Parenting Emerging Adults Who Game Excessively: Parents' Lived Experiences

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Elizabeth I. Johnson, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Parenting Emerging Adults Who Game Excessively:

Parents’ Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Excessive gaming among emerging adults is a growing concern, especially in cases where it interferes with key developmental milestones such as gaining an education or establishing a career. Although researchers have begun to understand the effects of excessive gaming on young people themselves, we know remarkably little about how emerging adults’ gaming may affect family relationships. Utilizing phenomenological interviewing of parents of emerging adult sons who game excessively, this study presents a rich description of the experience of parenting a young adult who games excessively. In-depth interviews were conducted with two fathers and two mothers. Findings suggested that parents felt their sons were missing out on aspects of their life due to their gaming and were not meeting their full potential. They also felt their children were odd and it was difficult to know how to talk to their sons about their gaming. Finally, they believed their sons were addicted to gaming. Using the family systems theory as well as life course theory of development, implications for families are discussed.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One Introduction and Literature Review ................................................. 1  
Gaming and the Gamer’s Well-being ............................................................... 2  
Implications of Gaming for the Parent-Child Relationship ............................... 4  
Current Study .................................................................................................. 7  
Chapter Two Method ......................................................................................... 9  
Recruitment and Participants .......................................................................... 9  
Interviews .......................................................................................................... 9  
Analysis ........................................................................................................... 10  
Chapter Three Findings .................................................................................. 13  
“I think he’s missing out on a lot of life” ......................................................... 13  
Costs ............................................................................................................... 13  
Concerns ......................................................................................................... 16  
Hopes Interrupted ............................................................................................ 18  
“I just don’t understand” .............................................................................. 20  
“I just think he could do a lot better” ............................................................. 21  
“It’s hard to know what to say” ....................................................................... 23  
“I believe he’s addicted” ................................................................................ 25  
Chapter Four Discussion ............................................................................... 28  
References ....................................................................................................... 32  
Vita .................................................................................................................. 37
Chapter One

Introduction and Literature Review

Technology has yielded an onslaught of electronic media and gaming platforms designed for the sole purpose of entertainment. One specific genre of games are those labeled as massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs, which connect thousands or even millions of players in a virtual world. According to a leading consumer behavior research organization, there were 217 million online gamers worldwide in 2007 (COMSCORE, 2007), a number that has likely increased substantially in the last decade.

MMORPGs are unique in that they allow players to explore a virtual world through “avatars”, or virtual representations of themselves. Avatars allow players to take on different personas, roles, or characters while interacting with other players. Games often require players to work together to accomplish tasks, meaning that friendships and relationships that exist exclusively within the game are common. Indeed, Cole and Griffiths (2007) found that 75% of the players they surveyed reported having made “good friends” through online games. Participants reported an average of 7.7 good friends that they had made through the game (2007). Thirty-six percent of male participants reported feeling comfortable discussing sensitive issues with their online friends that they would not have felt comfortable discussing with friends from their real life, and 35% of males surveyed felt they could be more themselves in their online game than they could in real life. The draw of this accessible and accepting online community of friends is clear for those who are socially awkward or self-conscious; the set-up of the game leaves the player feeling free to share as little or as much of themselves as they desire.
For some individuals, a combination of their own personal characteristics and the unique elements of this game type lead them to play the game in a way that seems excessive or compulsive. Unfortunately, this can also mean engaging in game play to the point that playing becomes detrimental, resulting in the individual neglecting their responsibilities or other obligations. In fact, this has become so common that the American Psychiatric Association now suggests the inclusion of Internet Gaming Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This disorder would be identified by compulsive play, neglect of other interests, clinically significant impairment due to gaming, and withdrawal symptoms when not allowed to game (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The emergence of internet gaming disorder suggests the need to further examine the well-being of gamers, how gaming may influence the relationships of parents and their emerging adult children, the fine line between excessive gaming and gaming addiction, and, finally, the impact addiction may have on the family.

**Gaming and the Gamer’s Well-being**

Excessive gaming has been used to refer to the excessive or exorbitant amount of time involved in playing. The clarification provided by Griffiths (2010) to distinguish between an excessive gamer and a gamer who would be considered to have gaming addiction is that the excessive gamer is able to discontinue or greatly reduce their time spent playing when circumstances require them to do so. In essence, excessive gamers play primarily due to opportunity; when there are changes that prevent them from playing, they are able to stop. Griffiths noted that the only true way to differentiate between excess and addiction is if the activity is adding to, rather than taking away from the individual’s quality of life (Griffiths, 2010). Despite this there are still costs to gaming excessively.
The time consuming nature of MMORPGs is one factor that has deeply impacted a subset of gamers, causing them to neglect other aspects of their lives. One study found, for example, that 12% of gamers played more than 30 hours per week, meeting the criteria for “heavy” playing (King et al., 2011). Those who received scores in the top 25% for the Problematic Video Game Playing Test, which measures: 1) tolerance, 2) withdrawal, 3) preoccupation, 4) mood modification, 5) harm and 6) relapse, played for significantly more hours per week (M=26.5, S.D.= 15.7), on average, than those scoring lower (M=14.4, S.D.= 14.1) on the measure (King et al., 2011). When comparing MMORPG gamers to gamers who favor other game types, such as MMO First Person Shooter and MMO Real Time Strategy games, it was found that MMORPG players, on average, played the most, with 38% of those surveyed playing more than 28 hours per week (Nagygyörgy et al., 2013).

