

# Affinity Spaces and Gamers: Time Online and Associated Emotion

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**Abstract.** Scholars in information science often take interest in a wide variety of questions and dilemmas relative to games and gamers, technology and users. With this project, we focus on affinity space confessions. Our focus addresses video-game players' perceptions of their time spent gaming in a time-scarce world. Though exploratory in nature, this study raises powerful questions around user perception of time spent in leisure activities. Indeed, this project raises many important issues between the time players devote to entertainment and the privilege of being able to play "too much." We provide a discussion of what our findings can mean for information scientists, game developers, and other scholars across disciplines interested in the relationship between game playing, psychology, and behavior.

**Keywords:** Gaming behavior, digital literacies, participatory culture, affinity spaces, leisure studies.

## 1 Introduction

Scholars in information science often take interest in a wide variety of questions and dilemmas relative to games and gamers, technology and users. Related studies of behavior in Information Science in particular, focus on topics as the game spectator (Cheung and Huang, 2011), or addressing grand challenges through game-design activities in school (e.g., Reynolds and Chiu, (2015). Some of these scholars focus on time-related factors (e.g., Cheung, Zimmermann, and Nagappan, 2014), or reference the ways game developers may work to leverage players' time spent playing games (e.g., Von Ahn and Dabbish, 2008). The findings presented here are drawn from a lengthier study in process, and contribute to these conversations about time and gaming.

Time management is an increasing challenge in this data-driven society. Indeed, people are distracted in a wide variety of ways at work, at school, and in their social lives. Authors like Kurtzberg and Gibbs (2017) address these challenges in their recent book, and there are other scholars working across a wide variety of disciplines to interrogate similar issues. Our focus for this project addresses video-game players' perceptions of their time spent gaming in a time-scarce world by looking at how gamers seem to know they are spending too much time in the game. That a thread about gaming too much

began at all in a forum casts focus on notions of excess gaming as a kind of tension in today's digital culture that we mean to explore with this project.

We conceive of games and related online forums as affinity spaces. According to Gee (2004), an affinity space “is a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture ethnicity, or gender” (p. 73). It is a space much like, but a little different, from a community or, more specifically a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The idea of a community connotes a sense of belonging and membership, and community of practices are comprised of both experts and novices who share problems. On the other hand, Gee clarifies that the term “space” can be seen as a place where people are interacting but do not necessarily form a community (pp. 77-8). They may share interactions, but they may not feel a sense of association. For scholars, these spaces allow for an analysis of interactions between users to address specific ideas shared between respondents. Here, we conceive a set of online threads of talk as a space providing a site for us to interrogate players' considerations of time-in-the-game.

## **2 Method**

This work follows Cresswell's (2007) guidelines for a strong qualitative research, and focuses on the content of players' talk about how they feel about their time spent playing games. Thus the authors conceived players' talk as data and through the work of the first author as the primary coder, we analytically deployed content analysis as a means for processing those data. As explained by Schreier (2014), content analysis involves “describing the meaning of qualitative data” (p. 170).

The data set involved 300 threads in the Sims 3 forum “You know your [sic] playing Sims 3 too much when....” These lines of online talk were coded thematically – this means data were attributed a theme and further categorized into an overall pattern (Saldana, 2011, p. 108). The posts were categorized around the assumptions that whatever a poster wrote in their post is what that poster meant. They were also coded for gender and other similar categories. Though gamer gender is not a primary focus of this current work, it is a factor in the larger project.

Based on content analysis of players' talk about their gaming, and while considering affinity space associated with the video game *The Sims 3* to inform the research, we provide a set of top reasons players think they have spent too much time playing video games. Our methods do have limitations (e.g., a content analysis of forum posts does not involve direct interviews with participants). However, we provide a discussion of our findings and what they can mean for information scientists, game developers, and scholars across disciplines interested in the relationship between game playing, psychology, and behavior.

### 3 Findings

The results of the study revealed a set of primary ways that users begin to feel that they devote too much time to their game. For this presentation, we present the top six themes that emerged in players' talk.

#### *Incorporating Computer Skills*

The largest category was computer skills, and many of the gamers posted that they knew they were playing the game too much because they adapt computer skills to inappropriate times and places. For instance, KSkyeeSims12 commented, "When you push p thinking you could pause things but you see it doesn't work so you push p a lot until you notice your not on Sims 3 -\_\_-."

#### *Adopting Language*

The second reason that emerged was that users started talking in the language of the Sims. Fifty-three of the users commented that they started speaking the language spoken in the Sims game: Simlish. Susiechan states, "...when you start saying "sul sul" instead of hello and "dag dag" instead of "bye" to your friends. Yeah...I am in trouble."

#### *Comparing Life*

The third category was that forty-eight users reported comparing their life to the Sims. Pollyphilip commented, "I feel embarrassed when I know the things the sims say, and how me and my friend compare things in real life to the sims... another sad thing is when I imagine my mood bars, and whether they would be green or red or whatever."

#### *Creating Houses*

A fourth category was that thirty-seven users commented that the ability to make houses in the Sims game altered their perceptions of the world around them and made them feel they played too much. Guanahanii83 states, "All my sims homes are based on real ones. I even build my current house and houses I've lived in and family members homes. I made my grandmother's house, which I grew up in. I was quite proud of that. Lol. I love making houses and changing up the other houses and making over other sims...I'm addicted to the makeover mirror. lol."

#### *Thinking of the Music*

Fifth, thirty-five users commented they internalized the Sims music. For example, user lawziee states, "[W]hen you walk round humming simlish songs to yourself."

#### *Dreaming*

The sixth category that emerged was dreaming about the game. Twenty-seven users commented on thinking about the game while they slept. For instance,, matdhatter123 states, "When you start muttering Simlish in your sleep..."

## 4 Conclusion

We aim to participate in ongoing scholarly conversations about gamers' experiences and emotions. Our findings point to some experiences that happen for players, and shifts they experience when playing a lot. We hope that our preliminary findings here can serve as a jumping off point for additional research on users.

While this analysis is preliminary and exploratory in nature, it provides a way to envision an extended scholarly agenda focused on how players manage their time online, both experientially and psychologically. Indeed, this project raises many important issues between the time players devote to entertainment and the privilege of being able to play "too much." Critical scholars may consider gamer inequalities relative to time available for gaming as well as the infrastructure and access needed for individuals to game regularly. Also, there is a discourse tied to gaming too much that is not just about how people recognize that they spend time, but rather is about identity making and performing. Beyond the content, that is, tied to gamers' stories about gaming too much, there is a discursive identity formed through the game that other scholars can continue to interrogate. We encourage readers to understand these findings in relation to their own work, and to inspire additional work focused on users' talk about their play and leisure time.

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