

Chapter 26

“I Can’t Do It by Myself”: An IPA of Clients Seeking Psychotherapy for Their MMORPG Addiction

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ABSTRACT

The addiction to Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) is a contemporary phenomenon which emerges against the background of the dissolution of traditional communities. The individuals who participate in these games seek sociability and find a variety of options to partake in social life online. For a number of players, their engagement may take on addictive qualities, as characterised by symptoms similar to substance-related addictions. These symptoms include craving, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms as well as significant impairments in different areas of the individuals’ lives. The aim of this chapter is to provide a qualitative account of how the fascination with playing MMORPGs can turn into addiction as experienced by clients seeking help in a specialized outpatient treatment centre in Germany. Moreover, it addresses their therapy motivation as indicated by their contemplation about and preparation for action. Five clients are interviewed and the results are analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Implications are discussed.

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. (...) To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive, even addictive. (Rheingold, 1993, p. 17).

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INTRODUCTION

Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) emerged as the virtual communities of today, with the game World of Warcraft (WoW) alone counting more than eight million subscribers worldwide (Goldfarb, 2013). According to a recent report published by the Entertainment Software Association (2012), World of Warcraft’s extension “Cataclysm” was among the top five selling computer games in 2011. In essence, an MMORPG is “a game in which numerous players around the globe inhabit a single virtual realm simultaneously, adopt different personas, and interact with one another in multiple ways” (Kuss, Louws, & Wiers, 2012, p. 1). The game community offers the potential for social contact without the constraints of time and place. Bearing on the dissolution of traditional communities which connected people merely through sharing the same territory, today’s communities are highly fragmented and dispersed (Bell, 2001). Accordingly, the social nature of MMORPGs not only attracts individuals to these games, but it may be conducive to Internet and gaming addiction (Li & Chung, 2006). The outstanding factor drawing people to the Internet and to virtual communities is their inherently social quality (Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Preece, 2000; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As a consequence, people seek the essential group experience because they are “plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation” (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 13). Thus, a decline in real-life social relationships may leave the individual wanting sociability, which refers to the human’s desire to associate with fellows, to extract “the serious substance of life leaving only ‘togetherness’, the sheer pleasure of the company of others” (Simmel, 1949, p. 255). It is a ludic, i.e. playful, form of communality, and thus it applies to the ways in which MMORPG players socialize with one another. In line with this, the social groupings of people in online games, namely guilds, offer a spectrum of psychological incentives to continue playing (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006, 2007; Taylor, 2006). There appears to be an association between the social relationship aspect of MMORPGs and the amount of time players invest into the game, which in turn can result in excessive gaming and addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012b).

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, addiction has been associated with dependence on a particular substance, such as alcohol or recreational drugs (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, the intake of a substance is not necessary for addiction as behaviours, such as pathological gambling or gambling disorder has now been included as behavioural addiction in the recent fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5), paving the way for the inclusion of other behavioural addictions, such as Internet and gaming addiction. Accordingly, similar brain circuitries are activated and altered in both substance-related and behavioural addictions (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012a). The clinical and scientific demand for a new diagnostic category is high and *Internet Gaming Disorder* has now been included in the appendix of the DSM-5 among diagnoses which require additional research (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This certifies the significance of implementing a new diagnosis, which must be targeted by scientific investigations in more breadth and depth.

In line with the criteria for substance dependence, people who play online games need to play for longer periods in order to achieve the same effect, i.e. flow¹ (Rau, Peng, & Yang, 2006), which can result in habit formation and tolerance. Moreover, players can experience symptoms associated with withdrawal, such as dissatisfaction, when they do not play or are hindered to play, and in order to overcome those,

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