



## (A)Social reputation: Exploring the relationship between online video game involvement and social competence



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### ABSTRACT

Affordable and accessible Internet has changed the way video games are played, allowing individuals to connect worldwide in shared gaming spaces. On the surface participation within these environments may seem socially beneficial, as these highly social, playful spaces allow players to connect, interact with, and learn from others. However, there is a growing concern that increased participation within online gaming environments comes with a wide variety of social consequences, contributing to numerous losses in 'offline' sociability. While considerable research has examined these claims, consistent relationships between social competence and online video game involvement have yet to be established. The current work ( $N = 515$ ) aimed to examine the extent to which online video game involvement may support, or undermine, the development and maintenance of traditional social skills. The results indicate that there are unique relationships between social skills and video game involvement within online gaming populations. However, among online video game players, these links were not as negative or broad as hypothesized. The results of this assessment dispute the anecdotal attribution of a global level of social ineptitude amongst online video game players and provide insight into the potential effects of online video game play on skill development and maintenance.

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### 1. Introduction

As the Internet becomes more accessible, an increasing number of people are utilizing it to supplement their everyday needs. Online shopping, banking, and information searching, have all become commonplace activities. There have also been substantial rises in more social activities, as online services such as *Facebook*, *Second Life*, *Twitter*, and online dating, have begun to change the way one interacts with the Internet as part of daily life. The video game industry has adjusted to this "social media" trend with great success through the establishment and popularization of online video games. This technology has vastly expanded video games' multi-player functionality by allowing players to connect with others in a shared gaming space beyond the boundaries of their geographical location. In 2008, there were a reported 1.5 billion unique registered accounts of online games worldwide (TMachine.org, 2008). This market continues to grow; in the US alone, the online gaming community is reportedly growing at 10 times the rate of the total US Internet population (Alvarez, 2009). By 2013, online games are expected to constitute more than 38% of total video game

software earnings (Wu, 2010). Unlike traditional video games, online video games integrate play within an Internet-based, social context, creating a distinctive environment, reminiscent of both traditional video games and other mediated social spaces, such as chat rooms, but unique in their compilation of these features and enabling of *social play*. Researchers have found that the social elements contained within these playful spaces to be one of the immersive factors of these spaces (Guitton, 2011) and a primary reason for continued play frequency (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; Kolo & Baur, 2004) and extended duration (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2010; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Hsu, Wen, & Wu, 2009; Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Yee, & Nickell, 2006).

At a minimum, socializing with other players helps accomplish the game's objectives (e.g., asking questions about the location of a particular object). However, many players seek more. For instance, content analyses of the social interactions that take place within online gaming spaces have revealed that emotional communication vastly predominates task-oriented conversations (Pena & Hancock, 2006), indicating that in-game social connections are not strictly goal oriented. Co-players assist not only with instrumental goals but also relational ones. They are seen as valued sources of offline advice (Williams, 2006), and up to 75% of game players report having "good friends" within their gaming communities (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Players have even been found to adjust their

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in-game spatial location in relation to other players in an effort to sustain close proximity when engaged in social activities, presumably to promote more intimate social interactions (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2012).

However, socialization within these spaces can be “a socially liberating experience” (Davis, Flett, & Besser, 2002, p. 332). Freed from the rules and pressures of traditional socialization, users may begin to perceive themselves as “...safer, more efficacious, more confident, and more comfortable with online interpersonal interactions and relationships than traditional face to face social activities” (Caplan, 2003, p. 629). For example, a lack of non-verbal cues allows individuals to socially engage free from any judgments based upon physical attributes, while the use of a text-based environment grants the ability to carefully craft any outgoing communication. Consequently, and largely because of the “inelasticity of time” (Nie and Hillygus, 2001, p. 420), one’s online social community may begin to thrive at the expense of face-to-face interactions (Caplan et al., 2010; Chiu, Lee, & Huang, 2004; Dunbar, 2012; Gonçalves, Perra, & Vespignani, 2011; Kraut et al., 1998; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Nie & Erbring, 2002; Williams, 2006). This can be problematic, as friends supported by physical proximity are able to provide more social and emotional resources (e.g., social and emotional support) and/or physical resources (e.g., tangible favours) as compared to their online counterparts, and as such, are seen as more socially satisfying (Dunbar, 2012; Kraut et al., 1998; Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005; Shen & Williams, 2010).

