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Online Gamers, Lived Experiences, and Sense of Belonging: Students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

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Abstract

Individuals who partake in video games are often regarded with prejudice. It is an activity that is perceived to be mainly related to senseless leisure and teenage entertainment. However, many diverse people make video games such an important part of their lives that they become passionately engaged in it. Video games and online video gaming offer the player immersive experiences unlike any other forms of media. A phenomenological and interpretive exploration is undertaken in order to gain a deeper understanding of the narratives of online gamers and their experiences of a sense of belonging to the associated online communities. Through the use of in-depth interviews, the article explores various aspects of the life stories of a group of eight South African university students. It attempts to show how online gaming has become a part of their lifeworlds. The aim of this article is to present the narratives of online gamers as rich and descriptive accounts that maintain the voices of the participants. Various aspects of the lifeworlds of online gamers are explored. Firstly, an exploration is undertaken to gain an understanding of what it means to be a gamer. It focuses on how a person can become involved with gaming and how it can evolve into something that a person is engaged with on a daily basis. Secondly, it explores how video games influence the perception of reality of gamers. Immersion in video games can transfer a player into an alternative reality and can take the focus away from the real world. This can lead to feelings of joy and excitement, but can also lead to escapism. Lastly, the article shifts attention towards how online video gamers experience online communities. Players can have positive experiences with random strangers online, but because of the anonymous nature of the online environment, it can also lead to negative and isolating experiences.

Keywords Phenomenology; Interpretive Sociology; Online Video Gaming; Lived Experiences; Sense of Belonging; Immersion; Socialization

Video games have grown into a worldwide phenomenon becoming part of international culture and entertainment. Initially, these games were perceived as a leisure activity for mainly male teenagers, but as the focus on video games increased incrementally over time, diverse individuals now partake in gaming. This activity is no longer considered a predominantly teenage male activity. The number of people playing video games increases every year, showing no signs of slowing down. One reason for its growth in popularity is the perception that a video game is a richly expressive and creative medium, offering individuals an immersive experience unlike most other forms of media. This article aims to understand how people become involved with

online gaming and how it evolves into an important part of their everyday life.

We subscribe to the video game definition of Salen and Zimmerman (2004:94): "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." Rules are used to provide structure in video gaming, while the quantifiable outcome proposes that games should have goals that can be reached—leading to winning or losing. Since there are goals resulting in an outcome, an element of conflict arises in a video game, however, because some of these goals require teamwork to complete the game, an element of co-operation may also arise. Therefore,

these games achieve more than simply providing entertainment for players. Video games enable the fostering of a community and even allow friendships to be formed.

What sets video games apart from other forms of media is their ability to stimulate, in a convincingly real manner, interaction and bonding between players (Lundmark 2015:58). They offer creative ways for individuals to interact with other players and with the gaming environment by allowing these players to make unique choices that generate different outcomes in substantial ways (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). In addition to offering players opportunities to interact and make choices, video games combine functionality with aesthetics, art, and science to further their appeal (Borowiecki and Prieto-Rodriguez 2015:239). People from all walks of life seem to enjoy taking part in this action and it has become a part of their daily life, influencing their cultural interactions (Culig et al. 2013; Lorentz, Ferguson, and Schott 2015).

With these capabilities, video gaming has grown to become one of the most popular forms of media (Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Boulton and Cremin 2011; Clarke 2013). Millions of people play and interact with other players on the Internet (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, and Taute 2014:853) on various platforms and devices (Borowiecki and Prieto-Rodriguez 2015). Widespread online gaming also occurs in South Africa. Estimates of the gaming industry in South Africa project that it earned 1.6 billion South African Rand in turnover from October 2007 to October 2008, out-performing other media such as movies and music during that period (Blyth

2009). However, even though gaming is a popular activity in South Africa, not all South Africans are exposed to it. Having access to gaming platforms is closely related to the income level of a household, and because of this, commentators suggest that online gaming is mostly found in White households in the higher income brackets (Walton and Pallitt 2012:348).

