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Social responsibility in online videogaming:

What should the videogame industry do?

The Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) genre is one of the fastest growing and most popular in the videogame industry. MMORPGs are an Internet-only, dynamic and highly interactive computer-gaming experience with a fully developed multiplayer universe and an advanced and detailed visual and auditory world (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2003). Whilst conventional videogames have an ending, or may become boring and repetitive, MMORPGs are an inexhaustible system of goals and success in which the character becomes stronger and richer by moving to new levels while accumulating treasures, power and weaponry.

In recent years, the problematic use of online videogames has received increased attention not only from the media, but also from psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health organizations and gamers themselves. A number of studies from different cultures are providing evidence that somewhere around 7 to 11% of gamers seem to be having real problems to the point that they are considered pathological gamers (e.g., 8.5% in Singapore: Gentile et al., 2011; 10.3% in China: Peng and Li, 2009; 8% in Australia: Porter et al., 2010; 11.9% in Germany: Grüsser et al., 2007; and 7.5% in Taiwan: Ko et al., 2007). Some gamers are reported to have been playing for 40, 60, and even near 90 hours in a gaming session (Kim, 2006). The American Medical Association indicated that up to 90% of American youngsters play online videogames, and as many as 15% of them (more than 5 million children) may be addicted (Young, 2009). According to a BBC report in August 2005, a 28-

year old South Korean man died after playing the *Starcraft* game in an Internet café for 50 hours straight (BBC, 2005a). To inhibit problematic online videogaming, Chinese authorities regularly shut down Internet cafés and have instituted laws to limit the hours of playing (Griffiths and Meredith, 2009).

While it may be difficult to distinguish between a healthy and unhealthy usage of online videogames, there is sufficient evidence to describe some excessive gaming as problematic and/or addictive when it pervades and disrupts other aspects of life (Ferguson et al. 2011) making it an issue worthy of extensive investigation (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). In some cases this leads to symptoms commonly experienced by substance addicts, namely salience, mood modification, craving and tolerance (e.g., Chiu et al. 2004; Hussain & Griffiths 2008; Smahel et al. 2008; Wan and Chiou 2006). Research suggests that some gamers are struggling to keep their playing habits under control and consequently compromise their academic achievement (Chiu et al. 2004; Jeong and Kim 2010; Skoric et al. 2009), real-life relationships (Allison et al. 2006), family relationships (Griffiths et al. 2004; King and Delfabbro 2009; Peters and Malesky 2008), physical health (Allison et al. 2006; Chuang 2006; Dworak et al. 2007), and psychological wellbeing (Lemmens et al. 2011).

Nevertheless, and despite a decade of research, there is significant disagreement on whether pathological gaming can be conceptualized as an impulse control disorder and/or a behavioural addiction such as pathological gambling (Barnett and Coulson, 2010; Griffiths, 2008; Wood, 2008). While acknowledging the potential for some gamers to engage in pathological use, most researchers argue in favour of creating an official diagnosis for pathological gaming (e.g., Block, 2008; Desai et al., 2010; Griffiths, 2008; Van Rooij et al., 2010). However, others disagree and advise caution about the potential for exaggeration of a real but uncommon problem (Barnett and Coulson, 2010; Ferguson, 2010; Olson, 2010; Wood, 2008). As well as the divergence of opinions in the scholarly community, there is

insufficient evidence to reach any definitive conclusions or an operational definition of pathological gaming, its diagnosis criteria and prevalence (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010). While the academic debate is likely to continue for a while, it is clear that for a small minority of gamers, pathological gaming leads to negative life consequences (King, Haagsma, Delfabbro, Gradisar and Griffiths, 2013).

Against this backdrop, comparable with the cautionary health messages on tobacco and alcohol packaging, warning messages about risk of overuse have recently started to appear on the loading screens of popular MMORPGs, for example: *World of Warcraft* – ‘Take everything in moderation (even World of Warcraft)’ and ‘Bring your friends to Azeroth, but don’t forget to go outside of Azeroth with them as well’; *Final Fantasy XI* – ‘Exploring Vana’diel is a thrilling experience. During your time here, you will be able to talk, join, and adventure with many other individuals in an experience that is unique to online games. That being said, we have no desire to see your real life suffer as a consequence. Don’t forget your family, your friends, your school, or your work.’ These and similar warning messages raise the question of why the online videogame industry warns its players not to overuse their product. Does the videogame industry really believe that their products have addictive features that can lead to negative consequences and the functional impairment of gamers’ lives? This leads to the important issue of whether the giving of such messages by online videogame companies means they have done enough to fulfil their social responsibility or do they have they a wider role to play? Furthermore, these warning messages suggest that the online videogame industry knows how high the percentage of over-users is, how much time gamers’ spend playing, and what specific features makes a particular game more engrossing and addictive than others. While they do not directly admit this, by showing these warning messages, they do take some responsibility into their own hands. This editorial

attempts to address these questions by examining the current CSR practices and outlining CSR challenges facing the online videogame industry.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE ONLINE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

