Internet gaming disorder: Social phobia and identifying with your virtual self

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Abstract

Online role-playing video games provide opportunities to connect socially and can enhance self-esteem. For some players, however, overuse fosters dependency leading to negative psychosocial and health consequences. Per the American Psychiatric Association, criteria for diagnosis of Internet gaming disorder (IGD) follow an addiction model, and include characteristics such as preoccupation, tolerance, and withdrawal. Though useful, this approach lacks a focus on underlying motivations that may partially explain vulnerability to IGD. This study explored relationships among IGD symptoms and two potential risk factors: social phobia and player-avatar identification. Participants (N = 394; 50% female) were recruited from game-related internet forums and surveyed online. We tested a model in which a positive relationship between social phobia and IGD symptoms was partially mediated by stronger avatar identification. Social phobia, avatar identification, and IGD symptoms were strongly positively related, and we found modest support for mediation as proposed. Accordingly, we suggest that fundamental needs for social connection and approval are potent motivators to play, particularly for socially phobic players uncomfortable with face-to-face contact. Vicarious interactions through a gaming avatar may fulfill these needs, reinforcing stronger self-identification with the avatar, which in turn can offer players a stronger and more positive sense of self. Such influences may work synergistically to motivate increasing intensity of and preoccupation with gameplay, contributing to IGD. These results support the use of player-avatar identification in assessing risk for IGD, developing treatment options, and reaching a better understanding of how socialization and identity can be influenced by virtual interactions and accomplishments.

1. Introduction

For over a decade, mental health professionals and researchers have been interested in the psychological underpinnings of online video game usage (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013a; Kuss, Louws, & Wiers, 2012; Yee, 2006). Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) bring together players from around the world to interact using avatars. These virtual gaming interactions may satisfy gamers’ unmet psychological needs, such as innate desires for social approval and interpersonal connection (Billieux et al., 2013). While these social interactions are often positive, research also suggests that long-term engagement in MMORPGs may incur serious costs (Kuss et al., 2012). Such engagement requires a considerable personal investment of time and money and can result in negative health outcomes, such as insomnia, along with social consequences such as decreased attendance at work or school. Excessive online game use increases the risk of mood disorders, obsessive thoughts, and social problems (Kuss et al., 2012); players report neglecting meals, school, and work, sleeping less, and experiencing tension with family members (APA, 2013a). Mental health concerns also arise when a player’s sense-of-self enmeshes with the character(s) played. For example, Wei, Chen, Huang, and Bai (2012) found that over-identification with an avatar caused undesirable psychological responses (e.g., anger, sadness) when the avatar experienced adverse outcomes in the game, such as virtual injury or death. The authors also noted that online gamers with longer weekly gaming hours endorsed more severe psychiatric symptoms.
In response to increased problematic video game usage, the recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; APA, 2013b) included provisional criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD). Table 1 outlines nine DSM-5 IGD criteria; formal diagnosis requires meeting five or more criteria within a 12-month period. The APA based these criteria on an exhaustive review of the pre-existing literature on problematic gaming or internet use (Petry et al., 2014; Tao et al., 2010), and intentionally worded them to parallel criteria for substance use and gambling disorders. Nevertheless, the APA has not formally designated IGD as an addiction. Though employing addiction symptomologies to describe IGD holds useful explanatory power, this perspective neglects to explore deeper psychological constructs potentially causally related to IGD, such as the need for social connection and its relationship with identity. Accordingly, the APA’s 2013 report encourages additional research to advance the conceptualization of IGD and enhance the development of effective IGD assessments and treatments (APA, 2013a). Below we examine how strong social anxiety might increase susceptibility to IGD, both directly and by fostering over-identification with the user’s avatar.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

Several characteristics make MMORPGs particularly appealing to individuals who are uncomfortable with interpersonal contact. Specifically, most games require the individual to develop a fictional character—an avatar—that is highly customizable, including gender, race (e.g., human, elf), class (e.g., shaman, warrior), and faction (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Avatars may be randomly generated, matched to user characteristics, or created to manifest idealistic self-perceptions. Furthermore, users can change their avatar’s aesthetic features whenever they desire. The most widely-played MMORPG, World of Warcraft (WoW), exemplifies this common playing experience using avatars.

Another characteristic of MMORPGs is the facilitation of social interaction (Billieux et al., 2013). It is possible to communicate quickly and easily with other players through both in-game texting and Voice Over Internet Protocol programs. Players within MMORPGs even group themselves in higher-order social structures known as guilds, which are hierarchical organizations of characters with mutual objectives (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004; Odrowska & Massar, 2014). Thus, these online experiences reproduce many aspects of social reality, but in an idealized and relatively controllable way.

2.2. Social phobia, avatar identification, and IGD

The human need for social connection as a causal factor for IGD demands further empirical examination (APA, 2013b; Billieux et al., 2013; Odrowska & Massar, 2014). As noted by Baumeister and Leary (1995), human beings have an innate drive to establish and preserve—to some degree—significant, long-term, and meaningful social relationships. Those with strong social anxieties or social phobias, however, are handicapped in their ability to satisfy this need (Moore & Johnson, 2009). Social phobia involves irrational fears and internalized experiences of inadequacy that often discourage individuals from interacting socially. It can arise from shame experienced during childhood or adolescence, which leads to low self-evaluation, dissatisfaction with one’s self, and increased sensitivity to embarrassment (Pinto-Gouveia, Castilho, Galhardo, & Cunha, 2006). Consequently, those who are socially phobic frequently avoid interpersonal situations, as social interactions lead them to feel undervalued and unwanted.

MMORPG participation offers safer opportunities for social connection (Lee & Stapinski, 2012). These games allow players to control the amount and depth of social interaction; although interpersonal communication within online games is rarely mandatory, it is easy to initiate and regulate. Moreover, virtual interactions may be particularly non-threatening because users need not consider their nonverbal behavior. MMORPGs even allow social interaction without engaging any other player, as Whang and Chang (2004) found gamers often develop relationships with their avatars. Such relationships may partially fulfill the need for social contact and have similar positive interpersonal consequences, and are viewed by some players as just as meaningful as relationships with real people (Billieux et al., 2013). In fact, brain imaging suggests parallels between the intensity of avatar involvement and level of intimacy experienced with close friends or partners (Ganesh, van Schie, de Lange, Thompson, & Wigboldus, 2012).

Thus, socially phobic players may employ online games to satisfy social relational needs while avoiding stress experienced in offline social environments (King & Delfabbro, 2014). However, because these players form friendships more easily in online than offline settings, they may be at particularly high risk for developing IGD. Some support for this comes from Wei et al. (2012), who found that online gaming usage positively correlated with social anxieties, low self-worth, and low self-confidence. Therefore, given links between Internet gaming and the desire to avoid anxiety-inducing social situations, we hypothesize that:

H1. Individuals endorsing more symptoms of social phobia will show greater IGD symptomology.

We also propose that social anxiety may contribute to players’ intensity of identification with their avatars. Much of gamers’ online social interaction is experienced vicariously through their avatars. These mediated interactions allow some players, particularly the socially phobic, to experience a sense of community and social belonging during gameplay that may be otherwise unavailable to them in the real world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995;
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