One of the aims of the research is to understand why people allow video games to become a big part of their lives. Several motivations seem to exist for people to partake in online gaming. On the surface, it appears that people become involved with gaming in order to relax and to escape reality (Billieux et al. 2013:108). However, often players become very passionate about gaming and more complex motivations influence their participation in online games. Main motivations to play relate to socializing with others, to gain a sense of achievement, and to be immersed in an alternate reality (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, and Martin 2015). Other motivations also exist, such as stimulating competitive needs, coping with stress, developing leadership and communication skills, as well as indulging in fantasy and recreation (Fuster et al. 2014).

In online communities, social contact and communication with other players often lead to the creation of friendships and interpersonal growth (Granic, Lobel, and Engels 2013; Badrinarayanan et al. 2014). Essentially, providing players with immersion influences the social construction of reality of players. Although interaction in the game may not be considered *real* and may not have consequences in the physical world, the actions in which players are

involved engage parts of the human consciousness and, therefore, the choices and consequences are often experienced as real for the players (Berger and Luckmann 1991; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2012; Latorre 2015).

One of the end products of playing online games—combined with the immersion and constant social contact—is the development of a sense of belonging for players in online communities. Players strive to be part of a larger online community and they try to make an impact on these communities. Carpiano and Hystad (2011:606-607) offer four key components of a sense of belonging that can explain how players achieve this sense of belonging. The *first component* refers to membership of the community. This is a central component and relates to the feeling of connectedness or feeling of a sense of personal relatedness. The *second component* is when a sense of belonging is fostered and the individuals feel their actions matter and can make a difference (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:606-607). The *third component* in experiencing a sense of belonging is integration and fulfillment of needs (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:607). In order for players to feel that they are part of the online community, they should be considered as valuable members of the team and should feel that the community fulfils their needs. This will lead to the player feeling a sense of personal relatedness towards the community. The *last component* of this sense of belonging is the sharing of emotional connections (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:607). This component relates to how members are committed to each other and believe that they share a history, common places, and similar experiences. Personality also often plays a role in how

a person interacts with his/her environment. If the player is extroverted and open towards new experiences, he/she will most likely become more involved with online communities (Park and Lee 2012). With interconnectedness and involvement a form of culture is established over time. If the community is safe and inviting, and passes on valuable information to its members, the culture will thrive and more players will join the online community (Haigh, Russell, and Dutton 2015).

Theoretical and Methodological Context

Narrative research is always interpretive. The aim of the study is to gain insight into the world of online gamers and to indicate how these individuals experience their world on a day-to-day basis. “Narrative research...[therefore] strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in society” (Josselson 2006:8). The stories of the gamers are interpreted in order to understand the meaning that they attribute to online gaming (Goodson and Gill 2011). People construct, reconstruct, and internalize their own realities through storytelling in order to make sense of their lives. However, how people interpret, digest, and recount their own experiences and the experiences of other people is subjective. In this project, the narrative approach is used by focusing on how participants construct their own stories. The aim is to break open the meaning contained in the perceptions and in the stories of the gamers and to attempt to reconstruct their views of reality (Packer and Addison 1989; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2012). These realities are reconstructed and retold in order to help us to understand the narratives of online gamers.

Because of its interpretive nature, a qualitative research design is appropriate for this study, since the goal is to obtain thick descriptions of the lived experiences of online gamers and of how they achieve a sense of belonging in the virtual communities of the online world (Palinkas 2014). Qualitative research strives towards obtaining an understanding of existing perceptions. It also seeks to establish an interpretation of phenomena related to online gaming from the point of view of the individuals experiencing these phenomena in their lifeworld (Jacobsen 2009; Palinkas 2014). Therefore, the phenomena are studied in the context within which they take place (Silverman 2011). In other words, online gaming is investigated in the context of online gamers portraying their lifeworlds through their narratives. With this in mind, the research relies on the theoretical foundation of phenomenology to understand how individuals make sense of the perceptions they have of the world. In this regard, we accept that practical consciousness is the foundation for action and interaction (Burger 1977; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). The intention is, therefore, to pull online gamers out of their practical consciousness and natural attitudes in order to allow them to consciously contemplate their habits of online gaming. By allowing them to recreate their lived experiences through stories, they open up their lifeworlds in order for us to get a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

