



Exploring the positive psychological aspects of video-gaming: A thematic analysis
of semi-structured interviews

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate how video games can positively affect individuals, and how they perceive this experience. Because technology is becoming more integrated into our lives, it is important to investigate how we interact and relate to such media (Woolgar, 2002). Because of the discourse in wider society of games as harmful and negative, researchers have increasingly been looking at ways in which this popular activity can benefit us (Murphy et al (2014). The meaning that individuals ascribe to immersive worlds such as video games interact with how we perceive and transform reality (Ryan, 2001). This study involved five interviews looking at social relationships, immersion, and skills developed in video games. Following thematic analysis of the data, several overarching themes have been found to form the positive influences of video games. The four main positive aspects have been conceptualised as themes: the social aspect of games, confidence building, desire for transcendence and immersion, and creativity which has emerged as a new theme, not commonly reported in previous research. We should note the interaction between the real and the virtual world rather than see them as separate spaces.

KEY WORDS:	VIDEO GAMES	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	IMMERSION	CREATIVITY	SOCIAL EXPERIENCES
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Introduction

In the 21st century, it is undeniable that technology is ever-expanding, and increasingly affecting more aspects of our lives through the growth of electronic information and communication (Woolgar, 2002). Markham (1998) argues that technological communications affect the very foundations of what it means to be human as our embodiment extends into the virtual world. Hillis (1999) further suggests that technology is a manifestation of our human desires and ideas that liberate us from the physical embodiment of reality. Therefore, there is an urgency to understand and adapt to these emerging technologies as society in order to use them for our benefit. Some even see the technological medium as a form of art. Ryan (2001) argues that art form has progressed from being a physical entity to something that is conceptualised and understood by the mind rather than the body, such as narratives. It is not surprising then, that researchers from many areas of study including anthropology, psychology and sociology believe it is important to research new electronic media and the possible effects it may have on us as humans.

Whilst games are an ancient concept, with one of the earliest games Senet dating back to 2700BC in Ancient Egypt (Eklund, 2012), video games are increasingly becoming part of our mainstream entertainment culture, with up to 92% of American adolescents reporting playing video games (Engels et al., 2014). This has drawn the attention of many scholars in attempts to investigate the psychological and social influences that video games have on people. There appears to be a tradition in media effects studies to invest research in looking at the negative aspects of new forms of media (Murphy et al., 2014), such as the case with theatre, cinema and comic books when they first appeared (Engels et al., 2014).

In the wider society and the academia, there appears to be a discourse of video games as a solitary and lonely activity embraced largely by socially incompetent adolescent boys (Eklund & Johansson, 2013). The media and mainstream psychology has been keen to highlight studies indicating a relationship between video games and violent and aggressive behaviour (e.g. Greitemeyer, 2014, Brock et al., 2012). However, measurements of aggression in such studies commonly take into account only short-term biological measures which are arguably not representative of significant real life long term consequences of gaming (Breyer & Elson, 2014). This study aims to address such discourses through in depth narratives, as some qualitative researchers argue that:

...the task of the qualitative researcher is to produce this kind of knowledge in a way that is different from the popular view... (Parker, 2005:7).

Qualitative research is more suitable for investigating how the players actually experience and conceptualize their experience with games, violent or not (Murphy et al., 2014).

However, there is also a positive side. Engel et al (2014) calls for a balance between research investigating the positives and negatives of video games. Recent statistical studies have shown that the stereotypical image of a gamer is far from the truth, with most gamers being over 30 years old, working full time, and around a third are females (Yee, 2014). Studies have found a correlation between anxiety, loneliness, and depression and use of video games (Yee, 2014), however, some researchers have argued that video games may help individuals with such problems by providing a safe virtual space where they can learn and master their social skills (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2014). Video games can be a very social experience, whether playing co-operative with a friend or online in a massively multiplayer online game (MMO), the video game world is far from a lonely place. With the most successful MMO World of Warcraft which peaked at 12 million players in 2011 (Billeux et al, 2013), online games offer challenges requiring a group of players to work in a team perform their assigned roles successfully to complete a challenge (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2014). Wimmer (2014) points out that such virtual spaces can give individuals who may feel uncomfortable in real world social situations a chance to learn and practice valuable life skills with others online such as effective communication, leadership, and respect. People who frequently experience displeasure whether through a mental hindrance such as stress and depression or a physical one such as a restricting physical disability, can be liberated of such restrictions in a virtual world where you are not judged, and can provide a mutual social activity across geographical distances (Eklund, 2014).