Companies in the online video games sector have started to face criticism around the addictive and problematic nature of the use involved with certain online games and their violent content (van Rooij, Meerkerk, Schoenmakers, Griffiths & van de Mheen, 2010), suggesting that it is a controversial industry. Gaining broader societal acceptance has become a critical factor for companies in controversial industries where failure to meet stakeholders' societal expectations result in their legitimacy being challenged (Palazzo and Richter 2005). Some authors argue that a company's CSR strategies could appear as a useful mechanism for corporate legitimization (Deegan, 2002; Waddock, 2000) by deflecting stakeholders' negative perceptions from activities that might be perceived as unethical (Palazzo and Scherer 2006). Previous research has found a positive relationship between CSR practices and firm value in controversial industries, suggesting that firms in controversial industries can act in a socially responsible manner, and they should do so particularly in areas that relate directly to their business strategy (Cai et al. 2012). Along the same lines, in response to the widespread, negative media publicity, as well as the increased academic debate about the implications of online videogames, companies in this sector should also embrace CSR as a strategic means to counter negative public sentiments, build reputational capital, and ultimately can attain legitimacy essential for their long-term prosperity.

Instrumental, transactional, and transformational levels of CSR

Palazzo and Richter (2005) used the terminology from leadership and organizational trust literature and suggested that all companies, including the ones operating in controversial sectors, have economic, legal and ethical responsibilities at three levels. Firstly, the instrumental level refers to a company's ability, skills and competences that are necessary to deliver products or services in the quality expected by its customers and to sell them at a profit. Peter Smith, director of development at Broadway Lodge, the first UK clinic to offer treatment specifically for computer-gaming addicts, comments: 'Video-game designers are, after all, just trying to make good entertainment. There's no point producing a game that somebody doesn't get grabbed by. It's a big, big industry and it's about getting people hooked into it' (The Guardian, 2011). From the growth and profitability statistics presented above, the success of online videogames suggests that companies in this sector are not only fulfilling this responsibility but also their financial performance seems to challenge the 'bad ethics is bad business' principle of CSR.

Secondly, at the transactional level companies can exhibit integrity by keeping promises and operating with consistency, transparency and fairness within the legal and moral framework (Palazzo and Richter, 2005). Unlike the gambling industry, which has a long history of forced governmental regulation and in which CSR has become a crucial issue (Griffiths et al. 2007; Griffiths and Wood, 2008), the online videogame industry has, by and large to date, escaped governmental action. However, there are some isolated examples of governmental interventions. For example, China introduced controls to deter people from playing online videogames for longer than three hours (Griffiths & Meredith, 2009), while Thailand's government banned *Grand Theft Auto 4* when a student murdered a taxi driver while trying to recreate a scene from the game 'to see if it was as easy as in the game' (Mail Online, 2008). In addition, the Australian classification board refused the original version of

Fallout 3 due to the high level of realistic drug use thus forcing its developer *Bethesda Softworks* to release a censored version (r18games.com).

In the USA, the sales of ‘Mature’ (M) or ‘Adults Only’ (AO) rated games to minors has been an issue of much concern to public officials, and the Video Games Ratings Enforcement Act introduced to the US House of Representatives requires an ID check for M- and AO-rated game purchases (US Congress, 2006). The majority of game publishers have decided to get controversial games rated by voluntary rating systems. For example, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rates games in the USA and Canada, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) in the UK, and the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) in Europe (King, Delfabbro, Derevensky & Griffiths, 2013). While the ESRB and PEGI ratings are not legally binding, the BBFC ratings are backed up by the British law, thus making it illegal to sell the game to anyone under the indicated age. Few publishers in the online videogame industry have attempted to develop and sell a game with the strictest ESRB rating of AO. For example, *Manhunt 2* by *Take-Two Interactive* was initially refused classification in the UK, Italy and Ireland, and given an AO rating in the USA (Gamespot.com, 2007). However, after making some changes to the game by blurring the screen during the game's executions and removing the scoring system, where players were awarded for particularly brutal killings, the edited version was given an M rating in the USA by the ESRB (Wired.com, 2007). Similarly, *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* by *Rockstar Games* was also given a rating of AO after widespread surfacing of an add-on which was later fully removed and the game retained the M rating (BBC, 2005b). These rating systems are helpful. However, a study commissioned by the UK games industry found that parents let their children play games with adult or 18+ ratings, because they perceived age ratings as a guide but not as a definite prohibition (Griffiths, 2010). Responding to these findings, David

Yarnton, *Nintendo's* UK boss, said 'It raises more questions than answers... We need to look at solutions and as an industry we are quite united on this' (BBC, 2005b).

