable to control his around-the-clock playing excesses, she eventually threw him out of the house. This forced him to find a job and reduce time spent on playing. At the end of his four-year long relationship with *World of Warcraft*, and the time of the interview, his attitude toward the game has changed, as he realises that the gameplay only provides repetitions of earlier challenges. A growing media competence and disenchantment with the game genre is part of his changed attitude toward *World of Warcraft*.

However, there was another topic running through Erik's life that, arguably, had an even stronger influence on his gaming practice: his religious faith. Because of strict religious parents, much of Erik's upbringing had revolved around being a good Christian. Before he started playing *World of Warcraft*, he was a leader of a Christian youth organisation, which took much of his time outside school. He also spent time in other Christian groups where they would sing, pray and read from the Bible. Some of these meetings he found enjoyable, others rather tedious. However, he still endured them since '[s]pending time with God is an important obligation for Christians', he explained. The strict, unselfish and community-oriented Christianity he was brought up with was contrasted to, and partly in conflict with, the competitive, self-promoting playing style he later indulged in. When his playing started to escalate, he broke completely with his Christian community – apparently because he no longer considered himself a good Christian role model. Playing in one of Europe's best raiding guilds also meant that the competition was fierce and time management was obviously also an issue. Even when he spent 14–16 hours each day on the game, there were other players who showed an even higher level of dedication. I asked him what his main motivation for playing was, and he answered:

> It was to be the best player. That's obvious. That's like the main point of playing: to be best, best, best. The best player in the guild, the best player on the server, best in everything.

During the first interview, I understood that his choice of having priests as avatars – three of which he had developed to the max level – was partly a reflection of his struggles with religious issues. He sometimes tried to incorporate his Christian faith into this new environment, and explained to me that '[w]hen you create a character and you are a Christian, you don't run around as an assassin, right. It's not exactly your first choice.' He tried to align these two worlds, to make his life coherent. This was not something he managed very well, and he ended up switching from one arena to the other. For instance, in one of his breaks from the game, he started studying theology at university but quit after a few months and started playing *World of Warcraft* again.

In a follow-up survey conducted 18 months after the interview, he told me he had played a wide range of games since we last spoke, including simpler online games such as *Settlers of Catan*, *FarmVille* and the strategy game *Starcraft: Brood War*, which he played in single-player mode. While the playing still had smaller bursts of intensity, he managed overall to keep the amount down. The tension between his religious belief and gaming had also come to some sort of resolution, and he explained that,

> [s]ince we met, I have been through some changes. I mentioned briefly how my faith as a Christian had been difficult for me. It has been a long process and something I have 'wished for' for a long time but this summer I found my belief in Jesus as an active Christian. This is very valuable to me and has tempered my eagerness to play. I don't want to spend more time on it. When I look back at *World of Warcraft*, it has been the most destructive part of my life, where I have let all responsibility go and made the least out of my life just to be able to focus on gaming.

On one level his playing excesses resemble an old-fashioned teenage rebellion, directed towards the religious tenets and obligations he was brought up with. What is interesting is that the contrast between the community-oriented Christianity and the individual satisfaction that playing represented for him, seems particularly large. In our Western society, individuality is held in high regard, although you still find groups that more generally favour the needs of the group over the individual. The tension between these two value systems seems to play a part in Erik's inner conflict, manifested in his game history.

If we approach his story from an existential perspective, it can be framed as a struggle to fit into his surroundings and a necessary process of coming to terms with who he is supposed to be as a grown-up. The game provided a space that enabled him to reflect on his religious struggles and also to experience what separation from his parish really meant to him. While he himself regarded the playing as harmful, it is not difficult to see how it has also been a tool for him to reflect upon issues that were crucial in his transition toward adulthood. From a life phase perspective, the struggles

he experienced can be related to a phase where explorations of 'various possible life directions' (Arnett 2000: 471) and the postponing of adult responsibility are accepted.

Similar patterns were also recognizable in the stories of my other informants; generally, the periods of excessive playing had started in their late adolescence and correlated negatively with increased responsibilities: moving away from their parents, starting an education at university, having to provide for themselves or becoming a parent were elements that caused them to restrict their playing time, often considerably. This was especially evident in my follow-up survey, as all of the informants told me they had reduced their amount of playing compared to 18 months earlier. Whether the informants really had reduced their playing amount is difficult to assess through a survey, but several offered an explanation for why they had less time for playing. For instance, Lars explained that he still loved playing games but that activities like 'school, volunteer work, social activities, a new job and a girlfriend' had taken priority over gaming. He also expressed hope that someday he would be in a life situation with more time for leisure activities, but without any clear vision of when that would be.

