

# The risk of being labelled as a deviance and the consequences of stigmatisation.

## An analyse of computer game addiction as a social phenomenon

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### Introduction

Computer games and their potentially negative effects on children and young people have been the subject of a lot of media attention. Many important questions have become the centre of media discussions: Is there a connection between the consumption of violent computer games and aggressive behaviour and crime? Is it safe to play? Is gaming substituting other life experiences normally associated with childhood? And does a high amount of usage lead to addiction?

Recently, the question of gaming and worries of getting addicted to computer games has created attention because some online games require an extremely high degree of presence and activity by the player. The worries have been reinforced by an increasing number of calls from worrying children, desperate parents and other relatives to different Danish social organizations.

However, in the ongoing debate about computer games and their potential negative effects on the player, it is not discussed whether it is actually appropriate at all to talk about computer game 'addiction'. But in fact, the questions relating to the negative, as well as positive effects of playing computer games are many and varying and reveal a more complicated picture of children's everyday life.

When it comes to the research of computer game addiction, the focus has revealed on a definition to categorise a sudden negative behaviour or a term to determine a hormone disorder. So far, a more ethnographical and sociological inspired research is rare. In general, the ethnographical and sociological inspired research finds that it is not possible to draw a direct line from the content of the computer games to the player, underlying that computer games addiction does not exist. For that reason, the ethnographical and sociological inspired research has neglected the challenges

relating to the role of spending a great amount of hours in front of the screen<sup>1</sup>. Actually, this statement is due to the fact that the ethnographical and sociological researches do not deal directly with the potentially negative effects. Furthermore the ethnographical and sociological research questions the use of the term addiction and has suggested using the terms 'high consumption' and 'problematic usage' instead.

As this implies, there is a lack of knowledge discussing computer game addiction as a social phenomenon. Therefore, in this paper I want to focus specifically on computer game addiction, analysing the consequences of using a medical inspired term in order to express a concern about high frequency consumption or even a problematic usage of computer games. As the sociologist Howard S. Becker already stated in 1963 a behavioural approach or a medical metaphor are in risk to limit and to locate the source within the individual and "...*thus preventing us from seeing the judgment itself as a crucial part of the phenomenon.*"<sup>2</sup> This suggest that instead of looking at computer game addiction in itself as located inside the individual, one ought to focus at computer game addiction as a deviance created "...*as the infraction of some agreed-upon rules*"<sup>3</sup>. Bearing in mind these considerations computer game addiction is also the question of how deviance is close connected to the responses of others. Drawing the above points together my aim is to analyze the interactional processes raised by my informants, investigating how computer game addiction is being used as a moral term to something considered as 'culturally unacceptable'. But first of all, I will take a closer look at the existent research on computer game addiction.

### Research 'state of the art'

There are many competing research traditions and approaches to computer games, and to the discourse of computer game addiction. I will not outline all the traditions, but provide a picture of the two dominant positions in the field at the moment, and add a new perspective called the 'sociological turn'. This division is pragmatic, of course, and does not do justice to the provisos and nuances of the research up till now. However, the objective in this part of the paper is to identify important issues and results, in order to distinguish the contrasting viewpoints in a more ontological and epistemological way, and on the basis of these criteria, to understand the complexities of the theme.

#### *Computer game addiction from a psychological point of view*

The psychological perspective on computer games addiction has its roots in North American psychology, the so-called behaviourist tradition and the natural science

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<sup>1</sup> Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S. & Smith, J.H. 2003

<sup>2</sup> Becker 1973:6

<sup>3</sup> Becker, 1973:8

research. In addition, this research perspective is inspired by studies in gambling, internet addiction and psychiatric diagnostic. Methodologically, the studies are carried out in a laboratory, as a cross section correlation study or as longitude correlation study.