In order to identify research participants, the following criteria are set: a participant has to be active in personal computer (PC) gaming or must have been active at a certain point in his/her life. Additionally, participants must have engaged in some

form of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Participants of any race or gender are allowed to take part in the study, provided they are students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. Purposive and snowball sampling are employed to select research participants. Purposive sampling is an ideal method to find suitable candidates because the participants must be unique cases that contain specific informative criteria and that can offer in-depth information (Neuman 2000:198; Maxwell 2012:93). The first participant is recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that he/she fits the criteria. After the recruitment of the first participant, a snowball method of non-probability sampling (using available participants to identify new participants that fit the criteria of online gamers) is used to find other suitable candidates (Neuman 2000). All participants turned out to be White South Africans. Students of different races were approached to participate in the study, however, it was not possible to find participants satisfying all the inclusion criteria. The composition of the sample confirms views in the literature that suggest that, due to the income inequality of South Africa, mostly members of households in higher income brackets are able to engage in online gaming—the profile of South African online gamers has been alluded to earlier (Walton and Pallitt 2012).

The data collection method for this study is in-depth interviews. It offers an opportunity to gain insight into the lived experience and subjectivity of a person's life (Seale et al. 2007:15). Data collected by in-depth interviews can identify meaningful themes in the lifeworld of research participants which relate

to their online gaming experiences (Kvale 2007). During an interview, open-ended questions are used, providing the participants the opportunity to respond freely and to discuss their experiences in detail without inhibition (Royse 2008:183). The conversations are recorded verbatim and also transcribed verbatim (Caplovitz 1983:102). Follow-up questions allow the narratives to be expanded on in order to create a clearer picture.

Any form of research contains challenges that need to be considered and handled in accordance with existing ethical codes and standards (Neuman 2000; Seale et al. 2007). Ethical issues that are prominent in the study are consent, confidentiality, and trust (Neuman 2000; Seale et al. 2007). The study also received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities from the University of the Free State—UFS-HSD2016/0330.

Eight participants are recruited by means of purposive and snowball sampling methods. In-depth interviews are used for establishing a clear narrative of the experiences of online gamers. All research participants are young adults ranging from 18 to 25 years of age. At the time of the interviews, they were all enrolled as students at the University of the Free State. Participants study towards a range of degrees: industrial psychology, information technology, education, history, arts, and accounting. Each participant offers a unique perspective into the world of video gaming. Thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) are employed (Riessman 2008; Pringlie et al. 2010; Grbich 2013). The findings of the study present a deeper understanding of what it is like to be an online gamer

in the associated online gaming communities. To protect the privacy and identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used.

The Online Gamer

All participants recall that they became involved with online gaming at a young age. In most cases, family members and friends introduced them to video games, particularly older siblings and cousins. Where no family members or friends provided the introduction, research participants were often lead by their own curiosity and interest, where exploring computers and video games lead to a more longstanding interest in video games.

Playing with other people is an often-occurring motivation to become involved with video gaming. Participants recall that initially they partook in LAN (Local Area Network) events. At these events, gamers brought their own computers and played together. However, over time, video games evolved and re-established themselves as predominantly part of the *online* community via the World Wide Web. The widespread availability of the Internet provides players with the option to connect and interact with each other online. In this way, video gaming is made easily accessible and increasing numbers of players shift towards online gaming (Boulton and Cremin 2011:341).

The research participants express that the shift towards online gaming initially was difficult, as a few years ago (in South Africa) Internet access was relatively unknown in most households. As a result, participants were, at first, “outsiders” from the

online gaming experience. The idea of being an *outsider* in as far as the online gaming world was concerned was frustrating to participants who felt that they were missing out on the largest part of what gaming has to offer.

