Video game addiction in Austria: Perspectives on a complex phenomenon.

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Abstract

Video game addiction is a complex phenomenon. Therefore, we try to understand video game addiction in individual and cultural contexts. In this paper, results from four smaller studies are reported: (1) A Test for video game addiction has been researched by interviewing 215 6 to 20 year old people in Austria with an online survey. (2) We conducted five biographical interviews with former excessive players. All of them stopped excessive playing without therapeutical aid. (3) Interviews with four currently addicted people show that they are aware of their addiction, but do not want to change their behaviour. (4) Additionally, we conducted six interviews with therapists who work with video game addicted people. While most of them do not consider the ICD 10 criteria as appropiate, they described their clients as addicted to flow experiences, communication, social standing, and the opportunity for self-expressions. According to the therapists, most addictives are aware of their addiction.

Keywords: Video Game Addiction, Prevalence, Therapist Interviews, Player Biography, Interviews

1 Introduction

Like in most western countries, playing video games is pretty common in Austria. According to a representative study, 86,5% male and 63% femal youngsters (11 to 18 years old) play video games regularly (Grossegger/Zentner 2008: 9). And this is not restricted to youngsters: A

non representative study suggests that 37,5% of 60 to 80 years old people in Austria play video games too (Jahrmann 2009). Playing video games can be considered as a harmless leisure activity for most of these people.

But for some people, video games become the most important purpose in life. While this might be considered as a normal behaviour of a game designer or a video game researcher, it is supposed to be problematic in other cases. If extensive video game consumption has to be considered as problematic, it is sometimes termed as video game addiction. While the relevance of video game addiction as a phenomenon is hardly doubted, there has been „very little research directly investigating video game addiction“ (Griffith 2005) for a long time. This situation has slightly changed since 2005. Still, the lack of research prevents the acceptance of video game addiction as a mental disorder in the DSM IV catalogue (Lemmens et. al. 2009). Additionally, some aspects of existing research might be considered as problematic too:

Most studies on video game addiction try to research the prevalence of something coined as video game addiction. To identify addicted people, criteria from the ICD-10 and DSM IV manuals are used. But the criteria have been developed for the diagnosis of gambling addiction. Thus existing prevalence studies assume a similarity of gambling addiction and video game addiction. But this assumed similarity has hardly been argued or researched. And there are relevant differences. As Pool has pointed out, real money – which is at stake while gambling - allows you to by beer and go on holidays, while video game rewards make sense in the game only (Pool 2010: 204). In this arguably relevant respect video games and gambling are different. Thus the similarity of video game addiction and gambling addiction is not simply clear. If there is a difference between video game addiction and gambling addiction, the tests that are based on gambling and applied for video game addiction become a relevant subject for research themself.

While the prevalence of video game addiction has been researched quite often, this is not the case for the context of this behaviour. This is not unique

to video game addiction. Squire has pointed out that research about "how gaming fits into people's lives, and the kinds of practices people are engaged in while gaming" (2002) is missing. This is still the case for video game addiction research. Accordingly, studies do not consider player biographies. While the 1989 study by Shotton suggests that high frequency playing is a temporary phenomenon for most high frequency players, this aspect has hardly led to any further biographical research. But to understand the meaning excessive video game consumption might have for people is hardly possible without considering this contexts.

To understand excessive video game consumption becomes even more difficult, since the personality of the player has hardly been researched too. While this aspect is excluded in the interesting study of Linderoth and Bennerstedt explicitly (2007: 25); most other studies do not mention it at all. This applies to the society where video game addiction takes places in as well, although some studies show the need for considering the society in order to understand the context of video games. The ideology of video games is researched in terms like inklusion and exclusion from the reality constructed in the game (Frasca 2003) or as a mirror of the western construction of race, ethnicity, gender and national identity (Höglund 2008). Additionally, aspects like the function of the military entertainment complex for the legitimisation of torture in interrogations (Sample 2008) are investigated. The relevance of the mentioned aspects for the understanding of video game addiction has not been discussed yet. It might be argued that the social entertainment complex (as it can be coined) tranquillizes gamers in order to keep them away from perceiving the social inequity in western societies and thus helps to avoid revolutions effectively and efficiently. It might as well be argued that excessive video game consumption as a highly useless and non productive behaviour is a subversive and revolutionary strategy that additionally helps people to avoid the unhealthy major conflicts within our societies. But as the contexts mentioned above, this dialectic has not been used to understand video game addiction yet.