In the early research, computer game addiction was aligned as a subcategory to Internet addiction<sup>4</sup>. The main works were made by Dr. Kimberly Young. In her research she raises many relevant arguments about using a computer, including a statement about gaming. She points out that there is an ongoing demand of being online. In comparison, looking at television or reading a book, on line gaming is not calibrated with units of time. However, Young's main issue is to categorize the gaming problem in relation to other addictions like gambling and overeating. The users of computer games become dependent on the feelings and the experiences they get while they are playing. And for that reason, it is difficult to control and stop playing. But as a critical comment, and captured by many others<sup>5</sup>, I question whether it is possible to transfer the idea of psychological dependency to the diagnostic criteria of gambling and overeating<sup>6</sup>. Though, some scholars<sup>7</sup> have argued for including computer game addiction in the APA's DSM-IV-TR<sup>8</sup>, it is notable that a clinical criterion of diagnose has not yet been determined. Furthermore, while Young's Addiction Test may have had its relevance in the 1990 it seems to be outdated in the age of digital media. The computer games technology has developed into an economically significant industry with a focus on design and user friendliness, and reducing computer gaming to a simple question of eliminating needs or losing sleep is highly questionable<sup>9</sup>.

Generally, the extant research of computer game addiction is made by the English psychologist, Mark Griffith. According to Griffith, addiction is a behavioural and non-chemical condition. He distinguishes between a passive and active way of being addictive to technology. Gaming is an active involvement of the human-machine interaction and usually contains inducing and reinforcing features that may lead to the promotion of addictive tendencies. Compared to gambling, players do not suffer from some of the after-effects, like financial problems and crime.

Griffith and the English psychologist Mark Davies define addiction as comprising six core criteria, taken from the DSM-III-R scale<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> Young 1998

<sup>5</sup> Johnson 2009; Yee 2006; Yellowlees and Marks 2007;

<sup>6</sup> According to WHO, ICD-10(The Classification of Mental and Behavioral Disorders Pathological gambling is "the disorder consists of frequent, repeated episodes of gambling that dominate the patient's life to the detriment of social, occupational, material, and family values and commitments"

<sup>7</sup> Pies, 2008, Block 2008

<sup>8</sup> The American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – the Fourth's – Text Revision 2007

<sup>9</sup> Johnson 2009

<sup>10</sup> The American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – the Third's – Text Revision

1. *Saliency*, when computer games are the dominant activity in somebody's life
2. *Mood modification*, when the playing experience affects the player's emotional condition
3. *Tolerance* when the player has to play more in order to achieve a special state of mind
4. *Withdrawal symptoms* when the player experiences uncomfortable emotions when he/she stops playing
5. *Conflict* when the player is in conflict with his or her surroundings and other activities, and is in internal conflict
6. *Relapse* when the player falls back into the previous gaming patterns, even when s/he has not played for a long time

All in all, according to the criteria above, you don't necessary become addicted, but you might be addicted.

Not surprisingly, regarding the definition of addiction several studies have come to different results, especially when considering variations in the numbers of addicted. But still, Griffiths and Davies are<sup>11</sup> cautious about the existence of computer games addiction. In the following, they summarize the question of addiction:

*"... excessive video game playing can have potentially damaging effects upon a minority of individuals"*<sup>12</sup>.

And further on, if computer games addiction does exist, it affects only a small percentage of the online population<sup>13</sup>.

To some extent, this approach has been challenged by new psychological studies, looking at both the possibilities and the challenges of computer games activities.

The Daedalus Project is a long running survey study of MMORGP's<sup>14</sup> players, ongoing from 2003 and closed down in 2009. In his study, the psychologist Nick Yee concludes that for some players the online games are a form of escapism, making it possible to run away from everyday life problems:

*"...in other words, the people who are most likely to exhibit problematic usage are those who are purposefully using the online environment to escape their real-life problems. They are playing to avoid thinking about their real-life problems. They are playing to avoid thinking about their real-life concerns"*.<sup>15</sup>

Further on, Yee has an overall critic of the term 'addiction' to computer games. Yee claims that using the word addiction is mired in a debate of reconciling physical addiction theories with non-physical addiction theories. As a result, Yee finds the

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<sup>11</sup> Griffiths and Davies 2005

<sup>12</sup> Griffiths and Davies 2005:366

<sup>13</sup> Widyanto and Griffiths 2006

<sup>14</sup> Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game

<sup>15</sup> Yee 2005

term to be loaded, and conceptual rather than factual. Yee notes that there is a great deal of evidence showing that some players spend so much time playing computer game that other parts of their lives are severely impacted. And to some extent, they have trouble accepting they have a problem and controlling their play patterns. On the other hand, much of this is due to how loaded the term “addiction” is. Instead, he recommends the term ‘problematic usage’. As he argues, problematic usage is more about how the game-play begins to negatively impact your obligations and responsibilities.