Upon gaining Internet access, participants narrate that they start to play video games more regularly, with gaming becoming a part of their everyday life and routine (Jacobsen 2009:97). Their narratives reveal how video gaming increased in importance in their lives. They feel a passion towards gaming, with one participant incorporating it into his career-life. Stephen, an industrial psychology student, explains:

I'm so passionate about this that I even started my own company because of online gaming. So, like now, other gamers also feel the joy of online gaming. [Stephen]

The passion people have for online gaming can lead to two types of behavior. They can either be obsessively passionate about gaming or have a harmonious passion (Fuster et al. 2014:293). Participants state that they have learned to maintain a balance between playing video games and actively participating in other parts of their life. While obsessively playing video games at some point in their lives, most participants realize the need for a healthy balance, particularly as it relates to their studies. Ben, who studies information technology, explains how he started to understand the importance of not becoming obsessed with video games.

A few years back it was a very big part of my life, because it was my biggest hobby. It's like it was my

sport...I was basically living online. Currently, I'm not so much playing games. I'm more just trying to sort my life out. Just getting all the building blocks together at the right place. Because I don't want to make a stupid mistake and then having lived my regret... There's always a space for it...I like having a diverse life. I love having different things and stuff. I don't want to go in my small box. I want to experience a lot of things. I think if this current semester is over, I will play a lot again [online], like when it's holiday. [Ben]

Passion is an essential dimension to the understanding of why video gaming is such an important part of a gamer's life. Likewise, exploration into what causes a person to become passionate about gaming is also necessary. Socializing with others and competitiveness stand out as the two main driving forces motivating a person to play online video games, becoming an online gamer.

Online games create an environment to participate in activities and to socialize with others without being in the same location (Badrinarayanan et al. 2015:1046). Some participants indicate that they would only play online games with friends they know in person. While socializing with friends can add to the satisfaction players experience in online gaming, most acknowledge that playing with strangers can also be an entertaining experience that can lead to establishing new connections. Eric, who studies education, maintains that the aspect of socializing with strangers can enrich the experience of playing online.

It's definitely something that I enjoy—meeting new people—but on a different level than you usually do. You

can really socialize a lot, learn a lot from other people. More than one would expect. And there was actually so many people you can meet online. And all of them have the same interests as you, because they're also playing the same game as you're playing. So, I really enjoyed meeting people online, especially in games. [Eric]

Competition between players presents diverse experiences for participants. People want to achieve the best outcomes and win most of the games they play online. Social comparison presents one explanation of why people are competitive. Social comparison arises the moment a person observes others in domains related to achievements, interpersonal relationships, and health (Ozimek and Bierhoff 2016:272). In the case of online games, players compare themselves to others in so far as the domain of achieving the game's goals are concerned. Wanting to be as good, if not better, than your friends, or other players, motivates you to try to play better. Participants explain this as something in the human nature. Emily explains that—while competitiveness can enrich the gaming experience and allow a person to play passionately—too much of these competitive feelings can have a negative impact on your gaming experience and sense of self.

That's sadly the thing. I don't become too competitive. And if I find myself becoming too competitive, I try to remove myself from it, for a while. Just to like cool my head. And then I go back. I would say because I don't like it. [Emily]

I didn't use to be like this. I used to be much more competitive and angry. I used to break the controls and almost throw the remotes against the

wall and kick stuff. I used to be: react in very bold and outrageous ways. But, then I realized that: this is not right. This isn't right to react like this. And like: if I'm going to become like this, I don't want to then play, because it takes the fun away. [Emily]

Constructing Reality

Video games offer an immersive experience that is distinct from other forms of engagement with media (Culig et al. 2013; Lorentz et al. 2015). Unlike books and films, games allow you to become the center of an interactive story. It is able to draw your focus towards another world and reality. In the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991), the notion is brought forth that individuals construct their own realities by using human consciousness. Although video games provide a virtual reality for players, the stories produced by events within the games often are real stories to the players—becoming a part of their reality (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2012). When players immerse themselves into a game, they allow virtual reality to become a part of their own realities. Consequently, when a person immerses himself/herself into a game, the game becomes a part of his/her narrative. For the participants, being immersed means you become the character that you are playing. You start to live in that moment of playing video games and it occupies your full attention. You play more intensely, become more competitive, and feel attached to the character. Research participants narrate that becoming immersed in a game allows for a more genuine (authentic) and enriching experience.

