

Problem gaming as broken life strategies

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Introduction

In this chapter, I will suggest Margaret Archers concept of agential reflexivity as a framework of explanation when analysing problem gaming in everyday contexts. While a structurational framework, as represented by Gregersen (Chapter 4), directs attention towards the general structural conditions that tend to place teenage gamers in patterns of opposition vis-à-vis their surroundings, Archers concept of agential reflexivity directs attention to the way different individuals handle and challenge those conditions with various degrees of success. I will argue that problem gaming can be seen as an aspect of 'impeded reflexivity' – that is, situations where the individual struggles to translate his or her concerns into relevant 'life projects' and practices. Moreover, I will argue that this insufficiency can be partly explained with reference to the particular life phase of that individual: When problem gaming tends to appear as a 'conflict of youth' it may be because young people are still in the state of learning to perform agential reflexivity as a key aspect of modern life.

In the following, I will outline Archer's theoretical framework and specify its relevance for the theme of this anthology. After this, I will present the empirical data that form the starting point of the discussion. This involves a mixed-methods study, which maps and explores gameplay patterns in everyday life among Danish children and youth. In this first part of the analysis, I will demonstrate how the documented gameplay patterns can be interpreted as different types of life projects and practices in the lives of the children and young people in the study. This part of the analysis will primarily serve to describe the different ways gaming intersects with other concerns and projects in everyday life, and how gaming may represent a project in its own right. On the basis of this description, I will discuss how the concept of 'problem gaming' may be pinpointed and settle for a definition focusing on problem gaming as an aspect of impeded reflexivity. I will elaborate this perspective with two illustrative cases.

Agential reflexivity and gaming in everyday life

Margaret Archer centres her theoretical framework on ‘agential reflexivity’ as a key aspect of social life. She describes agential reflexivity as the ability of social agents to constantly monitor themselves within their social reality. It is by way of this agential reflexivity that we as social agents ‘actively mediate between our structurally shaped circumstances and what we deliberately make of them’ (Archer 2007: 16). In this way, agency is not a pure reflection of social structure, it is the product of the individual’s active reflection involving the ‘delineation of our concerns, the definition of our projects and, ultimately, the determination of our practices in society’ (Archer 2007: 16). In terms of gaming in everyday life contexts, for instance, all game players can be said to share – to various degrees – the challenge of balancing the demands of school, family life and the gamer community as described by Andreas Gregersen in this anthology (Chapter 4). In Archer’s terminology, this challenge involves delineating concerns related to school, family and gameplay communities.

However, the way this challenge is met depends on the agential reflexivity of the individual, and this may lead to different ways of integrating video gameplay into these practices. Archer thus describes the way of life, or ‘modus vivendi’, as the product of agential reflexivity and as an expression of the reflexive agent’s individual choices. In her illustrative cases and interviews, she tends to deal with general or existential life choices, such as choosing a particular education or maintaining a particular balance between work life and family life. However, at a more pragmatic level, agential reflexivity may also be understood as the way we balance various concerns on an everyday basis – that is, how we ‘conduct everyday life’. Building on Gerd-Günther Voss (2001), Rasmus Helles defines the conduct of everyday life as ‘a logic we apply to make the various parts of our everyday life fit together’ (Helles 2012: 337). While the individual components that make up our everyday lives may be highly typical of our age and socioeconomic background, the specific way they are combined in individual cases makes a key difference to the space of possibilities we are given, and we may as individuals apply different types of strategies in ‘putting things together’.

In the first part of my analysis, I will describe how videogames serve different purposes in the individual’s ‘everyday life conduct’ and how this leads to different types of practices and potential conflicts. For instance, gaming may be a key aspect of maintaining social relationships in a group of peers, but it may also represent a key concern in the form of an individual hobby. In both cases it is important to understand the way videogames are integrated into a more general conduct of everyday life and its various projects.

To pinpoint more specifically the ‘problem’ in problem gaming, two other concepts introduced by Archer are useful. First, Archer introduces the term of ‘morphogenesis’, which refers to the state of society in late modernity where the role of traditions has gradually diminished due to a general process of rapid change. In this morphogenetic society, the ability of individuals to reflexively handle possibilities and choices, rather than just re-enacting routines, becomes a key perspective (Helles 2016; Archer 2013).

Margaret Archer describes this as a 'reflexive imperative' (Archer 2011); i.e. an increasing demand on individual citizens to exercise their 'agential reflexivity' as compared to earlier ages, were they could, to a larger degree, rely on traditions and norms.

Second, Archer describes the existence of 'fractured reflexives' as the 'casualties of the reflexive imperative' (Archer 2011). Fractured reflexives are individuals unable to exercise their reflexive agency in a manner sufficient for handling challenges in their life. This inability may either be due to a suspension of reflexive powers ('displaced reflexives') or an insufficiently developed mode of reflexivity ('impeded reflexives') (Archer 2003: 298-299). In both cases, it is not the ability to reflect that is lacking; the problem is rather that *'their self-talk provides them with no instrumental guidance about what to do in practice'* (Archer 2003: 298-299), something that leads up to a general state of 'agential passivity' (Archer 2003: 164).