### *Computer game addiction from a neurological physiological point of view*

Another perpetuated phrase in the terms of computer games addiction is the discussion of whether or not gaming utilizes a special hormone, called dopamine. In a recent medical science research made by the Danish doctor Albert Gjedde<sup>16</sup> and a number of Japanese and other Danish researchers, it is pointed out that there is a connection between the need of extraordinary risky excitement and the utilization of dopamine. According to the researchers a little group of people are in the danger zone of being addicted to computer games because they use computer games purposefully and thereby excessively, in order to stimulate their dopamine production.

However, this is one of the first investigations that identify a connection between gaming and dopamine utilization. And after all, as others neurological physiological researchers<sup>17</sup> have estimated, addiction is not simply a question of hormonal disorder. From a more general neuroscience of pleasure point of view addiction is subjectively orientated, regulated by behaviour such as pleasure and desire and depending on cultural conditions and the context in which you are situated in.

### *The sociological turn*

As already stated in my introduction, only few ethnographical and sociological researchers have directly investigated the potentially negative effects. However, some sociologists have turned their focus on the challenges of a high usage of computer games. For example, T. L. Taylor<sup>18</sup> has examined the multiplayer computer game, Ever Quest. Pointing out the so called ‘power gamers’ she estimates that some computer games are so time consuming, demanding more than half a working week. On one level, there are some underlying notions of what constitutes playing. Sometimes playing is hard work, painful, repetitive, and boring. On another level, Taylor argues that the design of the computer game is constructed

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<sup>16</sup> Gjedde m.fl. 2010

<sup>17</sup> Kringelbach & Berridge 2009

<sup>18</sup> Taylor 2006;

in such a way that it creates a high frequency consumption usage, which is not necessary problematic, but which after all produces an everyday life controlled by the computer game. As a result, the programmatic system lays a social pressure on the players. You need to be online, and take responsibility to the communities of practice, otherwise your level and role in the game is dismissed.

Nicola F. Johnson<sup>19</sup>, inspired by the work of Bourdieu, presents a sociological analysis of eight young internet users and players and their everyday practice. Johnson concludes that it is necessary to accept that certain computer game activities may temporarily include an obsession and actually still be a positive practice. An important issue to call attention to is the fact that Johnson points to the necessity of understanding the Internet consumption and computer gaming as a cycle of different pattern of practice. A 'like' can become a 'preference', and develop into a 'habit', sometimes even an 'obsession' and maybe an 'addiction'. All in all, a cycle indicates that one needs to look at gaming as a process and to understand problematic usage as a process of different patterns of practice. The type of pattern can be broken, reverting to the former practice:

Figure 10.1 – Cycle of addiction

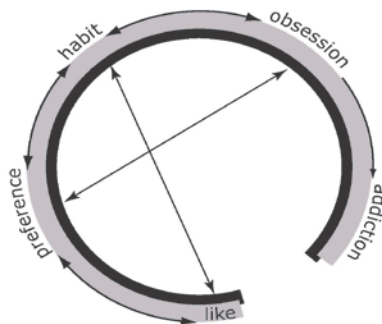


Figure from Johnson 2009:128

In their research, the pedagogues Jonas Linderöth and Ulrika Bennerstedt<sup>20</sup> have identified different types of pattern in the players' problem with MMORG, World of Warcraft (WoW). Like Yee and Johnson, the researchers dispute the term 'addiction'. As such, one needs to distinguish between 'high frequency consumption' and a 'problematic usage' of computer games. According to an earlier report<sup>21</sup> high frequency consumption can lead to problematic usage of computer games because of the negative influence on the players' everyday life. On the other hand, it does not necessarily mean that periodical high frequency consumption is problematic. According to Linderöth and Bennerstedt one of the main challenges is the problem for young people of socializing with adults' life conditions. To some extent, children and young people's everyday life is regularly structured, controlled by their parents,