Video games are also starting to be used in therapeutic settings. For example, Chiang et al (2011) found children with Down syndrome who have undergone Virtual Reality (VR) rehabilitation using a Nintendo Wii console performed significantly better on measures of sensorimotor measures; this was explained by the feedback in video games which activated the specific motor neural networks. VR has also been used as a treatment programme for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and panic disorders which has been shown to be as effective as other treatments (Armstrong et al., 2014). Psychotherapy has adapted video games into therapy, finding that games can facilitate the rapport between client and therapist, and also help to overcome barriers in difficult situations by allowing the client to diverge their gaze from the therapist to the video game (Ceranoglu, 2010). Furthermore, Festl et al (2015) argues that we only have a vague understanding of the relationship between games and low well-being, as people with lower psychosocial skills may simply be drawn to virtual spaces because they accommodate for their social needs. This shows that video games can and have been adapted to be a useful media to benefit people instead of being dismissed as merely a harmful entertainment platform. However, it is undeniable that extensive exposure to video games can be problematic, as Yee (2014) points out, when video games are used as self-medication rather than a supplement in cases of depression it frequently leads to problematic use.

Video games can be used not only to accommodate for deficiencies, but also improve baseline cognitions. Feng & Spencer (2010) found that video games positively affected performance in several cognitive domains including working memory, analytic processes, and visuospatial cognition. Such findings have important beneficial implications for the real world. For example, Benbow et al (2010) concluded that spatial skills are important predictors of academic success in science, technology, engineering, and maths. This shows that cognitive skills can be practiced and improved upon via video games which can be then transferred to real life. Problem solving is another cognitive skill that is highly emphasised in today's education and employment, so an adaptable and flexible mind is an advantage. When players are unsuccessful at completing a challenge in games, Mitgutsch (2009) suggests that players learn something about themselves, ways of experiencing and learning in such situations. Therefore, challenging situations force players to re-learn by reprocessing a situation until a successful solution is found, this clearly promotes mental flexibility and problem-solving. Engels et al (2014) also reported that children who were praised for their efforts in a video game task were more motivated and excited when they failed rather than angry, possibly due to developing better regulation strategies which are promoted in games. The capacity for cognitive reappraisal is an extremely useful mental tool to have in an ever-changing and evolving world of technology. However, not many studies have looked into how players address challenges and what steps they take to solve them, which will be explored in this study through a qualitative lens.

Virtual space in online video games is a relatively neutral ground for people from all backgrounds, genders, and age groups to co-operate and experience together. The very nature of games is becoming more interactive, diverse and social (Engels et al., 2014) and so it is unsurprising that people are turning more to virtual spaces for social interaction. The ability to control how we type, behave, and present ourselves using avatars in video games provide an additional dimension to human interaction (Markham, 1998). By embodying ourselves in a virtual avatar we can leave behind our real selves and become equal with people who are of different age and origins to us, in contrast to the real world where certain groups (such as minority groups) experience a lack of power due to their status in society (Yee, 2014). Hillis (1999) argues that technology is altering the way we perceive subjectivity and the segregation between our physical and technological selves are increasingly blurring.

This brings us to the topic of embodiment and how we experience it in different mediums. Ryan (2001) argues that virtual spaces can be liberating experiences of physical disembodiment in a body-obsessed society. Having control over how we present ourselves through a virtual avatar can provide an alternative world with the play of identities. However, virtual avatars in games do not necessarily hold different identities to the player. Jørgensen (2010) notes that studies of role-playing games (RPG) showed that players displayed a 'bleed effect' of their real identities into the virtual character, with which came their emotions and morals from the real world. This merging of identities between the player and the virtual avatar is a two-way

process, so morals and ideas in a game narrative can also be transmitted to the player, affecting their social attitudes in real life (Riva et al., 2015). Through this two-way process, the player essentially has two worlds to draw experiences from – the virtual and the real. By embodying both worlds through liquid identities (Wagner, 2012), players can be positively influenced by video games in relation to our attitudes and interactions in real life.

