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# Editorial: Where does the field of gaming addiction studies need to go next?

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**Citation:** Gkasionis, I., Kuss, D.J. & Griffiths, M.D. (2021). Editorial: Where does the field of gaming addiction studies need to go next? *Journal of Concurrent Disorders*.

**Editor-in-Chief:** Mona Nouroozifar

**Received:** 08/24/2021  
**Accepted:** 08/30/2021  
**Published:** 08/31/2021



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**Abstract.** Problematic gaming has been considered an issue of mental health (e.g., addiction) and ‘Gaming Disorder’ has been formally recognized in the 11<sup>th</sup> revision of the International Classification of Disease. This editorial argues that now is perhaps a good time to shift the focus from ‘disorder’ to ‘gaming’. Learning about the practice of gaming more holistically is one way to refine and extend attained knowledge in terms of our understanding of problematic gaming. A key aspect of gaming that needs to be explored is the *current state of gaming*, which can more likely be addressed from a game studies perspective as opposed to a purely psychological perspective. This editorial posits a number of key questions and approaches which could take the gaming addiction field forward from a more interdisciplinary perspective.

**Keywords:** Player-researcher Perspective, Gaming, Problem Gambling, Problem Gambling, Gambling Disorder

## **Introduction**

Psychological research on problematic gaming has been heavily concerned with exploring the circumstances under which the activity of videogame playing should be considered an issue of mental health (e.g., addiction). Having sufficiently addressed this primary concern, given that Gaming Disorder has been formally recognised, conceptualized, and given criteria in the 11<sup>th</sup> revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11; World Health Organization, 2019) under ‘Disorders due to addictive behaviours’, now is perhaps a good time to shift the focus from ‘disorder’ to ‘gaming’. In order to take the field further it is vital to attempt to understand contemporary gaming culture and those involved with it before making more ‘topic-blind’ advancements in gaming addiction studies (i.e., understand gaming as a practice before proceeding to study gaming in the context of addiction studies). Learning as much as we can about the practice of gaming more holistically is one way to refine and extend attained knowledge in terms of our understanding of problematic gaming. Involving self-identified gamers in the process of knowledge production, and thus obtaining a cultural insider perspective (Snodgrass et al., 2017) is arguably a good place to start this exploration.

## **Gaming from a player-researcher perspective**

In the video gaming studies field, very few studies have been published from a player-researcher perspective (e.g., ethnographic studies in which the researcher collects data while being a player and bringing insights from their player perspective). Such studies have a long history in the gambling studies field (e.g., Hayano, 1978; Rosecrance, 1986a, 1986b; Parke & Griffiths, 2011, 2012), but are much less common in the gaming studies field.

The gaming studies field can capitalize on the insights that a player-researcher can bring and can augment and enrich academic knowledge and understanding on what gaming is exactly. There appears to be consensus among scholars who study Gaming Disorder that there is a knowledge gap in the existing literature and addressing it would greatly benefit future addiction studies (Kuss, Griffiths & Pontes, 2017). The first author (who describes himself as a player-researcher) is well acquainted with the gaming addiction literature but has come to the view that addictive videogame properties extend beyond gameplay and there are entire sociocultural systems that create factors for game choices, gameplay durations, types of play, and players’ association with gaming in general. This concept is obviously very broad and could be explored from various perspectives.

## **What are videogame players addicted to?**

Quandt (2017) asserts that there is a lack of insight regarding the question ‘What are players addicted to?’ and this serves as good starting point in terms of considering how this question branches out and what would be pertinent and meaningful to explore in the gaming studies and

addiction studies fields. Quandt (2017) suggests that we should expand our knowledge in terms of gameplay aspects such as narrative, game mechanics, graphics, reward systems, etc., but brings the term ‘addiction’ into the equation, which could create confusion for researchers looking to explore this particular strand in the Gaming Disorder literature. A videogame offers the exact same things to all the players but very few players become addicted to it, given that developing an addiction is heavily dependent on context (Griffiths, 2010). Asking this question using the term ‘addiction’ in play invites considerations that may dilute the exploration of gameplay. In other words, the way in which the questions ‘What are players addicted to?’ and ‘What makes games enjoyable?’ can be answered varies substantially. Asking ‘What makes games engaging?’ rather than ‘What are players addicted to?’ allows for an interdisciplinary approach which perhaps broadens the horizon of this exploration.

The question ‘What are gamers addicted to?’ relies on research from (primarily) a psychological perspective. This approach indeed has its merits and those working in the gaming studies field need an empirical grounding in what we know on the subject as a discipline before assuming we do not know enough and extend knowledge by bringing in insights and data from other disciplines. Such an approach most likely involves gaming motives (Dong & Potenza, 2014), although there are other aspects to consider, such as avatar association studies that have gained traction in the field of late (e.g., Stavropoulos et al., 2019). However, since it has been established that ‘addiction’ and ‘context’ are interrelated in the case of problematic gaming, it can be argued that psychology requires tools from other disciplines that have been traditionally concerned with exploring the essence of ‘play’. These tools can be obtained only by asking the right questions.