<sup>19</sup> Johnson 2009

<sup>20</sup> Linderöth & Bennerstedt 2007

<sup>21</sup> Medierådet 2005

and divided in home time, school time and leisure time. Despite the obvious similarities in lifestyle, adults' players are more able to choose at what time of the day they want to play and for how long time they want to be online. Broadly speaking, this point is particularly relevant when it comes to problematic computer game habits. It underlines the fact that it is the relationship between the children and young people and their immediate surroundings one need to focus on, in order to understand why the high frequency consumption leads to problematic computer game habits.

The newest sociological inspired contribution<sup>22</sup> to the discussion about computer game addiction discuss the results from the psychological and neurophysiologic research with computer game studies – especially from areas like 'gaming and creative business processes', 'game genre', 'game play', 'game mechanics' and 'type of players and their motives for gaming'. The study finds no argument for the claim that gaming in itself can lead to addiction. The most striking issue is the time factor. But the time factor is not necessary problematic. It depends on period of life, gaming during leisure time or in school, gaming on week's day or in the weekend. So in order to understand the phenomenon it is important to investigate gaming in an everyday life perspective.

In the preceding paragraph I have tried to sum up some of the most relevant research about computer game addiction. The academic way of understanding addiction is broadly speaking divided into three directions based on psychological perspectives, neurophysiologic investigations and sociological inspired researches, connecting computer game addiction to a large field of sciences. The newest and more sociological oriented contribution to the discussion provide us with an inside view of computer game research facing that the time factor is the most striking issue to consider. In continuation of especially the study from the Swedish researchers, Linderoth and Bennerstedt, my point of departure is to investigate computer game addiction as a social phenomenon looking at the relationship between the players and their immediately surroundings.

## Methods

To investigate computer game addiction as a social phenomenon it is necessary to develop a methodological framework which is sensitive to empirical data. As an overall frame and research strategy a culture study inspired perspective is taken as a point of departure to incorporate reflexive elements in the qualitative research to be conducted.

I am drawing on semi structured interviews<sup>23</sup>, studying how informants explain and justify their acts and decision making. Analytically, the focus is on representation of

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<sup>22</sup> Brus og Thorhauge 2011

<sup>23</sup> Kvale & Brinckman 2009

the self through 'accounting'<sup>24</sup> and 'categorization of membership'<sup>25</sup>. In addition to this, the use of interview also makes it possible to explore a children and young people's approach to computer games addiction, putting their positive and negative meanings into perspective. Some of the youngsters call themselves 'addicted', and others are addicted, according to their immediate surroundings. I have asked the informants about their membership of the category 'computer game addicted' but avoided asking questions related to particular risk behaviours.

My project is rooted in an anthropological and sociological research tradition that focuses on children and childhood. Consequently, I regard children and childhood as a social construction<sup>26</sup>, an outcome of social and discursive processes, embodied in a historical, cultural and social world. Yet, living in a digital world children are social agents in a particular context, competent and able to interpret their own life.

To understand what computer game addiction means in practice, it is necessary to highlight the complexities of the phenomenon and demonstrate how it is situated in a specific context. So in order to unravel the diverse ways in which children and young people create their own meanings about computer games and 'computer games addiction' in relation to others I will focus on social interaction, analyzing the 'micro' aspects of the phenomenon. This approach has of course significant limitations. It misses the fact that social interaction is connected to feelings, interdependence, trust and affiliation. However, the idea here is to connect to and draw on approaches not commonly used in the study of computer game addiction, specifically by relating computer game addiction to the risk of marginalization in the social processes of everyday interactions.

## Theories

In order to do this I have found inspiration in the works of Erving Goffman and Howard S. Becker especially their ideas about 'the presentation of self', 'stigma', and 'deviance'.