But what is the appeal of virtual fantasy worlds? Wagner (2012) compares VR to religion, arguing they both allow humans to experience the extraordinary by departing from the physical limitations of our bodies. Humans have been attempting to make meanings out of our experiences and imagination throughout history. Since the Stone Age, humans have been trying to manipulate and replicate our world of mean-making through cave-paintings and myths (Evans, 2001). With our advancement in technology, these mythical worlds of meaning have finally come to life in the form of video games where the player must actively interact with the narrative of meaning. The experiences people have during these virtual adventures can provide a rich source of data on how such narratives affect the players, data which cannot be derived through quantitative methods, as each player is bound to have their own worlds of mean-making.

Some researchers have suggested that what keeps players immersed and interested in a video game is the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Borrowed from the domain of positive psychology, flow has been used to explain the immersive nature of video games and the sense of presence in the virtual world (Liebold et al., 2014). The mental mechanism of flow and immersion involves a clear goal to achieve, challenge that is adequate for the player's skill, and immediate feedback on the performance must all be present for flow to maintain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow is seen as a very positive and fulfilling experience that benefits our self-esteem and well-being, which is very achievable in video games due to their interactive and skill-utilizing nature (Eklund, 2014).

The majority of research into the influences of video games, whether negative or positive, have been of quantitative nature. Whilst such studies are useful in establishing causes and effects, the quantitative method only largely captures short term effects that are not necessarily applicable to real-world experiences of gamers (Breyer & Elson, 2014). Murphy et al (2014) has studied video gaming experiences qualitatively and found several themes that appeared important to gamers in their experiences, including: emotional response, game-play, social, outcomes of gameplay, goals, and personal qualities. Drawing from such past studies, this study will further advance the qualitative exploration of player experiences and how they perceive video games to have positively influenced them. Several new themes will be explored which have not yet been explored through qualitative methods, but informed from past research such as what makes a game immersive and what social functions games provide for individuals. Due to the dominant cognitive laboratory-based research paradigm (Liebold et al., 2014), Murphy et al (2014) suggested that

perhaps we should look at what the players themselves experience instead of allowing experimenters to report and explain what they think they are seeing.

This study will explore the following themes:

- What transferrable skills do video games teach players?
- How does escapism into virtual worlds facilitate well-being?
- Does immersion allow us to take control over certain aspects of our lives?
- Are virtual game worlds perceived as a separate from the outside world, or an integrated part of life?
- How are social interactions in video-games different from real world social interactions?
- Do social interactions in games fulfil or enhance our needs as social creatures?

Method

Philosophy of methodology

This study takes on a qualitative approach to exploring how people perceive and experience the positive aspects of video games. This method of research has been chosen because semi-structured interviews give the opportunity for several pre-determined topics inspired by previous literature to be discussed whilst leaving space for new topics to be explored as they arise (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Qualitative research is especially appropriate for studying newly emerging and under-researched fields of study because the interviewing method aims to collect rich, varied, and personal data to explore the topic in depth. Direction for this study has been influenced by previous studies such as Murphy et al (2014) and also by contradictory past findings, as Parker (2005) notes that reality can change and emerge through tension and contradiction. This does not mean that existing psychological theories of video game experiences are wrong, but rather, they act as foundations for further research to build upon and make sense of the world through the different accounts of reality.

Qualitative methods as such acknowledge the biases, assumptions and experiences that the researcher brings into the study (Maxwell, 2005), however, personal experiences are seen as a valuable source of knowledge rather than a restriction (Sternberg, 1996). For the purpose of this study, it was deemed important for the researcher to have knowledge and experience of video games. This is because video games are often treated as a separate world with its own rules and ways of being. Being an outsider as a researcher may only put off the informants from going in-depth about their experiences, and instead construct their narrative in a way that explains the basic mechanics of how games work rather than how players experience them (Liebold et al., 2014).

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using a voluntary sample from the Manchester Metropolitan Gamers Society (MMUG) through their private facebook group page. An advertisement was posted looking for volunteers, and an invitation letter (see Appendix 2) along with an information sheet (see Appendix 3) was sent to anyone who showed interest. In total, 5 participants were interviewed. All participants were between the ages of 18-25 and currently attending university.