The idea of a reflexive imperative causing a kind of injury to those individuals who cannot meet its challenge offer a relevant frame of explanation with regard to problem gaming in everyday contexts. Problem gaming may thus be interpreted as a state of agential passivity brought about by the suspension or impediment of reflexivity. Problem gaming can be interpreted as an aspect of a more general 'life crisis' where individuals, due to various external factors, have lost control over their lives (suspended reflexivity), and it can be interpreted as an aspect of situations where the challenge of the reflexive imperative is not (yet) met by a sufficiently developed mode of reflexivity in the individual (impeded reflexivity). A prototypical case of the latter is the teenager on the brink of adulthood, struggling to conquer and manage the position as the primary decision maker in his or her own life. This perspective corresponds well with Faltin Karlsen's focus on problem gaming as an aspect of life phases (Chapter 7), and in the forthcoming analysis I will primarily work from this perspective.

Some of Archer's own work addresses the genesis of reflexive agency as an aspect of individuals' 'coming of age'. For instance, she deals with the gradual development of agential reflexivity within undergraduate students (Archer 2011), and she does include minors in her studies as well (Archer 2003). However, she does not at any point address specifically the transition from a stage of childhood, where life-changing decisions are primarily taken by the parents, to that stage of early adulthood where this responsibility is passed over to the adolescent. She defines agential reflexivity as an 'emergent personal property' (Caetano 2014: 3) and specifically brings it up as an alternative to socialization theories with regard to explaining individual's practices in society (ibid.). Yet, she does not specify the nature of this emergence – is it a psychological or a social process and, if the latter is the case, how does it differ from socialization? This particular aspect of agential reflexivity is yet to be fleshed out theoretically as well as empirically, by Archer or others.

In the current chapter I will not attempt to resolve this issue, but I will address aspects of it. I will interpret particular instances of problem gaming as crises related to this transition into adulthood. In the context of the 'morphogenetic society', the transition into adulthood is potentially associated with a great deal of anxiety since

the 'reflexive imperative' places much more importance on the reflexive capabilities of the adolescent for managing this responsibility on his or her own. I would argue that instances of problem gaming can be interpreted as crises experienced by parents and adolescents when facing this transition.

A key topic in youth studies which may be relevant in relation to the emergence of agential reflexivity is the hypothesis of a 'prolongation of youth' (Mary 2014). According to this line of thought, young people of today postpone their transition into adulthood, and this has led to new types of life phases such as 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2000). Young people's reasons for postponing adulthood is sometimes explained in a rather normative manner with their lack of will, maturity or independence. However, Mary argues that it is more likely due to changing socio-economic conditions: '*Young people simply follow alternative patterns of transition based on available socio-economic opportunities*' (Mary 2014: 416). They face an uncertain economic future that calls for new strategies of transition; this argument fits Archer's characterization of late modern society and with the concept of agential reflexivity as a prerequisite for delineating concerns and translating them into life projects.

The qualitative part of the problem gaming project presented in the following deals specifically with 14-16-year-olds. In Denmark, this age marks a point in life where compulsory school attendance is coming to an end, and the young person will have to decide how to proceed in life with regards to secondary education, which has implications for overall career paths. In this article, I will assume that the challenges of the 'reflexive imperative' and becoming an adult is starting to emerge at this point, and in the forthcoming analysis I will explore this explanatory framework as a perspective on problem gaming.

In the first part of the analysis I will describe how the different gameplay patterns documented in our survey can be interpreted as different ways of integrating video gameplay into the conduct of everyday life. I will then discuss how to deal with the 'problem' in 'problem gaming' from this perspective.

Before moving on, I will briefly touch upon the relationship between our collected data and the analyses presented in the following. Our overall aim of the study was primarily explorative and descriptive, and we did not settle for any specific definitions or theoretical framework from the beginning. Our questionnaire included a range of questions regarding media and gaming behaviour as well as a range of previously established measures of 'lack of well-being' in order to identify possible relations between these variables.

The second wave of qualitative interviews was structured along the same variables, and was not developed with the specific aim of categorising respondents and interview subjects in accordance with Archer's different types of reflexivity. Instead, the concepts of agential reflexivity, impeded reflexivity and the reflexive imperative is invoked here as a way of contextualising and explaining some of the findings from the quantitative data analysis as well as key themes resulting from qualitative data analysis. Accordingly, in the second part of the analysis I will substantiate why 'impeded reflexivity'

may represent a particularly relevant approach to problem gaming and present two illustrative cases to make this clear. Before I set out to do this, however, I will present the empirical study as a starting point for the discussion.