I literally immerse myself with a character. Let's say my character is so hungry and I finally find a tin can of beans in a deserted house on the map...I would be actually happy because my character is surviving. Same goes [for when] there's a firefight. I would be stressed as hell. It's like real life, you don't [know] if someone's behind you or not. So, you would be so paranoid as hell and scared as hell. So...it would feel literally like real life. [Stephen]

Stephen illustrates how video games can have an effect on a person's emotions and thoughts. Players are able to put themselves in the place of their gaming characters and the realities of their characters—it becomes their reality. However, becoming too immersed in these games can contribute to gamers losing track of reality and, in some cases, causing them to turn towards gaming as a means to escape their everyday lifeworld.

When a player starts to prefer the game's reality over his/her own reality, it becomes a form of escaping reality with the aim of avoiding the demands of the real world (Clancy, Arvola, and Gjaerum 2015:8-9). During the interviews, most participants indicate that they feel a sense of immersion and safety in their video games. A few participants share their viewpoints on escaping reality and how it can become a part of life. In Zoey's—an accounting student—case, escaping her reality is not because of how these games pull her in but rather of how her home environment pushes her more towards immersing herself into video games.

When I started playing, there was a lot of stuff happening in my house. My dad was having an affair

and everything...And then, it was so easy: to just go and play games, and then everything is gone. And...then afterwards I would be so sad to return to this, this life. And...so, yeah, I think that's the main reason. Because there was bad stuff happening, and then I played and then I feel nice. And afterwards it's so...ugh!...So, then I started comparing [life] to gaming... Because then I'd rather play the whole time and never return to life that's so hard at that moment. [Zoey]

Zoey's narrative reveals how games are able to provide her with an escape from her circumstances. In real life, she feels constrained and also realizes that being able to do the things she wants to—such as travelling and seeing the world—requires money and time. In games, people can do different things and go to different places without money. Gamers are able to manipulate their virtual world in order to receive the most benefit from it. This often contrasts with the reality in which players find themselves—a reality that cannot easily be changed or manipulated. When a person finds himself/herself in such a reality, he/she is able to escape that reality through gaming (Martoncik and Loksa 2016:127-128).

Another aspect of video gaming that provides gamers an opportunity to immerse themselves into another reality is decision-making. When players are provided with freedom to decide, they feel more motivated to partake (Rapp et al. 2017:113). In role-playing games, players are provided with many choices. One of the choices players can make is the sex of their game character. Gender swapping—being able to play the role of a different sex—opens opportunities to encounter unique experiences (Song

and Jung 2015:435). Female gamers sometimes play as male characters—using male avatars to hide their female identity from other people in the online game world (Isaksson 2012). Research participants indicate that it offers a different experience and allows the player to be placed in unique situations.

I don't think it's something bad, no, because it's interesting. It's interesting to see how a man would react in a certain situation. If I think of a role-playing game now, of an RPG, yeah. It's interesting because I have done it. I have played a male character just to see how...I don't know, myself as a male character [would] react...Yeah, I don't think it's bad. I just don't like it when... like guys do it on purpose. Like they would then play a female character on World of Warcraft and tell everyone they are a girl. I don't like that. But, if you're just interested in, like...seeing...not seeing other people's reactions, and also just experiencing that. I don't think there is anything wrong with it. I think it's quite fun. I think it's a possibility that games have given us that we didn't usually have. [Emily]

Experiencing Belonging

A sense of belonging can be conceptualized as a feeling of connectedness with the community (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:607) and feeling that the community is supportive towards its members (Le, LaCost, and Wismer 2016:126-127). The four key components of a sense of belonging are: membership, influence (members' contributions matter and their actions make a difference in the community), integration/fulfillment of needs (a member is con-

sidered as a valuable asset whose needs are important), and sharing of emotional connections (members are able to share history, common places, and similar experiences).

Feeling a part of the online gaming community is something that varies from player to player according to participants of this study. For some players it is possible to feel a sense of belonging when entering a "foreign" online community and they have little problem in becoming friends with strangers. Other participants explain that while they feel a sense of connection with the online community, this sense of connection is something different to what they share with their real life friends that they interact with face-to-face. If they play an online game on their own, they do not really feel a part of the online community without physically having their friends at their side. It is also possible for players to feel no sense of connection with the community at all. For some, it is only possible to feel a part of the group if the members of the group are your friends in real life.