Maxwell (2005) noted that qualitative methods see people as 'respondents' rather than participants, as by responding to our inquiry they allow us into a certain reality of their own rather than act as subjects for our tests. Although, the study did not require the respondents to identify themselves as 'gamers', it was assumed that people who were members of a gaming society were knowledgeable and interested in games, and therefore, would be good informants on this topic.

Interviews

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. To help give the interview a framework, an interview schedule was used which can be seen in appendix 5. However, it was important to ensure that the interview did not feel rigid but was a spontaneous interaction between two people, roughly guided by the interview schedule (Frey & Fontana, 2000). As advised by Rubin & Rubin (1995), the interviewee can exercise control by changing the subject or indicating by their answers that they do not know enough about a certain topic to answer a certain question.

In every interview an imbalance of power between the interviewer and the interviewee is inevitable (Parker, 2005). Attempts were made to neutralize the differences between both parties through experiences (gamers) and position in society (students).

In order for the interview to be effective in exploring the research topic of video games, it was important for the researcher to use neutral probes as well as triggers to lead the interview in a loose direction while allowing the respondents to informally chat. Markham (1998) points out that straying off the interview schedule is an effective method of building a rapport with the interviewee as it can feel more relaxed and reassuring.

Even though the researcher had previous experience of video games, there were differences in experience and virtual spaces that were unfamiliar. To help understand these new contrasting experiences, interviewees were asked to tell stories as examples to illustrate their points. Stories, Rubin & Rubin (1995) explain, can help the interviewee discuss something that is otherwise hard to demonstrate, such as communities in a virtual space unobservable to the non-player.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. The transcripts can be seen in appendix 7. Thematic analysis was chosen as a method of discourse extraction from the data because it provides a way of looking for patterns in the data and trying to connect them together into meaningful groups and themes that capture the subject being investigated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the study of video games through a qualitative philosophy is fairly uncommon, thematic analysis provided the opportunity to find new themes by taking into consideration all of the varied and rich data gathered from interviews. As Braun & Clarke (2006:81) noted, "Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants..." which suited the aims of this study to capture the experiences of video game players.

The process of thematically analysing the data involves reading and re-reading the data several times and looking for common concepts and coding them throughout the text, whether similar or contrasting (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The codes are then grouped together into similar clusters to create a meaningful theme. A theme is the product of thematic analysis, it is a word or a phrase that captures something important or the essence of the data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are usually something that captures the attention of the researcher, and can be abstract or descriptive as long as they capture the concept of what the respondents said about their experiences and their reality (Boyatzis, 1998). After several overarching and important themes have been noted, the data was re-read again to see how they fit into every individual experience. As new themes emerged, they were integrated into the data.

The significance of such themes was also considered in the broader sense of whether they were in line with previous studies of the positives of gaming, or completely new and unexpected (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). Throughout the revision of data, themes were refined to better capture the diverse essence of the data. Themes and concepts were then linked together to create a meaningful explanation of the topic (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The thematic map with the main overarching themes and smaller concepts illustrating this process can be seen in appendix 8.

Ethics

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, ethical considerations that need to be taken into account are in regards to the sensitive information which may be revealed during the interview. According to Francis (2009), one main ethical issues in interviews is anonymity. As the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and then transcribed, several precautions were taken to ensure the anonymity of respondents was respected. Ethical approval was gained from the Manchester Metropolitan University psychological ethics committee (see Appendix 1).

All respondents were over the age of 18 and were recruited on voluntary basis. As participation is voluntary, no incentive was offered. However, the interviews were

intended to be enjoyable informal experiences so there was no pressure to participate.

Respondents were required to sign a consent form after they have accepted to take part in the study and read the provided information sheet (see Appendix 3). Respondents were also given opportunity to ask any questions before the interview. In addition, all respondents were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Once the interviews were recorded, respondents were thanked for their time and given a debrief sheet (see Appendix 6) with the researcher's contact details. Even though the study did not aim to explore and sensitive personal issues, the University's counsellor contact number was also included in the debrief sheet in case respondents felt they needed counselling.

To ensure the recorded data was kept secure, the files were digitally encrypted so only the researcher had access to the recordings. During transcription, all names were changed to fictional ones to ensure the respondents' confidentiality. After the recordings were transcribed, the voice recordings were destroyed. These steps were taken in line with the British Psychological Society (BPS) code of conduct (BPS, 2006).