Videogames in everyday life – a mixed-method study

‘Video games in everyday life’ is a mixed-method empirical study consisting in a national survey (N=1,560) followed by individual interviews (N=19) and focus-group interviews (N=2). The survey was conducted in the late summer of 2014 and the interviews were conducted during the autumn of 2015 as a further exploration of some of the key relations found in the survey. The general focus of the study was the gameplay patterns of children and young people in the context of everyday life and how this may be related to various types of problems. The study was not based on a specific theoretical definition or approach to problem gaming. Rather, it aimed to explore a range of quantitative and qualitative measures of gameplay and general well-being with the context of everyday life as the primary framework.

The survey part of the study maps the gameplay patterns of Danish children and young people aged 10 to 18. It is based on a stratified random sample from the Danish register of social security numbers with a response rate above 70 per cent. As such, the resulting sample allows for both a comparison of different types of players and non-players within this age bracket and a reasonable level of statistical generalisation of specific gameplay patterns to the general population in this age group.

The questions in the survey focus on the specific patterns of gameplay (competitive, cooperative etc.), media habits, other everyday activities (doing homework, being with friends etc.), and different measures of problems and lack of well-being (domestic conflict, bullying, loneliness and physical symptoms such as headaches and insomnia). Cross-tabulation of variables showed a clear relation between specific gameplay patterns (e.g. competitive team play and non-competitive soloplay) with other variables such as communicative patterns, social patterns and gender, with gender representing a remarkably distinctive variable. Accordingly, respondents for the qualitative interviews were sampled with the aim of exploring how the different types of gameplay patterns unfold within the everyday contexts of boys and girls respectively, and the focus-groups interviews were conducted to pinpoint the way gameplay becomes a part of boys’ and girls’ social interaction. In the following section, I will focus on the role of video gameplay as an aspect of everyday conduct.

Video games as an aspect of everyday life conduct

As mentioned in the previous section, the ‘social configuration of gameplay’ showed a rather strong relationship with variables such as time spent playing, social and com-

municative patterns and gender. With ‘social configuration of gameplay’ we refer to different patterns of competitive and cooperative gameplay. Basically, we asked the respondents how often they played against others and how often they played in teams. A cross tabulation of these two variables shows the following pattern:

Table 1. Gameplay patterns (per cent)

		Respondent plays against others		
		Often	Sometimes	Never
Respondent plays in teams	Often	18	6	2
	Sometimes	8	23	4
	Never	3	14	24

Comments: The respondents were asked how often they played in teams and how often they played against others (N = 1,375).

First of all, there is a significant relationship between competitive play and team play indicating that the more you play in teams, the more you play against others (or vice versa). Moreover, the table shows that almost 80 per cent of the player population can be defined within the patterns of ‘very competitive team players’, ‘moderately competitive team players’, ‘moderately competitive solo players’ and ‘non-competitive solo players’. This is particularly important because these gameplay patterns correlate significantly with other variables in the material, most notably the amount of gameplay throughout the day, the amount of mediated communication throughout the day and whether respondents have gained new friendships through gameplay.

Before I describe these relations, I will have to make a little note on the way we have chosen to measure these variables. Since the youngest respondents in the target population cannot be expected to give very precise answers to general time questions (i.e. ‘how much to you play on a typical day?’) we decided to focus on gameplay on the previous day and to ask about timeslots throughout the day, that is, whether they played in the morning, daytime, afternoon, evening and/or night. In this way, we let go of some precision for the sake of reliability. The resulting constructed variable, measured at the ordinal level, counted the amount of gameplay as the total number of timeslots.

As can be read from the table below, there is a significant relation between gameplay patterns and amount of gameplay throughout the day, indicating that competitive team players are likely to play more often. This is relevant because problem gaming is often associated with the amount of time spent playing, and the pattern presented in Figure 1 indicates that the social configuration of gameplay is an important factor in relation to this.

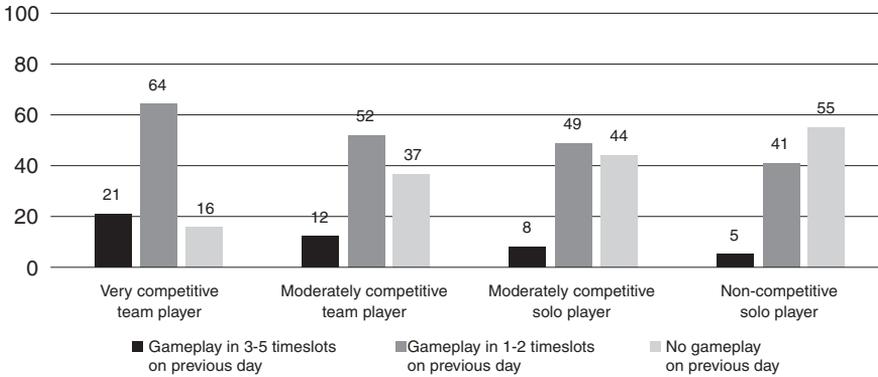


Figure 1. Gameplay patterns and gameplay on the previous day (per cent)

Comments: The percentages are calculated for each subgroup. The respondents were asked if they played videogames on the previous day and, if so, in which timeslots (morning, daytime, afternoon, evening and/or night). As can be seen, 21 per cent of the very competitive team players (n=252) played in 3-5 timeslots as compared to 5 per cent of the non-competitive solo players (n=334).