David, an education student, expresses that it is easier for him to become part of gaming communities than it is to become part of social groups in real life. He says that he is able to make friends in gaming communities with ease and has made close friendships through his online games.

Other than the friends I've already made, I'm still busy crafting new relationships on a day to day basis...I really enjoy meeting people. Obviously, I wouldn't go out on a limb, meeting a complete stranger on my own. [David]

David feels a sense of belonging, as described by Carpiano and Hystad (2011), by being able to make friends and have an emotional connection with them. Participants reflect a sense that even though you feel part of the gaming community, caution always has to prevail. David's comment above alludes to this and Emily's narrative explains this idea more fully:

It can be with strangers. I think it takes longer with strangers, but definitely it can be with strangers. Obviously, there's threats and people who lie. I see most of these people I've met online who said they're a girl are not—[or rather] that's just a guess. So, there wasn't a specific occurrence...I think a lot of people who play online games are guys pretending to be girls just to get stuff [laughs]. But, I did make a very good friend. A guy who lives in P.E. over World of Warcraft. And I think the big thing is, it takes longer because you are quite cautious. You don't want to just say your real name online and stuff like that. But, it takes longer, but then also there's a reward in it. You gain friends which you never would have met in real life. Which also has a certain fun quality...It's a good experience. [Emily]

Participants bring up the notion that games create an environment within which it is possible to become personally involved with someone. In online gaming, it is possible to become close friends or even become romantically involved with another player. Spending time playing games with friends leads to deepening friendships as in most cases participants describe gaming as an activity similar to any other pastime you perform with friends.

During the interviews, gaming is often associated with sport, where people spend time together doing something which requires communication and teamwork. Online gaming and sport create an environment for people to become friends, but playing online games does have certain benefits over sports. Gamers are able to play from the comfort of their homes (Fuster et al. 2014) and playing online is more convenient than having to make an effort to meet in person. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) point out that playing games can extend for longer periods of time without having the physical strain of playing sports. This results in more time spent together on playing games, developing friendships, and meeting new people. Players have stated, however, that they feel that friendships developed during gaming do so at the same pace as friendships formed through playing sport or other activities:

It's definitely something that is possible during online gaming because you meet people that you would probably never have met in real life. Because you meet people from all over the world. So, yes, definitely that, and it grows much more...Because you're playing the game together, and then you just build on top of that. It's not like you're meeting someone in a bar and you don't know if you have anything in common at all. You kind of know already: "Okay, this person is into games." So, this person plays and might play other games and might also be interested in Anime [a style of Japanese film and television animation]. And...like you already, you know that person is already kind of part of this sub-community. [Emily]

Participants agree that an effort needs to be put into maintaining new friendships formed online. A per-

son needs to keep playing with the new friend and sometimes needs to interact more than just playing games. Most participants confirm that gaming cannot be the only aspect of the friendship, and that it would not last if there are no other common interests. It is with this notion in mind that Peter, an information technology student, expresses that he does not find it worth his effort to befriend random online players. He explains that, if you only have that one game in common, it is not enough to make a lasting connection with someone. He continues by saying the chances of meeting the other player in person are very slim. Thus, Peter persists on developing his friendships with people he knows in person. For him, gaming is something that helps existing (face-to-face) relationships to grow.

I can basically think of like, it's like at a book club. And then they talk about the book. What we do is we've all finished the game and then we talk about the game. I love doing that...like every second weekend we get together and *braai* [have a barbeque] and talk about game endings and how fun it was.
[Peter]

In the players' narratives, different perspectives on how gaming influences friendships are given. For most gamers, it is possible to befriend a person online and become good friends. However, maintaining an online friendship through playing games is not sufficient. Participants express that people must have more than one interest in common, and that they prefer to also bond in person. Sharing the lived experiences of fellow online gamers can lead to the possibility of gamers experiencing a shared emotional connection with each other.