Discussion and analysis

This study aimed to explore the ways in which people experienced positive effects of video games. The nature of language in conversations is a social construct pre-laden with discourses of what people believe and do (Billig, 2009), therefore, experiences could not be reproduced in exact. Rather, the way respondents negotiated their stories and experiences was seen as valuable and insightful data.

Previous studies focusing on the positive aspects of video games found several themes that were commonly reported, such as socially playing in a team, the feeling of being immersed, and personal qualities (Murphy et al, 2014).

Social aspect of games

Contrary to popular discourse of video games as solitary and unsocial experiences (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2014), sociality emerged as an important theme. The social dimension of video games surfaced in every interview and appeared to be an important source of enjoyment and motivation to play games:

Lewis:...games now that kind of let you build a friendship online...MMOs always require you to group up with people to complete a task...you might arrange to meet up at a certain time to complete a task. (346-349)

Here Lewis describes his experience in an MMO, a genre of games that rely heavily on teamwork to successfully accomplish a challenge. Not only does this require interacting with other players online, such activities require good communication,

politeness, and flexibility (Gonçalves & Zagalo, 2014). Like Lewis, Samantha also gave an account how playing cooperatively and helpfully in a team made her feel comfortable and made the game an enjoyable experience:

Samantha: ...we were all like communicating and like giving each other money to buy guns...I felt comfortable...we were all like giving each other tips on how to improve in the next game...(915-918)

This statement comes in agreement with research by Eklund & Johansson (2013) showing that social activities in online games are dependent on trust and cooperation.

Social relationships from the virtual game world can also be carried over into other platforms of communication and other forms of relationships, as in Lewis' case:

Lewis: ...I made a few friends from around Europe...I still play that game on a weekly basis with the same people...we formed a friendship outside of steam...keep in touch through facebook...(423-426)

And indeed, it is becoming increasingly easier for game clan members and friendship groups to keep in touch and take their friendships outside of games and into social media and gaming networks such as PSN which accumulated 77m members up to date (Wimmer, 2014).

Video games can also be virtual spaces for bonding between existing friends and family members by providing a mutual activity. Ben and Samantha found that they did not need to both be virtually in the game, as sharing the same frame of experience gives a point of reference and pleasure for both parties.

Samantha: ...we had a family friend who was little as well and they used to come over and we used to...watch each...like co-op, one person would play it and the others would just sort of be around. (835-841)

Ben: ...we'd be playing like Zelda...passing the controller between us...that's how we 'hung out' when we were little. (1072-1077)

This shows that games can bring together family members who may otherwise find it difficult to communicate due to different interest, therefore filling a social function of performing a mutual activity. This collaborative engagement can lead to an experience similar to group flow, where those participating in the experience spark together in a joint action (Bryan-Kinns & Hamilton, 2009).

In contrast to other respondents, Henry explained that gaming can also have a negative impact on one's social life and interactions:

Henry: ...person won't be able to communicate...they'll be shy and they'll like not understand emotions. If they've been playing the game for so long, it can also make the experience negative. (52-54)

Contrasting experiences can co-exist in a theme (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) as it demonstrates how people perceive a common experience differently. From Henry's experience, if one becomes too invested and lost in video games their social relationships and attitudes may suffer as a result. However, Festl et al (2015) explains that sociality in video games should not be seen as a replacement for interactions in real life, but rather, an additional dimension to an already existing social life. So whilst social interactions in games were positive experiences for every other respondent, it can also be a destructive one, therefore, we must look at the motivations for which people engage in video games so that they are used responsibly.

Creativity

Creativity was a theme that spontaneously emerged from the interviews as respondents mentioned their experiences and observations about themselves and others in relation to creativity and games. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) asserted that creativity and curiosity is an important human trait that allows humans to progress as a society. Eye et al (2012:371) defined creativity in relation to technology as 'a mental process involving the generation of new ideas or concepts, or new associations between existing ideas or concepts'. Creativity has emerged in two separate forms; games as a facilitator of creativity for the players, and developers of the game as inspiring emotions and experiences in a particular way:

Henry:...developer creates the graphics, the actual level, that can still alter your mind...(229-230)

Here Henry explains that the graphics created by the developers can be inspiring and change the way they are presented can change the way his mind perceives the game. This shows how virtual worlds can alter the way we perceive and experience reality, rather than just a form of entertainment. This is further expressed by Roy:

Roy:...they have their own kind of graphical styles, they all tell their own personal stories and because of that I think it's more of an art form rather than an entertainment. (806-808)

Roy believes that video games is an art form, as the narratives told in them and the graphical style of the game can make him feel and experience in a certain way. This follows the observation from (Ryan, 2001) that art as a form is becoming more conceptual, perhaps even virtual 'in our minds' rather than having a physical form.