### *Introduction to Goffman*

Erving Goffman is closely connected to the so called Chicago School and the symbolic interactions tradition. By using a Goffman approach I recognise computer game addiction as closely connected to social interactions, to people's 'face to face' work, and to the many ways in which people seek to respond, maintain, and create themselves<sup>27</sup>. Using the theatre as a metaphor Goffman<sup>28</sup> provided an account of

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<sup>24</sup> Scott & Lyman, 1968 I: Järvinen 2005

<sup>25</sup> Baker 2003 I: Järvinen 2005

<sup>26</sup> Corsaro, 1997; James & Prout 1991; Buckingham 2000

<sup>27</sup> Goffman 1990a



social life, pointing out how people as actors plan and perform their acting in front of an audience, and how these performances turn out to be cooperation between the participants involved, negotiating and maintaining the social interaction order. As such, the identity work is a 'game' of how to represent oneself in order to get a positive identity in the eyes of others and, maybe more important, in their own eyes. Central to the understanding of the social interaction between the actor and the audience is also the assumption that the representations of the self is threatened and in risk of cracking in social interaction situations. By estimating this point of view Goffman discusses the potential threat of being stigmatised. Goffman distinguishes between three types of stigma: The abominations of the body, the blemishes of individual character and the tribal stigma<sup>29</sup>. Off course, the different types of stigma are subject to a historical and cultural variable<sup>30</sup>. Considering this, stigma is today connected to all kinds of cultural unacceptable norms and thereby it is more interesting to look at what the different stigmas have in common. Goffman defines stigma as "... a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype"<sup>31</sup>. That is so to say how the normative expectations and stereotypes in social interactions are in risk of producing a stigma; a discrediting discrepancy between what Goffman calls the 'virtual social identity' and the 'actual social identity'. The virtual identity has something to do with the impression and the normative expectations involved in the first encounter, about how people ought to be. The actual identity is attached to the characters and attributes that people actually possess. Off course, the consequences of the social interactions are many and varying, the encounter can turn out both positively and negatively. But when it turns out negatively there is a risk of being demarked off from the group and moved into the margins<sup>32</sup>.

### *Introduction to Becker*

As to Goffman Howard S. Becker is a practitioner of the symbolic interaction tradition. According to Becker<sup>33</sup> deviance is created by society and a consequence of social interaction processes which produce and apply rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. For that reason, "*deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather... a consequence of the responses of others to a person's act.*"<sup>34</sup> It is important to notice that Becker consider this rule breaking process to be the first crucial step towards a deviant identity. Another key issue in Becker's labelling theory is the way in which he categories deviance into four different types of deviance, notifying that it is possible to be a rule breaker without being accused for doing something wrong. On the other hand a person can end up

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<sup>28</sup> Goffman 1990a

<sup>29</sup> Goffman 1990b:14

<sup>30</sup> Williams 2000

<sup>31</sup> Goffman 1990b:14

<sup>32</sup> Scott 1972 in: Williams 2000

<sup>33</sup> Becker 1973

<sup>34</sup> Becker 1973

in “*the falsely accused*”<sup>35</sup> situation, expressing the risk of being categorized as a deviance without “*having committed an improper action*”<sup>36</sup>. Here the falsely accused deviant is perceived as a deviant, seen by others as having committed an improper action although in fact this is not true. By defining deviance into four different types of deviant behaviour Becker underline the important point that deviance is also connected to collective interactions. If somebody in a group agree upon a rule about what is an improper action, it is possible to maintain the rule by means of sanctions. Further on, the statement of the four types of deviance estimate the fact that deviance is connected to all kinds of complicated social interactions, depending not only on the rule-breaker, his actions and attributes but also on the others reactions and way of handling the control. Trying to put Beckers’ point of view into perspective computer game addiction is not only about how an individual manage his deviance but also about how his immediately surroundings react to him, among others looking at who has the power to define the situations.

## Research findings

It is important to emphasize that I am not trying to make up the mind of the matter of whether or not computer game addiction exists, nor taking a stance in connection with whether or not it is possible to diagnose my informants as computer game addicted from a psychological point of view or a neurological physiological perspective.