Nagygyörgy and colleagues (2013) noted that the sheer amount of time per day spent gaming was likely to be problematic for RPG players, interfering with other fundamental activities of daily living. One study took inventory of what the 540 gaming participants felt that they sacrificed; 22.8% reported nothing, 25.6% another hobby, 18.1% sleep, 9.6% work or education, 10.4% socializing with friends, 5.4% socializing with a partner, and 4.6% family time (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004). Less common sacrifices included fitness, house duties (such as cleaning), dating, other games, television, and reading. In a qualitative study of a clinical population of addicted gamers, participants also noted gaming addiction led to them neglecting to eat or sleep, lying to family, abandoning educational activities and other activities that they previously enjoyed, though neglect of eating seemed to be specific to addicted gamers (Beranuy, Carbonell, & Griffiths, 2013). Other studies have reported similar findings, where gamers stated their gaming resulted in missing school and poor grades (Griffiths & Hunt, 1995;
Hussain & Griffiths, 2009a), lost friends, lost love relationships, neglecting hygiene, neglecting eating, neglecting sleeping, not working, and feelings of irritability when not playing (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009a). In one study of 280 participants, over one third reported feeling guilty about the amount of time spent gaming and felt that their time would have been better spent on other tasks (Wood et al., 2007). The researchers noted that these feelings of guilt are likely brought up due to society’s somewhat negative view on video games as a positive use of time, noting the views on playing video games as a hobby are less positive than views on reading or being outdoors. These views on gaming as a less than ideal way to spend time tend to be shared by parents as well.

**Implications of Gaming for the Parent-Child Relationship**

Understanding how excessive gaming may affect emerging adults’ family relationships is complicated and requires a number of theoretical perspectives. One important framework is Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood (2007). He described emerging adulthood as a new life stage typical among 18 to 29 year olds (Arnett & Fishel, 2013) that is characterized by exploration of identity, relative instability, self-focus and reflection, examination of possibilities, and feeling in between (Arnett, 2007; Arnett & Fishel, 2013). This new stage emerged from societal shifts in views on the acceptance of pre-marital sex and cohabitation as well as the increased amount of time spent gaining an education before embarking on a career, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett & Fishel, 2013).

The parent-child relationship during the emerging adulthood period is shifting and difficult to define because so much of the relationship is based on where the child is in their journey through emerging adulthood (Arnett & Fishel, 2013). What is agreed on and understood is that the need to “parent” during this emerging adulthood stage is as new as the concept of
emerging adulthood itself. It can be difficult for parents of this age group to understand why their child is still reliant on them for support or is not progressing into what the parent would define as “adult roles” as quickly as the parent felt they did in their own growing up process (Arnett & Fishel, 2013). This period in the parent-child relationship also tends to involve the shifting and redefining of the identity of the parent, as well as the child (Arnett & Fishel, 2013). It is a time when parents look back and, based on their child’s current progress, may begin to see themselves as either successful or unsuccessful in their long held parenting role and, in particular, their job of launching their child (Arnett & Fishel, 2013). The emerging adulthood period of their child can be a time of great angst even for the parents of children not involved in excessive gaming, who would otherwise be considered to be developing typically (Arnett & Fishel, 2013).

When an emerging adult is gaming excessively, defined in one study as gaming at least 35 hours a week (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009b), it can be very difficult and troubling for the parent, both because they did not grow up experiencing the same type of technology and because many may not perceive their child’s gaming as a desirable, or even recognizable, social interaction. If the child’s excessive gaming is interfering with their normal life in terms of academics, careers, or finances, this can be especially worrying for a parent who looks at the achievements of their child’s peers and feels that their child must be somewhat lacking. In these instances, parents may be worried that their child’s gaming is beginning to resemble an addiction. Gaming addiction usually involves spending copious amounts of time playing a game, usually to the point of neglecting other responsibilities and relationships. The external signs are all the same as those seen in excessive gaming, however when making a distinction between excessive playing and addicted playing researchers ask the gamer how the game influences them. Today most researchers agree that gaming addiction is indicated when the individual meets
certain criteria, including mood modification, salience, conflict, withdrawal symptoms, relapse, and tolerance (Griffiths, 2010), similar to the criteria used to diagnose substance addiction.