Another way in which video games can spark creativity in the players themselves is by inspiring them to create.

Ben:...there's other stuff hidden around the game that tell you the bits and bobs of the lore...you can kind of like, write your own stories around that...(1147-1149)

For example, the narratives told in the lore of the game inspired Ben to write stories based on that particular game world. In this case, the narrative of the virtual world was elaborated creatively by Ben through writing his own stories, and therefore expanding the otherwise non-existent space.

Interestingly, 3 respondents mentioned that their decision to pursue computer science courses at University were at least partly inspired by their passion for video games. So, not only are the stories told by games can be creative, but also the very process of creating a game through code is seen as a creative process:

Ben:...it's hard not to be influenced by that kind of stuff...even coding is creative so in that aspect...so I was like 'hey I could makes those, and I like those, I could make more that me and other people like and that seems cool'. I think that's what got me into it. (1172-1183)

Roy:...gaming has inspired me to do computer science, if not for gaming I don't know what I'd be doing at the moment. (811-812)

The above exempts show how video games have given Ben and Roy a direction and a passion in their lives. Both mention the inspirational nature of games. Ben is inspired not just by the creative aspect of coding, but also the thought of the creating games that he loves and having others play and enjoy them too. Similar findings have been found by Eye et al (2012) who linked computational thinking and creativity to video game use in children. This could also be a two-way processes, with analytical skills as such required in computer science can increase performance and interest in video games.

Creativity, therefore, is a positive experience as for the respondents in this study it was characterised by passion both for creating and immersing in the virtual world. Creativity is also extremely important in today's world of work where employers increasingly look for creative and original solutions for their organisations (Beenen & Miron-Spektor, 2015).

Desire for transcendence and immersion

Virtual worlds are fantastical spaces that offer the experience of something extraordinary, which we could not otherwise experience due the limitations of our physical world. The theme of transcendence emerged through the interviews as a positive experience which allowed the players to experience a new different world:

Henry:...it's abnormal, interesting, it'll keep your mind stimulated...it tells a story, it shows expression, of emotions, like the story goes from A all the way to Z, how much of a change each person had...(101-105)

Henry conceptualises the virtual world as an interesting and abnormal experience, a narrative that takes him through a journey. Wagner (2012) suggests that virtual spaces are manifestations of human desires and concerns just like dreams.

Greenberg et al (2014) sees mythical worlds and legends as cultural constructs that imbue our life with meaning and value in the face of the common human fear of their own morality.

It was also uncovered that actively participating and the feeling being in the virtual transcendental world was an important experience for the respondents:

Samantha:...it is like escaping realism because it's like you're in it, as opposed to watching a film where you're just an audience, but in a game you're in it, like in a dream...(987-989)

Samantha compares the game world to a dreamscape, actively engaging in the events and surroundings. Active participation as a strength of video games, as it allows the player to take control of the situation (Eklund, 2014). An Interesting finding by Gackenbach & Kuruvilla (2008) showed that gamers were more likely to be victorious threatening dreams, possibly because gamers have learnt that success comes from controlling a situation rather than relying on good fortune.

Furthermore, Lewis mentioned how becoming immersed in a fantasy world can be a liberating experience:

Lewis:...the idea of escaping into a different world outside of your own...you get this sense of freedom, you know of exploring a world that you could never explore in reality.(473-476)

He shows the desire to escape into a virtual world which does not exist in the physical world yet it has the ability to give him a sense of freedom. This links to embodiment, as we are not simply physical bodies, but as Wagner (2012) argues, we can become embodied in a virtual character. This is further illustrated by Roy:

Roy:...it tells more of a personal story in a larger bubble, that sort of helps me relate it to myself...the problems of those 2 people and their problems, same as mine...(695-697)