The problems mentioned above have different structures and require different approaches. In the studies reported here, we tried to take a step towards an understanding of excessive video game consumption by taking a look at the contexts.

2 Methods

To understand video game addiction as a complex phenomenon, we developed suggestions towards a theory of video game addiction (Swertz 2009a, 2009b). In the next step, we conducted a number of small studies to create a broader understanding of the phenomenon. To gain a deeper understanding of the dominant research, we tried to measure the prevalence of video game addiction in Austria in the first place. The objective of this first study was to observe the research process. This observation helped us to identify relevant questions for subsequent studies. As a result of our experiences in the prevalence study we decided to conduct biographical interviews with former excessive video game players. Since these interviews were conducted with former e-sport enthusiasts, the sample might be considered as somewhat special in this respect. Therefore we conducted a set of narrative interviews with people who currently play video games excessively. While those interviews allowed for relevant insights into the life of excessive players, they allowed for the consideration of the player's perspective only. To get a look from the outside in we conducted expert interviews with therapists who work with video game addictives.

3 Results

3.1 Prevalence Research

To research the prevalence of video game addiction appears to be difficult. Existing studies most often research video game addiction by applying cri-

teria derived from the ICD 10 category “gambling addiction”. Since we doubt that video game addiction and gambling are similar enough to use the same items, we took a closer look at those items. Soon it became clear that some of the items and the criteria applied are somewhat arbitrary. Why, for instance, are two hours video game consumption three times a week considered harmful (Grüsser 2005: 191)? We assumed some research backing this implied connection. But we couldn't locate any study where a connection between the amount of playing time and video game addiction has been proven. Thus we turned this aspect into a question for our further research.

In the next step, we applied an established scale to get an estimate of the phenomenon and to get first hand experiences in the application of this scale. With an online survey, we interviewed 215 6 to 20 year old people. Only 73 of the interviews were analysable. 2,73 % of these are, according to the test, video game addicted. This confirms Batthyány's (2009) results of 2,7 % for 13 to 18 year old in Vienna. According to our results, 17,82 % of the interviewed people are at risk. This result is close to the results of other research too (overview in: Wölfling/Müller 2010). Further analysis shows that there are no gender differences at the „addicted level“, while there are more males meeting the „at risk level“ criteria. In our sample, only people above the age of 10 are at risk, and only people above the age of 16 are addicted.

Our results are close to the results of other studies. This is astonishing, since our study, like most other ones, was carried out with a quite problematic sample. We interviewed a cross sectional sample. Clearly, results from a cross sectional sample are valid for the sample only. Conclusions about people who did not participate in the sample can not be drawn. Unfortunately, hardly any of the known studies applies a random sample. They all interviewed different cross sectional samples, like registered readers of an online gaming magazine, students visiting one school or people who react on an invitation in online discussion boards, like in our study.

Since the interviewed samples are very different, major differences in the

results have to be expected. Still, all studies show very similar results. This suggests a close connection of the results to the research instrument applied and a loose connection to the researched phenomenon. In turn, the validity of existing studies seems to be low. Existing results might be just artefacts of the applied instruments.

This assumption is supported by two further things we learned: The test we applied has not been developed as a test, but as an instrument to support a therapeutical diagnosis. The test is not diagnostically conclusive without taking the opinion of an therapist into consideration. Unfortunately, we could not ask an experienced therapist. The same applies to all other existing studies. Therefore, it is completely unclear if the test results meets something that might be diagnosed as video game addiction. Instead, reported results are based on the test only. Thus, the measurement operation is not applied in a meaningful way. In fact, the operation used is like measuring the temperature with a measuring tape.