Finally, the transformational level refers to a corporation's benevolence by demonstrating that it is willing to transcend self-interest for the sake of the common good and contributes to the well-being of society. This final dimension requires further scrutiny, as it raises the issue of whether online videogame companies maintain socially responsible standards of operating in an ethical manner. Is it theoretically possible? How can it be done? One-off cases of warning messages on loading screens and trivial game design modification are not enough. Previous research has suggested that responsible videogame operators can endeavour to curtail impaired individual control over behaviour, which might be a cause for addiction, by following a three-step strategy of combining good game design with effective gamers' care polices, and referral services (Wood, 2008).

As a first step, online videogame developers and publishers need to look into the structural features of the game design, for example, character development, rapid absorption rate, and multi-player features, that make them addictive and/or problematic for some gamers (Hussain, Griffiths and Baguley, 2012; King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010; Wood, Griffiths, Chappell and Davies, 2004) This undertaking falls mainly on the game developers as they hold the codes for making the games less addictive. For example, long quests can be shortened to minimize the time spent in the game to obtain a certain prized item. *Blizzard Entertainment*, the makers of *World of Warcraft*, introduced some down-tuning of hardcore game-play mechanisms that encouraged excessive gaming. Initially, a symbolic and unique in-game title was rewarded to players who progress their character to the maximum level of 80 fastest. However, after several pages of forum debate in which players expressed their concern, an official *Blizzard* representative announced the removal of the title from the game. In response to a 2010 BBC *Panorama* documentary on videogame addiction, *Blizzard* told

Panorama in a statement: ‘*Our games are designed to be fun... but like all forms of entertainment... day-to-day life should always take precedence. World of Warcraft contains practical tools that assist players and parents in monitoring playing time*’ (BBC, 2010).

Online videogame developers are already working on porting Online Role Playing games to consoles. If we take into account that this type of game is most often implicated in cases of online videogame overuse and that console systems have more market share than PCs, the number of ‘videogame addicts’ will increase in the coming time. Furthermore, many MMORPGs make use of variable ratio reinforcement schedules, which provides a very intense experience, thus increasing the addictiveness of the virtual world. Although, the potentially addictive design features of MMORPGs might not be intentional there is an obligation on the developers to consider ways of limiting harm. One way of doing this can be for developers to make design changes on time limits as many gamers schedule and plan according to the in-game periods of time. For example, long quests could be shortened, the amount of experience points needed to reach the next level could be lowered, spawns could be timed to appear more frequently to give gamers increased chances of receiving specifically wanted items and by speeding the processes of difficult task, gamers will be able to leave the game much earlier after completing their tasks. Implementing these changes to MMORPGs would show that game developers are taking CSR seriously and that they are concerned with more than revenue. Furthermore, implementing such changes would show that the MMORPG industry is engaging at the transactional level of CSR (Palazzo & Richter, 2005).

Secondly, in terms of effective care policies for the gamers, the most observable act until now by the online videogame publishers is the initiation of warning messages. Through these messages, the industry is seemingly addressing CSR in the area of excessive use of videogames, albeit to a rather limited extent. Furthermore, some games (such as *WoW*) have a parental mode that allows parents to restrict playing time for their children.

Finally, online videogame publishers should make provision for suitable referral services. Presently, they provide neither referral services nor customer care with regard to videogame addiction (van Rooij et al., 2010). Although the time constraints policies applied in China might not be a viable option in Europe, companies can potentially identify from their databases extreme or problematic gamers who are spending an excessive amount of time in the game and offer them contact information for a referral service in their country. Empirical evidence from the gambling industry suggests that similar initiatives and other social-responsibility tools are appreciated by players (Griffiths et al. 2007; Griffiths et al. 2009; Wood & Griffiths 2008). There is also recent empirical evidence that the setting of time limits helps the most gaming intense players the most (Auer & Griffiths, 2013). In the context of online gambling, Griffiths (2010c) suggested that it is not the gaming industry's responsibility to treat gamblers but it is their responsibility to provide referrals for problem gamblers to specialist helping agencies. He suggests that it is better for the industry to refer their problem customers to online help, such as *GamAid*, which offers a high degree of anonymity, as this is preferred by online gamblers. This is an important finding for the online videogame industry to take on board, as it seems that it is not currently taken into consideration in their CSR practices.

CONCLUSION

The wide-reaching implication of this editorial is that online videogame companies should take social responsibility for the extreme and problematic usage of their products. They create games for gamers to play and make a financial profit. In Asia, the government has already taken steps to counteract the potentially problematic effects of game play by limiting usage (Cain, 2010). If videogame companies refuse to create restraints for its players, and videogames grow in greater popularity, then Western governments may have no choice but to

follow in the steps of its Asian counterparts (Van Rooij et al., 2010). The proportion of gamers who develop problems and/or become addicts may stay roughly constant but as online videogames get better and better, and increasing numbers of people discover them, the number of addicts is most probably going to rise. We therefore propose to proactively approach the main online videogame publishers and explore options for collaboration between academics, healthcare, and video game industry in order to provide proper referral, customer care, and information to the general public.

Authors' Disclosure Statement

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