Roy explains how by being immersed in a video game his goals, feelings, and emotions can become transferred into the virtual character in the game world. This bleed effect (Jørgensen, 2010) shows how our own identities are not solid entities, but can embody even computerised characters. Like Roy, Gee (2008) has found that players can inhabit their virtual characters by embodying the character's goals as also their own. By embodying a character and learning to take the perspectives of others, players can experience novel situations:

Roy:...many different characters and they all have different personalities, same as in real life...does kind of help in real life situations in real life as well because I'm becoming more familiar from learning in-game. (704-707)

Gee (2008) refers to this as model simulations in which we can experience situations in a virtual world and we can use that experience for future situations in real life. Experiencing new situations and interactions with people can be referred to the

concept of emotional intelligence. This is a beneficial experience because by practising emotional intelligence, we can learn to better empathise and understand people (Mathews et al, 2002).

Confidence

The final theme refers to narratives of how the respondents experienced confidence as a result of engaging with video games. Due to the nature of virtual worlds, players have the opportunity to present themselves in a certain way, eliminating any anxieties a person may have in real life situations:

Roy:...it will give them the confidence in game, perhaps they can gain the confidence to do so in real life...I used to be very shy...but since then, because of playing games I have become more outgoing...(783-786)

Because video games create a special virtual world 'frame' separate from the real world (Eklund, 2012), Roy felt more comfortable to behave socially, and over time this transferred into real life. Furthermore, the fear of being judged by social peers is not a concern in video games, as illustrated:

Lewis:...my confidence...lacks quite a lot...in a game, confidence isn't really an issue because once again, you don't get judged on your actions. (464-466)

Lewis brings up that he is lacking confidence in the real world, however, in the virtual game world in which the social space is separate from the real he feels comfortable about socialising and not being judged. A possible interpretation of this is that having a sense of control over self-presentation in a virtual space presents a valuable dimension to games (Markham, 1998).

However, it appears that video games can affect confidence in different ways. Henry told an especially interesting narrative, because he did not see socialising in games as a boost to confidence in real life. He realised that because he was playing for so much during his early life, it had a negative impact on his sociality in real life. This made him realise he needs to take control of his real life first:

Henry:...because the fear of myself and who I am. And then as I realise I played too many video games, I learned to do sort of self-control thing. (255-256)

In this interesting case, games served as a purpose of making Henry realise there is a problem and motivated him to change his lifestyle and become more social:

Henry:...I started to improve because at the end of the day we only have one life. (66-67)

This again refers back to the statement by Ryan (2001) that immersion in virtual spaces is not just for entertainment, but as a way to transform our perception of reality, as in this case Henry realised that his perceived reality is not the one he

wanted, and made steps to change it. The narratives of games themselves can act as spaces for exploring own issues and emotions.

Bettelheim (1991) explains that fairy tales and myths have been prevalent for as long as human culture existed, and so the safety of encasing a narrative as just a 'story' can help people deal with a situation by analysing it. With the increasing instability of modern society such as insecurity over employment, fantasy worlds and stories can be a useful resource of mean-making and confidence boosting for individuals.

Reflexivity

It is important to acknowledge that the analysis and findings of this study are not exact reflections of reality and experiences of the respondents, but a description of a discourse by the researcher (Parker, 2005). As the researcher, personally I have experience of video games and its culture. The inspiration for this qualitative study was the overwhelming negative discourse of games in general society. Parker (2005) says that the conflicting views of the researcher can be a crucial resource in the study as a foundation to subjectively making sense of the data.

Because video games can be so different in nature (Engels et al., 2014), it was important that I considered my own biases and knowledge about games and respected that the respondents may have had a totally different experience to me. As Murphy et al (2014) asserted, the game content is not reflective of the player's experience, so every respondent told a very personal and unique story. But, overall, I believe my personal engagement with the medium helped respondents open up and felt understood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study attempted to communicate the positive influences the respondents experienced with video games. Whether video games can directly affect the individual by fulfilling our need for the extraordinary, providing us with a virtual space to interact and make friendships, or motivate us to change. Even though the experiences of 5 respondents may not be applicable to every gamer, the validity of findings are extremely useful to the purpose of this study (Maxwell, 2005). In particular, this study illustrates how people can derive positive individual meanings and experiences. Our relationship with technology is only becoming more intimate in modern society, we should embrace and adapt it for the benefit of society.

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