Moreover, we found a significant relation between gameplay patterns and amount of mediated communication throughout the day, indicating that competitive team players tend to be more communicative than non-competitive solo players, and actually tend to resemble non-players more with regard to this variable (Figure 2). This is in some contrast to a common sensical understanding of problem gaming, namely that it represents an opting out of ‘genuine’ social relationships.

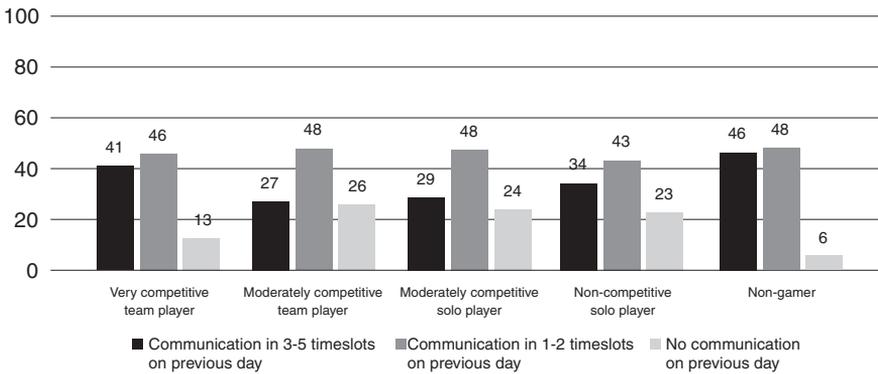


Figure 2. Gameplay patterns and communication (by way of computer or phone) on the previous day (per cent)

Comments: The percentages are calculated for each subgroup. The respondents were asked if they communicated with their peers by way of computer or phone on the previous day and, if so, in which timeslots (morning, daytime, afternoon, evening and/or night). As can be seen, 41 per cent of the very competitive team players (n=252) communicated in 3-5 timeslots as compared to 34 per cent of the non-competitive solo players (n=334). Moreover, while 23 per cent of the non-competitive solo players did not communicate by computer or phone, the corresponding figure for the very competitive team players was 13 per cent.

In line with the above reasoning, Figure 3 (below) shows that an overwhelming majority of competitive team players report to have gained new friendships through their gameplay. In contrast, less than every tenth non-competitive solo player reports to have gained new friends through gaming. In combination, the communicative and social patterns of very competitive team players indicate that gameplay, to this group, is a form of social interaction.

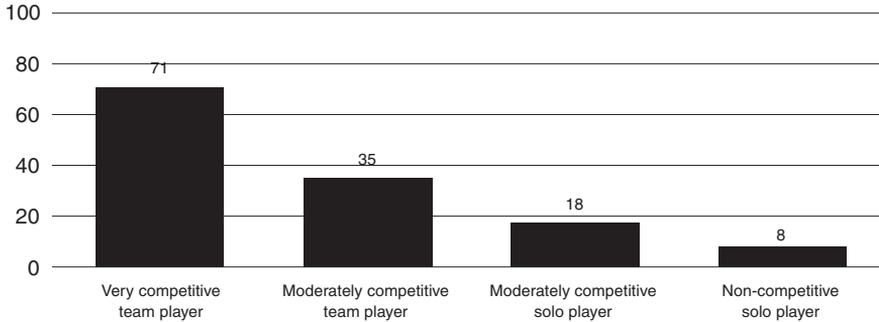


Figure 3. Gameplay patterns and friendships gained through gameplay (per cent)

Comments: The respondents were asked if they had met new friends through their gameplay activity. This was the case for a large majority of the very competitive team players (n=252) while it was only the case for a small minority of non-competitive solo players (n=334).

Finally, the gender distribution turned out to be very pronounced with only 2 per cent of the female player population in the group of very competitive team players and only 9 per cent of the male player population in the group of non-competitive solo players.

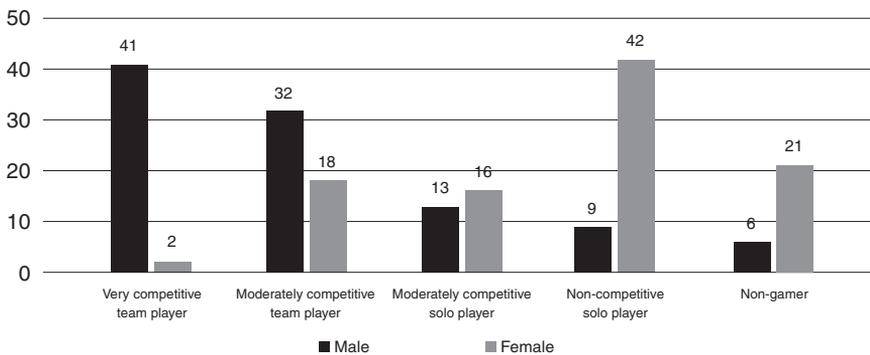


Figure 4. Gameplay patterns and gender (per cent)

Comments: The percentages are calculated across gender. As can be seen, 41 per cent of the male player population (n=761) are included in the category of very competitive team players as compared to only 2 per cent of the female player population (n=623).