Additionally, the test has never been standardised. To judge people as addicted on the basis of a non standardised test means to jump to conclusions. It can not be concluded if the observed behaviour is unusual at all, since a data based criterion to support this conclusion is not available. Hence the conclusion would be a little bit far fetched.

Some of the existing studies do not even apply all items. Rehbein et. al. (2009) for instance used only half of the items of the test we applied in our study. In other words: Rehbein's results are based on an ambiguous, non standardised and only half applied instrument. Conclusions from a study like that can hardly claim to be valid.

The results from our first study show the need for the development of a reliable and standardised instrument for a more precise measurement. But to develop such an instrument requires deeper insights into the phenomenon in question and it's context. Thus we decided to proceed with smaller qualitative studies.

3.2 Biographies of former excessive Players

Our first qualitative study was inspired by the contrast between the presumably high number of addicted people (Wölfling/Grüsser 2007) and the low number of available therapeutical programmes (Wölfling/Müller 2008, S. 132). It looks like most of the supposingly addicted people are either not addicted or able to cope with their addiction. To get some first data about this assumed phenomenon, we conducted five biographical focus interviews with former professional video game players. The interviews were analysed according to the three step content analysis method suggested by Mayring (2008).

All of the interviewees played video games for more than five hours a day for at least several months, and all of them were successful in international video game competitions. Until today, they all stopped excessive playing, all are employed, and all stopped excessive playing without any therapeutical aid. Additionally, all of them still play occasionally.

The most often mentioned reason for excessive game play was the community. One of the interviewees stated: „It wasn't the game itself that was fun, but the people.“ Another often mentioned reason for excessive playing was success. A typical statement was: “Yes, and with counter strike for instance it was only this, it was fun to compete, it was fun to see yourself improving.”. These reasons are known (Wölfling/Müller 2008) and do not lead to new insights.

Reasons to stop excessive playing were different among interviewees. Examples for reasons are: The team broke apart, the girlfriend left due to excessive playing, it becomes more difficult to win competitions, or the income from professional gaming dropped significantly. In all cases external life events were mentioned in connection with the decision to reduce playing games.

For the interviewed people it can be concluded that the decision to reduce video game consumption wasn't a private decision. External influences were

necessary to motivate the interviewees to reduce excessive video game consumption. On the other hand, all of the formerly excessive players reduced playing games without external support. None of the interviewees called upon therapeutical or other external help. They were all able to change their behaviour alone. This seems to be an internally inconsistent finding: While all of the interviewees were able to reduce their video game consumption, none of them did this based on an own decision.

Since therapeutical interventions require people to ask therapists for help, which presupposes the motivation to ask for help, this results are consistent with the phenomenon we used as the starting point: The motivation to ask for therapeutical help is often based on external pressure. This external pressure took place here too. But the substantial changes in behaviour did not require external help. This potential to change the behaviour alone can be understood as a self healing potential of excessive video game players.

Another thing we asked the former excessive players was their opinion about the items of the video game addiction scale we applied in our first study. The first was the reduced pattern of behaviour. This is explained as continuous thinking about games. While all of the interviewees rated this dimension as meaningful, they didn't experience it them self or with gamers they know. The same applies to the control of negative emotions. One said: “If I want to blow off steam, it's useless to klick a mouse. To do that, I have to go running or so.” None of the interview partners judged salience as a meaningful category, since they did not experience a more intense game experience with an increase of playing times. They mentioned something like ambitions as a reason for excessive play instead. The category withdrawal symptom was strictly rejected: “Never heard of something like that or realised it. And I know a damned lot of computer freaks.” While withdrawel symptoms were rejected, loss of control was judged as sensible. This was not the case for the category relapse. None of the interviewees experienced a relapse after they stopped excessive game play. Additionally, they couldn't name anybody they knew who experienced a relapse. Only half of them re-

ported harmful secondary effects for their life. These ones connected possible harmful secondary effects with parental control: Poor parent control might lead to uncontrolled video game consumption.

