Chapter 1

Introduction

What's the problem in problem gaming?

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By publishing this anthology, we would like to help steer the research agenda away from 'videogame addiction' as a psychological pathology ascribed to the individual and towards a situated understanding of *problem gaming* as something that takes place between people in the socio-cultural contexts of everyday life. That is, we propose that scholars consider substituting the concept of 'problem gaming' for the concept of 'video game addiction' and that the research community as well as the public, seriously question the general assumption that problems related to excessive gaming should necessarily be approached as addiction problems.

The concept of video- or computer game addiction has entered the popular vocabulary as a common way of talking about the conflicts and problems emerging from video gameplay in the socio-cultural contexts of everyday life. Whether it appears in newspaper articles announcing the advent of a new grave diagnosis, or in domestic quarrels between teenagers and their parents with regard to proper ways of spending time, the concept of video game addiction has become a common signifier for the various types of crises and disagreements that may arise within and around the playing of video games. Indeed, 'Internet gaming disorder' is currently being debated as a possible diagnosis in the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Likewise, the World Health Organization (WHO) has proposed 'gaming disorder' and 'hazardous gaming' in the beta version of the forthcoming ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases) (Bean et al. 2017), a move which sparked a heated debate between critical media studies and clinical psychology (see Aarseth et al. 2016 and the many replies collected in the same themed issue).

The concept of 'video- or computer game addiction' has arguably replaced 'video game violence' as the key trigger of media panics surrounding the new medium. Whereas the 1990's and 2000's offered a plethora of studies and academic debates on the possible effects of video game violence on 'the affect, cognition and behaviour' of the gamers (Carnagey & Anderson 2005), (research) concerns have more recently

turned away from the content of video games and toward the time spent playing. This research focus builds on the idea that an excessive amount of gameplay can be a sign of 'addiction' in a manner similar to the way the pathological gambler is addicted to acts of gambling and the drug addict is addicted to a chemical substance. This type of research has almost exclusively been carried out within the disciplines of psychology and neurophysiology. Accordingly, the alleged 'pathology' has been formulated in extension of existing concepts and definitions such as gambling and behavioural disorders within psychology (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell 2004; Chumbley & Griffiths 2006; Grüsser, Thalemann & Griffiths 2006) and the release of dopamine within neurophysiology (Koepp et al. 1998). In this way, the majority of research on video game addiction has emerged by applying concepts and definitions of addiction from existing disciplines to the field of video games.

This anthology can be seen as an extended argument that the 'addiction approach' is in danger of seriously missing what is really at stake in problematic uses of video games. In this anthology we will thus expand and explore the many possible ways 'problem gaming' may be conceptualised and studied once we let go of 'addiction' as the primary framework. We will locate and pinpoint, from a range of perspectives, how gameplay is seen as problematic or is problematized in everyday life and zoom in on the inner logics of the situations in question. Importantly, this does not entail a neglect of the very real worries parents or professionals may have with regard to excessive gameplay. We readily acknowledge that video games are, in certain situations, the cause of problems and conflicts in their contexts of use, and that they are associated with negative directions in individual life courses (Enevold 2016b).

However, a default resort to the addiction analogy excludes a whole range of relevant alternative explanations that may generate more context-specific and, as a direct result, more successful problem-solving strategies for all involved parties. For this reason, the authors will throughout this anthology refer to the concept of *problem gaming* as embracing the many different possible approaches and definitions that appear when we move beyond the narrow addiction-focus of psychology and neurophysiology.

A Scandinavian perspective

This alternative research agenda is not new in a Scandinavian context. Several Scandinavian media- and game scholars have suggested explanatory perspectives with regard to problematic or excessive gameplay. This research has focused on the gameplay community (Linderoth & Bennerstedt 2007), gender and family (Enevold & Hagström 2008; Enevold 2014; Enevold 2015), distinct life phases of the involved individuals (Karlsen 2016, partly reprinted in this anthology), and critical examinations of the concept of video- or computer games addiction as such (Brus 2013).

The research presented in this anthology builds on this previous work, and the anthology itself grew out of a set of related activities. These comprise a panel on problem

gaming at DIGRA 2015 in Lüneburg, Germany (Thorhauge et al. 2015), a symposium at Lund University in Sweden in 2016 at which the editors and several of the anthology authors presented research (Enevold 2016a), and a recent collaborative research project focusing on gameplay patterns among Danish children and youth funded by the Danish research council. All of these activities, to varying extent, involved a range of relevant actors including practitioners and policy makers. In this way, the anthology builds on a strong tradition of questioning mainstream 'video- or computer game addiction' studies within the Scandinavian region.