## Addiction or dependency

Before moving on from these preliminary remarks the term computer game addiction demands a commonsense explanation. In Danish it should be noted that we only use the term ‘afhængighed’. However, the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (OED)<sup>37</sup> distinguishes between “dependence” and “addiction”. According to OED, dependence is the *state* of being dependent and addiction is the *condition* of being addicted. In the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of English Language<sup>38</sup> the concepts are clarified in this way: “Dependence is a constant and regular need that someone has for something in order to be able to survive or operate properly”. By contrast, “*addiction is the condition of taking harmful drugs and being unable to stop taking them or an addiction to something is very strong desire or need for it*”. Significantly, both dependence and addiction operate with a ‘need’ term.

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<sup>35</sup> Becker, 1973:20

<sup>36</sup> Becker, 1973:20

<sup>37</sup> Eleventh Edition

<sup>38</sup> Sinclair (ed. in chief)1992

### *Giving words to the phenomenon*

My informants have in common the fact that they are 'addicted' to computer games, giving words to the phenomenon by themselves or articulated by their immediate surroundings and afterwards embodied by the informant. And as to the dictionary explanation, my informants describe computer game addiction e.g. as a 'need', something missing, especially in school and often relating the phenomenon to an addiction to drugs:

Interviewer: "Are you addicted or have you been addicted to computer games?"

Boy, 15 years old: *"I have been addicted. The feeling of...Being in school, thinking of the game. Something in the game you just have got to manage. Not because it is funny, but because something in the game calls your attention, thinking you are going to have more fun managing this difficulty. But it is not like that. Reaching a new level, you just have to start all over again, and again, and again. It is like a routine job, a habit. Like drugs changing you as a person. The computer also changes your personality, you get addicted."*

Another example describing some problems with the Internet, and thereby not able to play:

Interviewer: "Please describe what it is like to be addicted".

Another boy, 15 years old: *"Very often, I am sitting in front of the computer screen waiting and thinking, even though I am not able to go on to the Internet...Or sitting in school, thinking, why the hell, looking forward to the break. And when the bell sounds, the first thing to do is grapping the hard driver running down to the library, and logging on to the game."*

All in all, the boys associate computer game addiction to taking drugs and a strongly desire to play. So according to the boys, computer game addiction is a recurring motif in order to describe what too much computer gaming is all alike. But the interesting point is not to understand the phenomenon rooted in an individual subject but to interpret how it is related to meaning and as a social phenomenon.

### *The risk of producing normative stereotypes*

Interviewer: Are you addicted to computer games?

Boy, 14 years old<sup>39</sup>: *"I don't thing I am addicted, but I have been addicted. I kept thinking about computer games, night and day. E.g. when I was looking at television or washing the dishes. All time wanting to get back to the game, bored by everything else."*

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<sup>39</sup> From the first interview, translated from Danish to English by the author

Interviewer: But why did you become addicted to computer game?

Boy, 14 years old: *"Because I did not know what else to do"*

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the result of being addicted to not being addicted?

Boy, 14 years old: *"Because of the rule [playing only two hours a day], forcing me to do something else. Realizing that it is greater doing other things... And opening my eyes that computer game is not the greatest thing in the world"*

Interviewer: It is not because they told you so?

Boy, 14 years old: *"No that's just how it is."*

Interviewer: But did you actually consider your gaming as a problem?

Boy, 14 years old: *"Yes because now I am told, I understand it is a problem."*

Interviewer: So you were addicted to computer game without knowing you had a problem?

Boy, 14 years old: *"Yes I did not know it was computer game addiction. Because addiction has something to do with drugs or alcohol."*

Interviewer<sup>40</sup>: With your own words please tell me why you think they [the boy's parents] contacted the centre for Gambling?

Boy, 14 years old: *I don't know exactly why...Maybe she thought I was playing too much computer compared to other children; she started reading about it and got in contact with The Centre for gambling... Giving me extracts from articles about everything. Like 'computer gamers are the brightest people in the world but their talent are being misused'. And 'you are not socializing'...I told her to calm down. What the hell. Everyone plays. There is nothing wrong playing computer games."*