To summarise: According to the interviewed experts most of the dimensions of the scale commonly used to research video game addiction do not make sense. Only the dimension "loss of control" was judged as sensible and substantiated with experiences.

3.3 The life of addicted Players

Our first observation was that it is very difficult to get interviews with people playing video game excessively. Obviously, they often prefer to play video games instead of wasting their time with interviews. Still, we could conduct five interviews. Interviewees were a 28 years old student, a 17 years old vocational school student, a 26 years old student of astronomy, a 37 old secretary and a 40 years old clerk.

We asked the interviewees for the impact of their video game consumption on daily life to get an estimate for the importance video games have for them. The younger interviewees adopted their daily routine and neglected their commitments like going to school or visiting university lectures to have more time for their favourite game. A typical statement is: "The impact was huge. If somebody plays or if I played I turned my back to everything else. That was all not important. Things like school or going to the university later on. That was all offered up for the game." This holds true for leisure time activities as well. One of the interviewees stated: "I prefer to spent 13 € a month for world of warcraft instead of paying 100 € per month to go out." The older interviewees go to work regularly and keep routines like a family dinner up. They play games at times where most people watch TV, as one of the interviewees said. But still, the older interviewees play video games quite a lot. They claimed to play five hours a day on average (including the weekend), but on four days a week about three hours longer. The other interviewees reported considerably longer periods of ten to six-

teen hours a day. In other words: All of the interviewees spent more time playing than working. It can be concluded that they hardly spent any time with any other activities. From this point of view, playing video games is the most important activity in their life, and they leave other contexts like school or the university.

All of the interviewees mentioned the community and the contact with other players as the most important motivation to play video games. They are very well integrated into the player communities and do not want to stop these social contacts. And they like the success they experience within the game, while they hardly report any success in other parts of their lives.

Three of the four interviewees described themselves as addicted, while only one reported difficulties while attempting to stop playing. When he stopped to play games, he experienced something he described as withdrawal symptoms: “I didn't suffer from it, but if you wake up and start to think 'I would like to play today', or if you start to think about the game as soon as you see a computer – that's really bad”. The person who didn't describe himself as addicted argued that excessive video game consumption is less dangerous than excessive alcohol consumption. With this comparison it became clear that he is not certain here. At another point of the interview he stated: “Of course one adapts ones daily life, I don't want to say I change my life due to the game, I do not do this.” In this contradiction the tension between the obvious impact of playing video games on daily life and the at least partly refused perception of this impact is expressed.

But most of the interviewees answered the explicit question “Are you addicted?” pretty clear: “Yes, for sure”. Even the interviewee who started the answer with “Well, that's a delicate problem...” stated “If somebody tells me: 'You are addicted' I would say: In actual fact you are right.” later on. In other words: All of the interviewees described themselves as addicted. And all are aware of the consequences for their commitments and their leisure time. Still, they don't want to stop. A statement like: “I didn't want to stop playing games.” is typical. They all enjoy the time spent on the game. It

looks like the advantages of playing video games outrun the disadvantages.

The disadvantages are often connected to commitments in the real life, like finishing studies or being successful in school. But it looks like our interviewees do not need this success. None of them mentioned the need to earn much money, but all stated that playing video games is pretty cheap. It can be concluded that even living on income support does not threat them, since this situation would allow them to continue their favourite activity. This suggests a difference in the values they judge as important. They seem not follow modern or neoliberal values, but are more oriented on other values. If the values excessive video game players judge as important can be described as postmodern values (Inglehardt 2000) can not be concluded from our data.