Most respondents state that sharing personal information and intimate details of their lives should be kept at a minimum. Stephen summarizes this view by expressing that he does feel an emotional connectedness with his friends by sharing his passions for gaming and for overcoming obstacles in games. However, he does not easily share something online with someone he does not know, and he keeps his gaming accounts private.

I would only like to disclose this to people I would know for like years and stuff. I wouldn't give away private stuff within like seconds...With international gamers I would like say: "Hey! From which country are you? Oh, you're from Australia. I'm from South Africa," and stuff like that. But, I wouldn't go like personal stuff that could be to my detriment. I would only share stuff that would not invade my privacy. So, like I said, if I'm friends with the person, like a real friend. And I have him on Facebook, because of the gaming and stuff. I would then share a little bit more intimate details of my private life. [Stephen]

Only after adding them as friends and spending more time with them does Stephen begin to share personal details. But, the shared information remain mostly about where they live and what they do for a living. Only after he has met them in person, the friendship starts to grow. Aaron, a history student, builds on this viewpoint by explaining that he feels gaming is not a platform where a person can share personal details or deep emotions.

I don't think gaming is a place to share personal feelings. It's just weird...When I play with my good friends online, we will ask like each other personal

questions, but we know each other. But, I will say if we were not playing the games, we will still ask each other the same questions, like: “No, man, how’s it going with that girl you like?” Or something like that. But, I don’t believe like gaming is the platform, is the place to share more deep emotions. [Aaron]

He elaborates that you can talk with a personal friend about what is going on in your life, but you can do that at any location if it is a close friend. Aaron continues that he cannot see online gaming as a platform where a person meets another, they become close friends, and share such personal information. If it is to happen, it will take a long time.

I can’t see how when I play with someone, met someone randomly online, and we start [becoming] friends...It will take me at least like 6 months to, on my own, to opening up. [Aaron]

Concluding Thoughts

This study seeks to gain a perception of what video games and online gaming entail. A context of current insights into the phenomenon of online gaming is provided to move the focus towards understanding the everyday lifeworlds of online gamers. People can become gamers from an early age through introduction to gaming by family members or friends. What motivates them to continue playing are driving forces such as socializing with friends and strangers in an online environment, as well as feeling a sense of well-being and accomplishment in a competitive environment. Passion also plays a role; having a passion for something can be an important motivator for a person to participate.

Existing literature on this topic agrees that online video games offer an immersive experience unlike many other forms of media. Players are provided opportunities to grow and to allow games to become a part of their identity. Immersing into one’s own lifeworld and escaping reality are two dimensions of *The Social Construction of Reality* within video games. In the participants’ narratives, they express these feelings. People project themselves onto the gaming characters that they encounter in video games. The realities of their characters coincide with their own.

From the narratives it is clear that online gaming is no longer only a recreational or passively executed leisure activity. Video and online games have become distinctive activities which require a substantial amount of agency. The article, therefore, explores the lifeworlds of online gamers and provides insight into why gaming becomes such a large part of their lives. Experiencing a sense of belonging to online gaming communities is an important reason why gaming becomes a part of participants’ lives. For some players, it is possible to instantly feel a sense of belonging upon entering a random community, and they find it easy to become friends with strangers. On the other hand, some players may only feel a sense of connection with real life friends who play with them online. It is clear that through online gaming friendships and bonds can be forged. However, most participants express that they do not feel that video gaming is a platform where people are able to share intimate information with each other.

Future research can aim to explore the female gamers’ experiences. Throughout the narratives

of the participants, the stories told by the two female participants portrayed significantly different experiences than that of their male counterparts. Female participants voiced that they face more stigma and prejudice because of their gender—mainly from male gamers who feel that the world of online gaming is a male domain. Additionally, female gamers appear to face stigma and prejudice from other females who do not play video games.

Future research can elaborate on gender equality in online gaming, and whether female gamers find gender equality a necessity. It can also explore the role of gender swapping in gaming. In the study, females find it easier to immerse themselves into the gaming reality and find it harder to separate themselves from their moral beliefs. Further research is required to investigate and understand these standpoints.

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