While the potential for the social displacement of offline for online contacts has been identified within a variety of Internet-based, mediated social spaces, online video games have garnered particular concern, as they not only provide a social space populated by relative strangers, but are also characterized by shared, playful, and often novel, activities. This difference is key, as these shared activities contribute to the formation of long-lasting, highly intimate friendship bonds, with sustainable levels of self-disclosure and intimacy not traditionally found in other mediated spaces (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Hsu et al., 2009; Iacono & Weisband, 1997; Williams, 2006; Yee, 2002). Over time, the formation of intimate, sustainable bonds, between co-players could generate substantial displacement effects, leading to declines in the quantity and quality of offline communication and the size of one’s social circle (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009a; Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008; Lo et al., 2005; Shen & Williams, 2010; Williams, 2006). This, in turn, may hinder one’s ability to form and maintain reciprocal offline relationships (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Shen & Williams, 2010), and attenuate the development or maintenance of effective social and emotional skills (Chiu et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2008; Peters & Malesky, 2008; Shen & Williams, 2010; Zamani, Kheradmand, Cheshmi, Abedi, & Hedayati, 2010). Displacement effects have also been linked to more long lasting social consequences. As stated by Kim et al. (2008), “the [use of] online games is associated with a decline in participants’ communication with family members in the household and a decline in the size of their social circles, and because of this they become socially isolated and are no longer able to socialize in a normal way” (p. 215).

Despite these claims, and a multitude of research, the empirical inquires that have attempted to demonstrate a relationship between increased online video game involvement and social competence has been inconclusive. The current research aims to clarify the veracity of previously drawn conclusions by comprehensively evaluating the relationship between social competence and online video game involvement amongst adult video game players. To determine the extent to which online video game involvement may support, or undermine, the development and maintenance of social competence, the linear relationships between social skills and online video game involvement will be evaluated.

While social competence can, and has been, conceptualized in a multitude of ways, the current work employed the social skills approach to measuring social competence. This approach operationalizes social competence as either having, or not having, certain social skills (Rose-Kransor, 1997). The social skills approach was chosen because it forms the base of most social competence models (Cavell, 1990; DuBois & Felner, 1996; Rose-Kransor, 1997), supplying the foundation for the other facets of social competence to build upon. This approach is also the most frequently employed within the social competence literature (Rose-Kransor, 1997), and has shown significant relationships with performance based assessments (Baron & Markman, 2003; Riggio, Watring, & Throckmorton, 1993), suggesting that it is a valid methodology to assess social skill and social performance. Thus, any significant associations between social competence and online video game involvement should be quantifiable on this foundational level. Furthermore, the social skills approach is most adept for pinpointing the precise social abilities that may hold a relationship with online video game play.

To conceptualize video game involvement, a single variable, called Involvement, was developed to represent the degree to which participants are involved in video gaming as a form of activity. The construction of this composite variable was motivated by the lack of consistency in determining what qualities identify an individual as a more involved “gamer”. For example, while play frequency has been the most commonly employed characteristic to differentiate between varying levels of game involvement (Barnett et al., 1997; Colwell & Kato, 2003; Griffiths, 2010; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Lo et al., 2005; Senlow, 1984; Shen & Williams, 2010; Smyth, 2007), reliance on play frequency as the sole differentiating variable of game involvement may be too simplistic, as it cannot account for the wide variety of other factors which may contribute to one’s level of involvement within this activity. There may be important differences between a person who plays *Tetris* for 30 min during lunch each day, and one who spends several hours a week playing *World of Warcraft*. A simple frequency measure would not capture this difference. There has also been a lack of standardization regarding what qualifies as ‘frequent’ gaming. For example, Barnett et al. (1997) identified frequent video game players as those who played at least one hour per week of video games, Kolo and Baur (2004) identified frequent video game players as those who played between 5 and 15 h a week, and Griffiths (2010) criteria for a frequent player was more than 7 h a week of video game play. In lieu of play frequency categories, other researchers have conceptualized play frequency on a spectrum (e.g., Colwell & Kato, 2003; Lo et al., 2005; Shen & Williams, 2010).

In an effort to address some of this inconsistency, and move beyond assessments that rely on a single facet of participation, Involvement scores were generated as a composite of participants’ reported weekly play frequency, game play variety, and social identification as a “gamer”. The inclusion of a social identification measure is particularly important, as the frequency and duration of game play, which has been implicated as the underlying source of possible social changes due to gaming, is strongly influenced by the attachment one has with other members of the gaming community (Ghuman & Griffiths, 2012). Game variety was also included as a component of Involvement as engaging in a wider variety of gaming behavior is indicative of greater general involvement within video game environments and communities, a difference that is not detectable through the measurement of play frequency alone. Enlisting this multi-faceted measure of Involvement, that integrates both objective (i.e., play frequency and variety) and subjective (i.e., social identity) measures, will provide a more systematic assessment of game involvement than has been employed previously, evaluating players across a broader spectrum of video game involvement.

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