From a methodological point of view the two interviews could be used as an example of how social identity is being negotiated, not only as a statement in the investigation but also during the interview as well<sup>41</sup>. By analyzing the accounts and the categorization of membership as an overall theme of understanding computer game addiction as a social phenomenon the question is how the informant is representing himself. As such, considering the interaction order as a result between the performer, the audience and the society Goffman<sup>42</sup> stressed social interaction as a matter of 'routines and rituals', probably somewhere between the inside and the outside. But to the purpose of the discussion of computer game addiction the drama and the game of everyday life also involves accepted scripts and rules on the one

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<sup>40</sup> Second interview, 3 months later, translated from Danish to English by the author. After listening to the first interview I planned to ask the boy about 'computer game addiction' again, thinking of the possibility of getting an another answer questioning the boy in a different way

<sup>41</sup> Gubrium & Holstein, 1995

<sup>42</sup> Goffman 1990a

hand, and on the other hand realisable in practice through negotiations, transactions and improvisations.

Using these considerations as a point of departure to the interview it is possible to interpret the situations described above. As such, in the first interview the boy presents himself as a previous pure deviant, recognising his rule-breaking behaviour. In the second interview the boy presents himself as 'a falsely accused computer game addicted'. According to Goffman<sup>43</sup> the performer [here the boy] uses 'impression management' in order to control any kind of social interactions, or to sustain the so called interaction order. Usually, a tacit agreement between the performer and his audience is typically stressed and opposition is underplayed. In the interview the tacit agreement is clearly formulated by the boy: Yes I was addicted, and yes, I know better now. In this sense, the boy confirms the agreements achieved with his stepmom, and leaving their potentially conflicts unspoken. And as the deviance perspective suggest how one becomes a deviant and the process from being perceived as deviant by others to identify oneself as a deviance. Presumably in response to the loyalty to his stepmom expressed by the boy in the first interview he reacts to the deviance stereotype in the second interview. As such, asserting his 'actual social identity' and questioning the nature of computer game addiction but also outlining the set of normative expectations being exposed by the stepmom and the articles she refers to. On the one hand the stepmom quotes something positive about computer game addiction; on the other hand she accuses the boy of misusing his talent or being anti-social. As Becker stresses: "*Values provide the major premises from which specific rules are deduced*"<sup>44</sup>. Maybe more important the example highlight the fact that the conforming behaviour as a so called computer game addicted is not an intrinsic part of the personality but is needed to be viewed in relation to others. Undoubtedly, another key element here is the relationship between deviance and normality hanging in the balance. Because, as the boy remarks, everybody plays computer. Who is breaking the rule and who is actually the deviant? The stepmom who exposes her lacking knowledge about young people's life with new technology or the boy who is consumed by playing the computer games?

Yet as the analysis shows, when considering computer game addiction as a social phenomenon it is necessary to recognise the risk of using the term as a normative stereotype categorising the 'addicted' performers as socially 'abnormal', and labelling them as a falsely accused deviance.

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<sup>43</sup> Goffman 1990a

<sup>44</sup> Becker, 1973:131

### *The risk of stigmatising*

One thing is the risk of using the computer game addiction term as a way of being labelled as a deviance; another thing is the possibility of stigmatising.

Interviewer: Why did the computer game make it even worth being bullied?

Boy, 15 years old<sup>45</sup>: *“Actually I think I am being misunderstood [by the interviewer]. I was being bullied in school. And the computer games did not help me. I was shutting the door on to the real world.... The thing is, in the very end I had only online friends. And was not able to socialize with others, except for socializing in the virtual world. It was getting bad to worse being social. I could not enjoy social interaction at all, also being lacking in self-confidence. I would do anything, not being noticed, especially by somebody I did not know beforehand. The only place I was able being myself was at home, together talking with my parents, causing the fact of getting more and more ‘strange’, specifically arriving at talking with other people. I had difficulties in answering questions, talking with them and looking in their eyes. So the effect of playing computer game actually only made my problems even worse... The game was getting out of control. Playing computer was a way of escaping from reality. So yes, I was addicted because gaming was more than just a habit, one couldn’t let the game off the hook, and one could not quit thinking about the game despite not playing. In a way, it is okay calling it addiction. Because playing too much computer is as bad as drugs and alcohol. You cannot pull through your everyday life, dealing with others, playing even more trying to forget your problems.”*