One way of interpreting these relations between gameplay patterns, communication, friendships and gender could be that videogames serve very different purposes in the everyday lives of 10-18 years olds, and that gender is a key predictor of this purpose. In accordance with this interpretation, gameplay is on one hand a form of focused interaction comparable to playing football (boys), and on the other hand a kind of individual entertainment comparable to reading books (girls). To relate back to the theoretical framework presented at the beginning of the chapter, gameplay may thus represent rather different life projects and intersect with different everyday concerns such as upholding friendships or seeking entertainment. This is relevant with regard to problem gaming because these concerns serve as an important context when we try to understand situations where gaming becomes a problem.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the way the observed gameplay patterns were integrated in everyday life, we decided to interview boys and girls (aged 14 to 16 years old) within both ends of the gameplay spectrum. It turned out to be very difficult to recruit any girls that were competitive team players within this age bracket and we only managed to recruit one girl that fit the pattern perfectly. However, we found a few that played competitively enough to allow for a more nuanced discussion.

The general aim of the follow-up interviews was to describe the life situation of the interview subjects, the specific way videogames fit into this life situation and the possible problems and conflicts this combination of life situation and videogame play might involve. In order to ground the interview exchange in gameplay situations, we asked the interview subjects to make photo and/or video diaries throughout the week preceding the interview. Altogether, the interviews confirmed and detailed our interpretation of gameplay as focused interaction and individual entertainment, but they also introduced alternative themes and perspectives.

As regards gameplay as focused interaction, the follow-up interviews allowed us to expand and elaborate our understanding of the different social purposes that gameplay served. To some of the interview subjects, gameplay was a key aspect of social life in their school classes, something they did to fit into a group of peers. To others, gameplay was deeply integrated into their friendships, something they shared with specific friends. To others again, gameplay served the purpose of keeping in touch with old classmates or entering new social circles.

In Archer's terminology, videogames intersected in a range of ways with the general concern of gaining and maintaining social relationships in everyday life. With regards to videogames as individual entertainment, the interviews also yielded material that allowed for elaboration. While videogames in several cases represented a break from other duties in everyday life, the specific nature of those breaks was similarly diverse and defined by the life situation of the interview subjects in question. To some interview subjects, gameplay represented a way of relieving stress and handling pressure in an otherwise demanding everyday life. This was particularly evident among subjects who had to balance sports (in some cases on elite level) and friendships with high demands in schools. To other interview subjects, gameplay was a way of spending time alone

and, potentially, handle loneliness. Particularly one interview subject seemed to have gameplay as a way of handling the loneliness and social stigma caused by the social exclusion she experienced from her classmates¹. In this way, gameplay as individual entertainment similarly intersected with a range of concerns in everyday life that directly reflected the life situation of the interview subjects in question.

However, the interviews also revealed an alternative kind of purpose that was not covered by the variables in the survey. This was videogame play as hobby and videogames as collectibles, i.e. commodities with cultural and personal significance. To a few of the interview subjects, the games thus represented a purpose or project in themselves rather than an entry-point to friendships or a means for taking a time out. One of the interview subjects had collected all Nintendo hardware platforms as well as a considerable number of game titles for them. Another couple of interview subjects defined their interest for videogame in extension of a more general engagement with 'nerd culture' including comics, roleplaying and the collection of cards such as *Magic: The Gathering*. In these latter cases, video gameplay can be interpreted as a concern and a life project in its own right alongside concerns such as maintaining friendships and keeping up with the demands of school and family.

For the sake of the current argument, the most important conclusion to be drawn from the survey and the follow-up interviews is the way games and gaming are part of the everyday conduct of Danish children and youth. That is, they may on one hand be a component in a general 'concern', such as gaining and maintaining friendships, but they may also represent an important concern in themselves that will have to be delineated and balanced with other concerns in everyday life. Finally, they may be a way of taking a time-out that does not represent a concern in itself. These patterns form an important backdrop if we are to understand those cases where games are related to conflict or problems in everyday life.

What's the problem in problem gaming?

As was mentioned in the introduction to the study, we did not set out with a specific definition of problem gaming, but rather used an established range of measures of lack of well-being to explore their possible relations with patterns of gameplay in everyday life. Accordingly, we included loneliness, bullying, physical symptoms and domestic conflict related to gameplay as possible measures to be explored in the analysis. When translating such variables into potential problems in a broad population, it is important to be aware if one is looking for 'problems of the minority' or 'problems of the majority'. That is, extreme cases of lack of well-being are very likely to appear in only a small minority where statistical uncertainty is so high that the grounds for further analysis is shaky. On the other hand, problems appearing in broader groups of the population are likely to be less extreme and hardly count as 'pathologies' in the way that problem gaming is most often articulated in the general public.