The chapters of the book

A key aim of the present anthology is to introduce alternative critical theories and disciplines into the discussion. The contributions of the book engage theoretical and disciplinary frameworks not usually employed to explain problem gaming. They create new scientific and academic routes for us to

1. Define and problematize video game play, and

2. Identify the 'problem' in problem gaming.

Thus, the contributions cover a broad range of disciplinary frameworks including media studies, game studies, play studies and youth studies, as well as range of methodological approaches including ethnography, participant observation, diaries and in-depth interviews.

Obviously, this diversity of approaches leads to a set of different ways of addressing the phenomenon of problem gaming. It may be seen as a product of generational conflict (Chapter 4), as the result of conflicting roles and responsibilities in the everyday contexts of gamers (Chapter 3) or the gamers' inability to cope with this complexity (Chapter 5). It may to some extent be built into the design of a game (Chapter 8) or it may be a characteristic of a particular life phase (Chapter 6).

Given the exploratory nature of our book, we are not aiming for *one* ultimate explanation of problem gaming. Instead, we urge a broader view and aim for *a set* of explanations. The elements in this set, however, are not unconnected: They cluster around a number of key themes that we see as comprising a possible framework for future studies of problem gaming. These themes include 'the social uses of addiction', 'the everyday practices of play and gaming', 'the family as the key context of play' and 'life courses and strategies'.

The phrase 'the social uses of addiction' is a tip of the hat to James Lull's classical study of the 'social uses of television' (Lull 1980). In this seminal piece, Lull shifted the focus away from the content of television toward the many pragmatic purposes television serves within the context of family households. In the same manner, 'the social uses of addiction' foregrounds the historical and pragmatic uses of addiction as a concept. For instance, as Rune Kristian Lundedal Nielsen points out in his chapter

(Chapter 2), addiction has a long history of 'usage' within academia reflecting a range of professional and institutional investments. Nielsen's chapter offers a polemical critique of the psychology of addiction targeting the construct validity of the concept. As other chapters demonstrate, the concept of addiction tends to take on a number of different meanings in various contexts, be it that of therapy, as explained by Patrick Prax and Paulina Rajkowska (Chapter 7), or the everyday social interactions of family life, as explained by Anne Brus (Chapter 4). Within all these contexts, the concept of 'addiction' serves a range of pragmatic purposes such as getting access to public funding, explaining failure in life or exerting power over family members. To understand how the term 'addiction' is used and engaged with across disciplinary and empirical contexts represents an important first step in the critical study of 'problem gaming'.

Obviously, the 'social uses of addiction' foregrounds the importance of the empirical contexts in which problem gaming unfolds. Several chapters deal with the empirical context of play as a relevant frame of explanation with the context of family life as the primary focus of attention. Patrick Prax and Paulina Rajkowska (Chapter 7) deal with broken family patterns as a key explanation of the problem in problem gaming and the proper focus of therapeutical treatment. Anne Brus (Chapter 4) deals with generational conflict within families, where problem gaming becomes a key theme around which negotiations of agency and power among family members evolve. Andreas Gregersen (Chapter 3) offers a more general sociological explanation of institutionalized roles and responsibilities at the intersection between family, school and gamer community as way of understanding the structural reasons underlying conflicts related to gaming. In this way, family life seems to be a key context of study when studying problem gaming as a relational and situated phenomenon.

Beyond the social contexts of problem gaming a set of chapters pay attention to more general strategies and life courses as a supplemental perspective on gaming in general and problem gaming in particular. In his chapter, here reprinted with permission by Ashgate, Faltin Karlsen (Chapter 6) suggests that problem gaming is a matter of particular life phases. He ties what he calls 'excessive gaming' directly to the specific life conditions of late teens who have more time and less responsibility, pointing out that such gaming patterns tend to fade out as adult life and its accompanying conditions set in. In a similar vein, Anne Mette Thorhauge (Chapter 5) suggests that problem gaming may be a sign of 'broken life strategies' in the cases where the young person turns out to be unable to take on the responsibilities of adult life. Here, problem gaming becomes one important component in a more general problem of being 'stuck' in a particular situation.

Finally, the specific characteristics of different videogames obviously shape the patterns of play and problem gaming as well. In the final chapter, Ian Sturrock addresses different game design principles as a relevant perspective on problem gaming with a special focus on the motivational frameworks they form (Chapter 8).

To conclude, the presented collection of chapters about problem gaming does not offer one single explanation or definition of the phenomenon. Instead, it offers what

we think is a range of plausible, empirically grounded explanations that together might serve as a framework for future studies.

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