

Chapter 21

Social Contributors and Consequences of Habitual and Compulsive Game Play

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between social motivations, pro-social relationship outcomes, and two types of game play—habitual and compulsive—in the context of simulation games on Facebook. Social motivations were significantly associated with compulsive game play, but not habitual game play. Compulsive play was a positive predictor of pro-social outcomes whereas habitual use was not. By differentiating two different types of media use that are both associated with problematic use, the authors see that social factors contribute to people’s inability to control their gaming behavior, but that the so-called “addictive” behavior can also yield positive relationship outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Online game usage has been characterized as one of the most addictive activities since the early ages of the Internet (Grusser, Thalemann, & Griffiths, 2007; Young, 1998). Social network games (SNGs), in particular, have been a target of criticism by popular press as a source of addiction. SNGs are digital game applications that use network data from social network sites such as Facebook (Wohn, Lampe, Wash, Ellison, & Vitak, 2011). Prior research has found that the time people spend playing SNGs can be largely attributed to habit, and this habitual behavior can be predicted by specific features of the game which require repetitive actions (Wohn, 2012).

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SNGs are defined by their platform rather than their gameplay genre (Wohn & Lee, 2013). The connection to social network sites enables SNG players to interact both within the game and outside of the game on the social network sites, making them different from single-player games or even multiplayer games that exist on isolated platforms. From a communication perspective, the social connections that SNG players make are interesting because unlike most massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, players are exposed to the identity of their fellow game players outside of the game.

Playing games with people whom one has connections to offline can have its ups and downs. SNGs often rely on use of network connections to advance in the game (Wohn, Lee, Sung, & Bjornrud, 2010) by requiring that players request their connections for favors. Prior studies have shown that these obligations can sometimes be overwhelming and coaxes people to play the game even when they don't want to (Wohn et al., 2011). However, there has been evidence that playing these games can have positive outcomes—for example, they can serve as mechanisms of bonding (Price & Wearn, 2012; Wohn et al., 2011), especially for families that are not co-located (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014).

As of 2013, the United States SNG market value is estimated to be around \$152 million US dollars, with nearly 200 million players worldwide (Superdata, 2014). SNGs attract a wide range of players, perhaps because they are often free to play and can be played in short sessions. It is important to understand why SNGs are so popular among so many players, not only from a design perspective, but also from the players' motivation and expectation perspectives.

In this paper, we are interested in the connections between social factors and problematic behavior, or so-called “addiction,” in SNGs. From a practical perspective, it is important to understand addiction of SNGs because there are many self-reported addicts, as reflected in anecdotal evidence in media reports and the number of game addict support groups online (Tran, 2010). However, more importantly, we address the challenges that the scholarly community has been facing in terms of trying to define and measure what exactly “addiction” is. To do that, we suggest that we shouldn't be using the colloquial term of addiction at all, but looking at constructs that are more theoretically driven—such as compulsive behavior and habitual behavior. We explored the relationship between social motivation (why people play), how people play, and their relationship outcomes. In particular, we examine two types of play that have been associated in the past with addiction: compulsive play and habitual play. By differentiating these two types of play, we will be able to see how these different play types are associated with different motivations and different relationship outcomes.

EXPLAINING ADDICTION: COMPULSIVE OR HABITUAL?

For the past decade, researchers studying problematic game play have had very little consensus on the conceptualization of addiction as a phenomena. Several different terminologies have been used, including compulsive, addiction, excessive, pathological and problematic—all referring to the similar undesired effects of online game playing (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). These undesired effects, generally speaking, are such that the “gamers” play without self-restraint, to the exclusion of other interests, and their persistent and recurrent online activity results in clinically significant impairment or distress (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013).

The underlying characteristics of behavioral disorders related to game play are in most studies identified with symptoms of substance addictions (Grusser, Thalemann, & Griffiths, 2007; Hussain & Griffiths,

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