### **Contemporary gaming from a game studies perspective**

Another aspect of gaming that needs to be explored and that is relevant to the scope and perhaps overlaps with the aforementioned questions is the *current state of gaming*, which can more likely be addressed from a game studies perspective. More specifically, contemporary gaming needs to be understood in its entirety in order to avoid bringing in outdated views to future addiction studies. Gaming is now in the mainstream media, and for a minority of players is a career choice (Faust et al., 2013), and association with it should not be seen as negative at face value. Consequently, there are a number of potential aspects and key questions that need exploring in relation to contemporary gaming, including: (i) sociocultural standing (e.g., What are society’s views on gaming and how have they shifted over the years?), (ii) player base (Who is playing video games and how has this changed over the years?), (iii) duration, frequency, and intensity (How often are they playing?; How long is a standard gaming session?; How invested are gamers during gameplay?), (iv) popular genres and gameplay (What are people playing most and why?), and (v) gaming culture and its associated peripherals (What comes attached with gaming?).

Areas for exploration include competing in games, viewing others playing games, talking with others about gaming, posting about gaming on online forums, attending gaming conventions, discussing the hype and anticipation for upcoming releases, upgrading hardware, etc.

Examining the area more broadly creates an overview of gaming as a sociocultural practice. Each one of these five aspects is interesting and important enough to merit standalone exploration and contemporary reviews. However, when embarking on a sociocultural exploration of gaming for the benefit of addiction studies, ‘What are gamers playing the most, and why?’ are perhaps the most pertinent questions. Exploring popular genres and their distinctive game designs, how and why they have emerged, and the reasons behind their popularity can reveal much regarding both gaming culture as well as addictive game loops. For example, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) explored the popularity of MMORPGs and particularly *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, and concluded that communal play is not necessarily sought out for the interaction with other players (which was the prevailing opinion), but because other players serve as an audience for in-game achievements (“*it is not the people that are addictive, but rather it is the image of myself I get from other people*”, p. 7). This provides an excellent example of how the transition from single-player to multi-player (made possible by advancements in broadband and internet speeds) altered the narrative of enjoyability for gamers.

### **The evolution of gaming**

Since *WoW's* inception in November 2004, there have been numerous games that have revolutionized the gaming scene in ways similar to *WoW* (e.g., *League of Legends*, *Call of Duty 4*, *Overwatch*, *Minecraft*, *Fortnite*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*). Following the advancements of the First Person Shooter (FPS) genre, one can observe how changes over the past two decades signify different and evolved ‘hooks’ for players to get attached to: shooting AI (e.g., *Doom*, *Wolfenstein*), shooting other players (e.g., *Call of Duty*, *Counter-Strike*), shooting other players, but the player’s character has supernatural abilities (e.g., *Overwatch*, *Valorant*), shooting other players, but the player only has one life (*Players’ Unknown Battlegrounds*, *Fortnite*, *Apex Legends*), shooting other players, but the player only has one life and the player also loses their hard-earned gear when killed (e.g., *Escape from Tarkov*). This perhaps goes to show that the conceptualisation of ‘tolerance’ in IGD (i.e., the need to spend increasing amounts of time engaged in games; American Psychiatric Association 2013) for Gaming Disorder may need to be reconsidered. Gamers arguably build tolerance based on the quality of gaming rather than its quantity. Some gamers clearly have to play longer to get the mood-modifying effects they once got from shorter playing times (Griffiths, 2010), but after a certain point, ‘more of the same’ is not enough and gamers need something new and novel (similar to psychoactive substance users moving from marijuana to more powerful and intoxicating drugs), which

could be through playing different genres, playing different games and/or being rewarded in different ways in terms of game advancement.

### **Gaming peripherals within gaming culture**

Finally, following up on Ducheneaut et al.'s (2006) findings on gratification based on in-game 'player audiences', with all the popularity gaming has gained over the years, this audience is no longer limited to co-players, but extends to several 'meeting points' (e.g., forums, streaming platforms) which gamers have created to make gaming as communal as possible (Taylor, 2018). The extent to which gaming peripherals (as noted earlier) should be considered as inseparable from videogame playing merits further investigation. For example, an increasingly popular launch model for new videogames is to release the game in a 'beta' (testing) state and hand out beta keys (i.e., early access to the game) to those who watch a specific amount of time (typically just one hour in total) of live streaming the beta version of the game. Researchers need to investigate how advancements and emergences in gaming genres have shaped gamers' experience and thrill-seeking over the past decade as well as examining gaming 'add-ons' (i.e., how has gaming expanded beyond gameplay and what are the implications for gaming habits and attitudes?).

### **Conflict of interest**

There is no conflict of interest.

### **Availability of data and materials**

N/A.

### **Funding source**

None.

### **Authors' contributions**

All authors contributed to the preparation of this manuscript.

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