If we focus on problem gaming as ‘a problem of the minority’, the most extreme cases were quite clearly the female respondents within the group of very competitive team players. Half of this group reported loneliness, physical lack of well-being and victimization from bullying at the grave end of the spectrum (Figure 5).

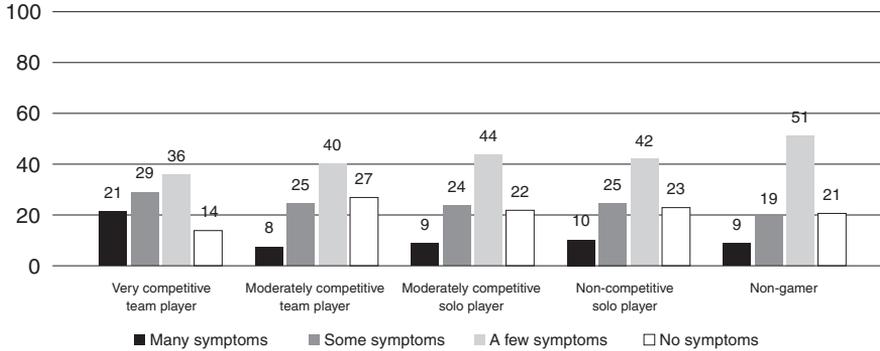


Figure 5. Gameplay patters and symptoms of lack of well among female respondents (per cent)

Comments: The percentages are calculated for each subgroup. The respondents were asked if they had experienced symptoms such as headache, stomach ache or sleeplessness during the previous week. The diagram includes data from female respondents only, and it shows that 50 per cent of the very competitive team players (N=14) say they had experienced some or many of these symptoms (as compared to 28 per cent of the ‘non-gamers’, N=140).

However, this group is so small that the quantitative analysis comes with considerable statistical insecurity and we did not succeed (in spite of considerable effort) to recruit a sufficient number of respondents for the follow-up interviews to explore this interpretation further.

If we shift the focus towards problem gaming as ‘a problem of the majority’, domestic conflict appears to be the variable with the strongest connection to the observed gameplay patterns. The group of competitive team players is the group that has had the greatest amount of arguments with parents about their gameplay activity within the previous week (Figure 6).

Of course, domestic conflict may relate to a wide range of everyday problems, and in the follow-up interviews we set out to get a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what these conflicts may be about. Though several types of problematic themes did indeed appear in these interviews (e.g. money issues or adherence to familial norms of paying attention at the dinner table), the most typical conflict turned out to be disagreement between adolescents and their parents regarding school and the parents’ doubts that the young was able to properly balance responsibilities in school with their gameplay activity. Though this definitely amounts to a ‘typical’ problem rather than a ‘grave’ problem, it is quite evident in the data that it creates a considerable amount of tension for the informants, and the relation to gameplay is clear.

In the following sections, I will focus on domestic conflict relating to the balancing of school and gameplay. I will focus on problem gaming as domestic conflict related

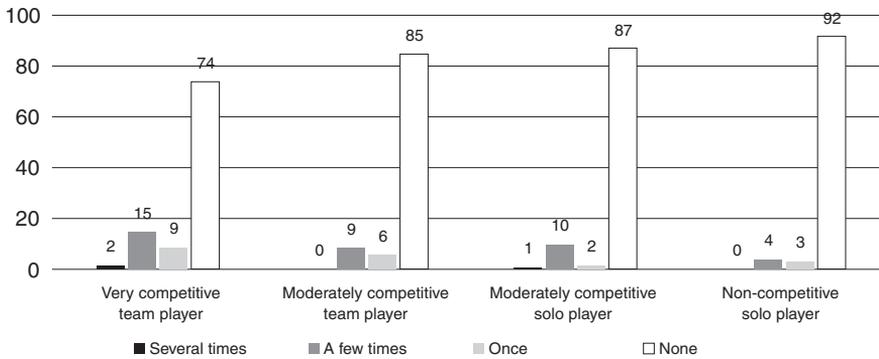


Figure 6. Gameplay patterns and domestic conflict (per cent)

Comments: The percentages are calculated for each subgroup. The respondents were asked if they had had arguments with their parents about their gameplay during the previous week. The diagram shows that 17 per cent of the very competitive team players (N=249) say they had had an argument with their parents a few times or several times (as compared to 4 per cent of non-competitive solo players, N=330).

to the balance between school and gameplay. Two illustrative cases will serve as a background for the discussion.