Jesper Juul has described how a life with children, jobs, and general adult responsibilities is not conducive to playing video games for long periods of time. He explains that '[t]he player that at one time was a stereotypical hardcore player may find him- or herself in a new life situation: still wanting to play video games, but only able to play short sessions at a time' (Juul 2010: 51). New responsibilities alter what games it is possible to engage in, steering users from demanding game activities like raiding to casual games that are interruptible and possible to play for a few minutes at a time.

Even those of my informants who had suffered problems in relation to games repeatedly, and over the course of many years, reduced their playing considerably when entering adulthood. Practical reasons and more responsibilities explain part of this or, as Erik stated, 'when you live on your own, you've got to have money to pay the rent and stuff. Then you obviously get less time for playing'. Becoming an adult simply gives less room for self-indulgence and excess. A different reason was voiced by Geir, the informant who estimated having played online games for 1,000 days between the ages of 16 and 27. In the follow-up survey he was 29 years old and he explained that his '[p]laying bursts come more seldom and last shorter than before, as it becomes more and more difficult to defend computer game playing the older you get, in addition to not having the same dedication and patience as earlier'.

What is reflected in this statement, beside the practicalities of entering adulthood, is the view that playing games is more suitable for children and adolescents than for adults. Adults should pursue more worthwhile activities than playing games. Having control over your playing is not only a question of maturity and age but also about priorities and identity, as being a reckless, self-absorbed gamer becomes a less suitable social position the older you get. When most of your peers adjust to the demands of society and focus their attention on family, education and work, you are more likely to do the same. To identify as someone who suffers from problem gaming or to identify as someone who just does not bother about what 'society' or 'grown-ups' think

you should do are two very different mind-frames. For players, like Geir, who have obviously struggled with controlling gaming, to enter a life phase where playing no longer constitutes prominent social capital may make the dedication to controlling the excesses stronger. This again suggests that the player was not completely without the ability to control the excesses in the first place but, rather, that he or she needed to identify or label it as a genuine problem in order to deal with it.

Discussion: ubiquitous media and cultural standing

The way that computer games in the West are associated with children and adolescents also influences how they are treated by society in general. If we move to a culture where computer games have a higher standing, we can see a different image of them. Taylor, in her book *Raising the Stakes* (2012), has described how the e-sport arena in South Korea has become a professional scene on par with traditional physical sports: it is a public spectacle; computer game tournaments are broadcast on television; gaming can become a professional occupation. When gaming has the same cultural clout as soccer, with professional gamers receiving a monthly pay cheque, gaming becomes indistinguishable from other types of work. Taylor contrasts this with an idea of gaming that more of us are familiar with:

> The notion of converting something you love into something you can do as a vocation holds an almost mythical status in our culture, a goal only the luckiest few attain. And yet when it comes to computer games and their highest intensive play, alarm bells often go off. (Taylor 2012: 99)

In the West, gaming events or tournaments rarely reach mainstream media, and earning a living by playing computer games is not really a feasible option. Unsurprisingly, few parents see excessive computer game playing as part of a grander plan for a prosperous life. And while most young people adjust their life trajectory toward work and education according to commonly accepted cultural scripts, there is also a tension between the generations.

With increased leisure time at our disposal and online media being close to ubiquitous, gaming and online socialisation have moved from the fringes of our culture and established themselves much closer to the centre. Online games are part of a larger trend that changes the way we socialise, work and play. It is not surprising that some people find these arenas more worthwhile and meaningful, as the life outside of them can be boring or too challenging. Trying to accomplish something in the outside world can be hard and the criteria for success difficult to understand. Conversely, progress and success are easily monitored in game worlds. And, while they can also be arenas for conflict and abuse, they are usually easier to navigate and master.

Online games offer endless escape and are environments that can fulfil many of our social needs. For some, the escape comes too easily and makes it harder to

focus on other aspects of life; aspects that may need their full attention. But, when we discuss downsides of online games, we must recognise the extent to which online media on the whole are integrated into our lives, especially for the younger generation. Teenagers are, typically, situated in more than one space at a time, whether they are gaming from the laptop while watching television with their family, or updating their Facebook status during a movie with friends. Young people have often integrated online media into their lives to the extent that the online-offline distinction is meaningless to them.

The way media penetrates our society means that there are few situations where children and adolescents are not exposed to some sort of media message. This also changes the role of parenting. Finding ways to handle the constant beckoning of the media, and teaching children time-management skills, is more important now than a generation ago. And while we could wish for a life without the abundance of media, this is the sign of the times: captivating media forms, fiction and games are not going to disappear any time soon. What is important is that we make an effort to understand what coming of age in today's society is like, whether we are parents or researchers, and, when we raise our concerns about media usage, that we remember the broader context of which the media are part.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter has been published in the book *A World of Excesses: Online Games and Excessive Playing* (Karlsen 2013). The version in this volume has been reedited in order to serve as a stand-alone text without the context of the book. It is reprinted by courtesy of Ashgate/Routledge.
2. The full title of the book is: *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime and Religion.*

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