3.4 Interviews with Therapists

To combine the aggrieved party perspective with a professional perspective, we conducted a series of six expert interviews with therapists, who regularly work with video game addicted people. Since we extensively searched for therapists who work with video game addicted people, contacted them all and received a 100% response rate, we assume a census for Germany and Austria.

In the interviews, we asked questions about diagnosis, therapeutic strategies, and symptoms. Concerning diagnosis, most experts do not consider the playing time as a reliable criterion. We asked all about their opinion concerning the ICD-10 criteria for gambling addiction. The answers were a bit inconsistent here. Most of the experts agreed to the general diagnostic criteria from the ICD-10. But a subsequent questions for typical symptoms revealed aspects like a certain state of neglect and a social isolation in the real life. These aspects are not among the general addiction criteria. This inconstistence can be explained by the relevance of the ICD-10 for billing. All experts mentioned this aspect. Additionally, it can be assumed that only people who actually might be described as addicted ask for therapeutic advice.

Thus diagnostic criteria are not really a problem in the therapeutical practice, while this is the case for billing.

Still, most of the experts see a demand for more appropriate video game addiction criteria and an appropriate test, while two reported scales they have developed. According to the experts, video game addictives are addicted to success or flow experiences, to the communication and the social standing within the player community, and to the opportunity for self-expressions in avatars. While none of the therapists see a connection between a narcissistic personality and video game addiction, all mentioned social anxiety. At the same time, video game addiction often occurs in connection with other diseases like anxiety disorder, depression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder according to our interview partners. The most relevant anamnestic factor mentioned was a broken home situation.

The experts do not consider abstinence as an objective for therapeutic interventions. Due to the lack of research or standards, they most often do not use specific therapeutic strategies, but apply therapeutic methods they know from other contexts. Methods based on behavioural concepts seem to be dominant.

The results from our previous studies have led us to the assumption, that most video game players learn how to use video games appropriately, while this learning process is blocked in some cases. Thus we asked the therapist, if the understanding of video game addiction as a blocked learning process that keeps gamers from recognizing and controlling the role of video games in their life makes sense for them. Five from six interview partners said that this might be a meaningful concept, while the concept of learning they used was diverse.

We asked the therapists if the assume that the missing acceptance keeps affected people away from searching for professional help. Most of them assumed that people suppress the perception of their behaviour as an addiction.

4 Discussion

Our result show some aspects of the complexity of the phenomenon video game addiction. The discussed difficulties with existing prevalence studies reveal an interesting difference between the state of research and the public commotion. While the prevalence of video game addiction is very unclear due to methodological problems, even a high prevalence would not necessarily indicate a „generation at risk“. Our biographical study suggests, that a self healing processes might occur in the context of video game addiction. From this perspective, excessive video game consumption might be a temporally limited phenomenon for most people concerned. Still, the self healing processes seem to depend on external triggers. These external triggers can rely on the fact, that video game addictives seem to be quite conscious about their addiction. This results stays in contrast to the opinion of therapists who work with video game addicted people. They assume that only very few of the concerned people look for professional help. Probably, there are less people showing up in their ordinations than assumed. Our results suggest that this might be explained by the often reported but maybe not existing high prevalence and the assumed self healing potential of excessive video game players. At the same time, therapists and former excessive players both highlight the loss of control as the central problematic point.

The later observation becomes visible in the interviews with excessive players too. These people are conscious about their excessive and harmful behaviour, but they do not see reasons for a change in their behaviour. Additionally, they hardly became dropouts. All interviewed excessive players are able to handle their every day life, while not all of them do so in accordance with modern or neoliberal values. But they like to play and they like the social contacts considerably. Additionally, some explicitly mention that they might become addicted to something else if they would stop playing video games. And most other things one might become addicted to are, according to one player, more dangerous than video games.

To research the values of people playing video games excessively seems to be important. This applies to all other results reported here too. They can not be considered as well funded results, since we researched small samples in an explorative style only. But some of the discussed aspects might at least serve as suggestions for further discussion.

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