If we follow Goffman’s way of thinking stigma, we can see how it is possible to discredit some members of a particular social category. Mostly, the stigma is not articulated directly, rather appearing as boundaries between the social acceptable and not acceptable. The distinction between the primary deviance and the secondary deviance estimate this, for sure. Primary deviancy is the original infraction, stemming from different kinds of physiological, psychological or social factors; secondary deviance is how the person reacts to the process of labelling produced by the audience, identifying himself as a deviant<sup>46</sup>. Generally the primary deviance is not being articulated; rather the primary deviance is being normalised away. In the interview the boy is telling me about being bullied in school over a period of 5 years. He has been breaking some normative rules and some classmates have shown him disrespect. We don’t know exactly why he was being bullied. Nevertheless we know he is blaming himself for being too reserved, telling me in the interview that he is without any social skills at all, not able to talk to other people. But he is also talking about an accident, causing him a year in a wheelchair, not able to move his body, and thereby using all his leisure time with playing computer game. Further on giving the wheel chair period the cause of his overweight. He is also telling me about a teacher not taking his problems seriously, about the feeling of being laid down by the

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<sup>45</sup> Chat interview via Skype, translated from Danish to English by the author.

<sup>46</sup> Williams 2000 and Jenkins 1996 referring to Lemert, 1972:62-92

teacher who is not doing anything, not taking responsibility. All in all, the 15 years old boy is using computer game addiction as a term to describe his stigma produced over time, but also pointing out the consequences of the others discrediting reactions to him: How the spoilage of his identity constitutes inside him, how he is lacking in self confidence etc. The point, I wish to make is how strongly this “secondary deviancy”<sup>47</sup> influences the boy’s identity and being, how the stigmatising internalises his feelings. As this implies, he is so obviously identifying himself as a computer game addicted. He describes how he is using the game to “*shoot the persons who had something against me*”, how the online computer game was a possibility of escaping from the real world, making it possible to forget his problems and worries and using the metaphor “*a closed door*” to describe his lacking of socialising with others than his friends online: “*[In the online game habbo.dk] I had a lot of furniture of great value. And in a way this is something, something to be bragging about. My position in the online world gave me something I could not get in Real Life. And I got pretty addicted to this feeling. When I was feeling bad in RL I could get a feeling of recognition in the online world...But playing computer can’t solve your problems, instead you are ignoring them and forgetting them for a while. But over time, your condition of feeling bad is growing.*”

The bullying stopped when the boy changed school and lost weight. In his book about Stigma Goffman describes several social interaction situations in order to understand how the stigmatised handles the missing respects from other people. One way of handling the situation is to try righting the objective cause of the stigmatisation as to the boy losing his weight. Another Goffman inspired point is the fact that ‘shame’ becomes a central possibility and an important feature of the stigmatised way of understanding his life situation. Shame and the feeling of being guilty, not being able to come up to the normative expectations like “*I could not look them in their eyes*”. And further on, the stigmatised is maybe feeling a bit uncertain on how to approach the others, how to manage the impressions others have on him, how to manage a spoiled identity. For Goffman, the point is that this kind of social interactions are in risk of leading to avoidance, rejection or withdrawal for all participants, but especially the stigmatised one. Or so to say a rejection and a withdrawal from Real Life and into the computer games.

## Conclusions

As the analysis shows the term computer game addiction is being used as a common sense word in order to express problems with computer gaming. The term is mostly being associated with a strongly desire to play. And according to the boys, computer game addiction is a recurring motif in order to describe what too much computer gaming is all alike. By investigating computer game addiction as a social phenomenon it has become clearly that computer game addiction is covering up a

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<sup>47</sup> Williams 2000:15

large amounts of other problems than the simple state of condition that a psychological and neurophysiologic perspective describes.

According to my research findings there is a risk of producing normative stereotypes categorising the player as social abnormal. I have also argued that the pattern of too much computer gaming is needed to be understood as a phenomenon situated in the players social contexts, in relation to other social forces in the players live. By pointing out computer game addiction as a stigma raises different questions about children and young people's social life, on the one hand showing how painful it is to be labelled as an 'outsider' and on the other hand that it is necessary to understand computer game addiction in relation to others.

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