Rune is a 16-year-old who lives with his parents and elder sister. He is going to tenth grade (a supplementary level to mandatory elementary school of nine years) at a 'pick-up school' for young people who have not yet figured out their future ambitions. Rune has *World of Warcraft* as a part of his 'dailies' (everyday duties). When engaging in competitive team play, it is primarily with friends from his old school – he does not really socialize with classmates from his new school. Recently, he has had a rather grave conflict with his parents due to his gameplay, which culminated with him running away from home. (Later followed by his sister). According to him, his parents thought the problem had to do with the videogames while it was actually a conflict with a teacher causing a negative spiral of truancy.

Morten is also 16 years old. He lives with his mum and two young brothers and visits his dad every second weekend. The parents are recently divorced and he is still mad at his dad. Earlier on, Morten has primarily had football as a way of hanging out with friends, while video games have been limited to single player gaming in titles such as *FIFA* and *Heroes of Might and Magic*. More recently, he has started playing competitive *League of Legends* as a way of hanging out with friends at his new school, HHX (highschool with a business line). He does experience some game-related conflict with his parents, which primarily has to do with their inability to understand that you do not just log out of a game of *League of Legends* during a match.

While Rune and Morten have a lot in common, they also differ with regard to a number of issues. They are the same age and both use games as a way of staying in touch with and retaining a position within a group of peers. Moreover, both experience a relatively

high level of conflict in their lives, but these have to do with different issues. Morten blames his dad for the parents' divorce and experiences some disagreement with them regarding his gameplay. Rune has had an overt conflict with his parents about his gameplay, which has caused him to run away from home, something that would in most cases be seen as 'problematic'. In the next section I will tie this discussion to the theoretical framework outlined in the beginning of the chapter and show how these issues can be explained within Margaret Archer's framework of agential reflexivity.

Problem gaming as an aspect of impeded reflexivity

As was demonstrated in the previous section, competitive team play is the gameplay pattern that is most likely to lead to domestic conflicts where the balance between gameplay and responsibilities in school is a key issue.

Within the terminology of Margaret Archer, this gameplay pattern seems to pose the greatest challenge to the 'delineation of concerns, the definition of our projects and determination of our practices' (Archer 2007: 16). Moreover, as can be concluded from the two illustrative cases, this may involve various degrees of conflict going from the game as a subject of individual or familial deliberation, over familial disagreements regarding gameplay, to a situation where family life has reached an unbearable level of conflict and the child or young person is unable to uphold a '*modus vivendi that [is] felt to be both satisfying and sustainable*' (Archer 2003: 163). As the quantitative and the qualitative data clearly indicate, this is a rather rare situation. After all, the majority of very competitive team players has not had an argument with their parents during the previous week (see Figure 6) and though several subjects in the follow-up interviews did experience some amount of familial disagreement with regard to their gameplay activity, it only turned into direct conflict in very few cases. One way of explaining these differences could be that the young people meet the challenge of balancing gameplay activities and other aspects of life with different strategies.

As was mentioned in the former section, Rune goes to a 'pick-up school' for tenth graders who have not yet figured out their ambitions for the future. He is still indecisive with regard to his next step in life, though he would like it to somehow reflect his current engagement with videogames. More specifically, he thinks live-streaming might be a way of making a living. He mentions how some people on *Twitch* and *Youtube* have managed to make huge sums of money on this and he reckons that his parents might be able to accept this if he makes it:

If I get at least 1,000 viewers and can live from it every month, I think they will not have a problem with it [...]. They really want me to take my secondary anyway, so I do that [...] and if it turns into something on twitch or live-stream, I will do that.

In this way, Rune struggles to translate his current engagement with videogames into a plan for the future. He seems to have accepted his parents' demand that he takes

some sort of secondary education but he has not turned this into an ambition of his own. He seems to be torn between his parents' idea of a viable future plan and his own attempts at formulating one that can unite his own desires with the options available to him. In comparison, Morten has already embarked on a new step by entering HHX and he has a relatively clear idea about what is going to happen next;

My plan is to do the military service and, if I like it, to do the entire period [...].
And when I have done my HHX, I will move away from home; at that time, I will be 19 and I will move to Aarhus or Copenhagen.

Morten is not more specific about his future career than Rune. However, he is a lot more confident and articulate when explaining his plans several years ahead and does not mention his parents' opinion as a relevant factor. He seems to have accepted and embraced the position as the key decision maker in his own life.

If we take a closer look at their gameplay activity, this reflects Rune's and Morten's life situations in interesting ways. Rune has gameplay as a way of keeping contact with a former group of peers. As mentioned in the former section, he does not really socialise with his new classmates and his social interactions in front of his computer is primarily directed toward friends belonging to an earlier point in life. In comparison, Morten has gameplay as a way of entering a new circle of friends. When moving from elementary school to HHX, he also changed his interests from football to *League of Legends*, because this was a relevant way of gaining friendships in his new educational context.

I just started at HHX and then there was someone talking about [League of legends], so it's me and two classmates who play together now and then.

Morten seems to have embarked on a new life phase by entering a secondary education and he uses videogames as a way of entering a new circle of friends. Rune seems to be caught in a state of 'agential passivity' where gaming is a way of holding on to an earlier point in life. His 'problem gaming' is an aspect of his impeded reflexivity. However, the game is not necessarily the determining factor. Morten's and Rune's more general life strategies are mirrored in the way they play videogames, but it is hard to say to what degree they are caused by it. I will get back to this question in my discussion.

Discussion and conclusion

To sum up, the quantitative data presented in this study indicate a set of distinctive gameplay patterns that relate differently to patterns of communication and socialization and to domestic conflict. The qualitative data confirm that gameplay indeed serve very different functions in everyday life; that is, gameplay activities are integrated in different manners into the general life projects or 'modi vivendi' of the young people in question. Moreover, the qualitative data indicate that domestic conflict in relation

to gameplay is primarily related to parents' doubts that their children are able to balance school and gameplay sufficiently. That is, 'problem gaming' in these cases has to do with generational disagreement over proper life choices. With two illustrative case studies, I demonstrated how this can be interpreted meaningfully within an explanatory framework of agential reflexivity. From this perspective, grave cases of problem gaming can be related to the young person's inability to delineate his concerns and translate them into a 'satisfying *modus vivendi*'.

In other words, problem gaming can be seen as an aspect of impeded reflexivity. At a more detailed level, however, a number of questions remain unanswered. Firstly, the qualitative interviews clearly indicate that parents and adolescents experience the situations differently. Secondly, it is hard to say whether the problem should be tied to the impeded reflexivity of the individual or the complexity of the social situation. And, thirdly, there are many different ways in which gameplay can be seen as an aspect of impeded reflexivity.

As regards the first question, it is fairly clear that parents and adolescents hold different perceptions of the situation. Put very briefly, parents think the adolescents have a problem with the videogames while adolescents think they have a problem with their parents; this pattern repeats across a considerable number of the interviews in the study. Archer does not really address this disagreement between social agents regarding the 'truth of the situation', but it will definitely have to be dealt with when studying adolescents and their parents: Who defines 'proper life choices'?

As regards the second question, the relative challenge of defining a sustainable '*modus vivendi*' depends on the complexity of the situation, and it cannot be concluded from the interviews summarized above whether it is the reflexive capabilities of Rune and Morten or the complexity of situations they face that cause their respective problems. While Morten's situation in a newly divorced family may at first glance seem to be the most challenging one, we cannot really determine this within the confines of our overall research design since it did not, for instance, include an interview with the parents or observations of family conduct.

Thirdly, problem gaming can be an aspect of impeded reflexivity in many different ways. It can be a key factor (excessive gaming prevents agential reflexivity), a contributing factor (excessive gaming is a part of a pattern preventing agential reflexivity), an arbitrary factor (it appears in a number of cases but is neither decisive nor contributing) or a pseudo factor (excessive gaming is initially interpreted as agential passivity while it could be interpreted as the opposite).

As regards the first option, there are several counter-indications to this in the case of Morten and several other informants in the study: Competitive team play does not *necessarily* lead to agential passivity. It is less clear, however, whether the second or the third option is the most truthful interpretation. That is, are games only one among many ways in which adolescents display impeded reflexivity, with excessive television viewing, excessive fitness and exercise or similar obsessions representing comparable patterns, or does gameplay represent a greater risk?

Zooming in on Rune's case, it is very likely that videogames have been an active part of his 'negative spiral of truancy', but it is hard to decide whether he would have succumbed to an alternative pattern of agential passivity in case videogames had not been a key activity. Our quantitative data cannot really speak to this, as this would require, at a minimum, a comparison with alternative 'excesses' and this was not part of the original research design.

Finally, excessive gaming might be a pseudo-factor, perceived by the surroundings as a 'broken life strategy', while experienced by the adolescent as the opposite. For instance, several respondents in the follow-up interviews considered videogames to be a relevant career path, either in the form of becoming a professional e-sports-gamer or becoming a successful 'YouTuber'. While this may seem highly unrealistic to most of the population above the age of 18, e-sports is indeed an expanding field if we are to believe recent coverage in mainstream media. With the advent of new platforms such as Twitch and YouTube gaming, where videogame players can earn fame as well as money by streaming their gameplay activities, it might not be as unrealistic as parents seem to think.

To conclude, Archer's theoretical framework offer a meaningful explanation of those cases where excessive gaming indeed seems to stand in the way of young people's happiness by foregrounding individual strategies and concerns. However, key issues regarding the more direct relationship between gaming and impeded reflexivity, as well as the relationship between the young person, the parents and the more general complexity of the situation, still have to be carved out.

Note

1. It is perhaps worth noting that this particular case falls completely under the radar of established notions of problem gaming or 'game addiction' since she can easily keep her time spent playing at a socially acceptable level while, at the same time, she is the one interview person that most directly expresses social and emotional distress in relation to her everyday life.

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