Family Systems Theory is also relevant for thinking about the implications of excessive gaming for families. Bowen’s proposition holds that the family functions much like any other system in that all parts, or in this case individuals, interact and impact the performance and functioning of the system as a whole (Cook, 2001). More specific attention has been given to the role of this framework in understanding the impact of dysfunction in the family and the resulting addicted (Cook, 2001) and codependent behaviors (Prest & Protinsky, 1993) of family members. The ideas of fused families and poorly differentiated individuals have been theorized to account for adolescent delinquency and addiction as well as the transmission of dysfunction and codependent behavior from one generation to the next. In these concepts excessive anxiety in the family tends to result in the acting out of one individual, known as the scapegoat. This acting out can be in various forms, including addiction, delinquency, and other crisis inducing disorders. However, the acting out behavior serves to draw the focus of the family from the previous anxiety provoking issue and refocus the attention of all the members on the new issue presented by the scapegoat’s acting out (Cook, 2001). This is where codependence or enabling behaviors are seen, but the ultimate end is met regardless: the family comes together, strengthened by a common focus, to address the issue at hand (Prest & Protinsky, 1993). Regardless of the intricacies of family systems theory, what is clear is in instances where one family member is behaving in a dysfunctional manner all members of the family are impacted.

In terms of empirical research, no previous studies have examined how excessive gaming affects parent-child relationships. However, related literature on other compulsive behaviors may help in understanding how family relationships could be affected. Work by Choate (2015)
utilized a grounded theory approach to understand the commonalities experienced by parents of a substance addicted adolescent. Once substance use was recognized and problems started escalating, parents felt that their child was a different person and noted greater difficulties in attempting to parent and influence their child. Many noted that the stress of the situation caused them to withdraw in an attempt to escape the situation, placing greater strain on the other parent. It was noted that siblings were also influenced by the adolescent’s substance use, typically because the parent’s efforts became focused on trying to parent the substance dependent youth but also because the sibling they knew before had been changed by substance use (Choate, 2015). Given these similarities, Young discussed in detail reasons for gaming addiction and therapeutic approaches that the family may take which could potentially benefit gaming addicted adolescents (2009). Emphasis for these techniques involved recommendations for not only parents, but siblings as well, in interacting with the addicted adolescent in ways that could help the individual recover from his or her addiction, such as helping practice and strengthen face to face social interactions (Young, 2009).

**Current Study**

To summarize, previous research has suggested that excessive gaming is becoming increasingly common and that it may have significant negative implications for gamers’ well-being. Although there are conceptual reasons to suspect that emerging adults’ excessive gaming may also influence family relationships, researchers have yet to explore the experiences of gamers’ family members. Given the strong social element involved in excessive gaming and the tendency for withdrawal from real-world relationships, the potential impact that gaming has on the family members of gamers is an important issue to explore. The present study utilized phenomenological interviewing of parents. Phenomenology was chosen because it is well-suited
for exploring a new research area. The desire to gather richly descriptive data about the shared experience of parenting an adult excessive gamer made this method ideal given phenomenology is typically used for answering questions about how particular phenomenon occur or are experienced (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).
Chapter Two

Method

Recruitment and Participants

Attempts to recruit through the online means of Facebook, Reddit, and OLG-Anon were made by posting a recruitment statement. The recruitment statement asked that if a parent had a son between 18 and 29 years old who they felt played MMORPG type games a lot and they wished to talk about their experiences that they contact the researcher using the provided contact information. Unfortunately no participants were recruited through these online methods. A gatekeeper was also identified, however nothing came of the connections provided by the gatekeeper. Participants were therefore recruited through personal connections with the research and snowballing. This resulted in a total of 4 participants, two fathers and two mothers, all of whom felt that his or her son played an MMORPG to excess in such a way that it was impacting his life. One father and one mother were a couple and the information they gave was regarding the same child, however the interview with the father was conducted two years after the interview with the mother. The sons in the study were ages 23, 24, 25, and 25 while parents themselves ranged from ages 50 to 63. All parents interviewed were the biological parents of the son they discussed in the interview. In three cases, the participants had only one child, while the other participant had 2 children, with the gamer being the youngest. Only one participant had their excessive gamer child living with them at the time of the interview.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by the author and began with a single question posed to the participant and further questions were asked based on where the participant was leading the
interview. The first two interviews were pilot interviews and began with the question, “What has the experience of having a son who is in the emerging adult age range been like for you given that he games excessively or plays games a large amount of his time?” However, the decision was made to alter the wording of the question for the following interviews, with the author stating, “I’m interested in hearing from parents who have sons who they think game a lot. Can you tell me about your experiences?” According to Giorgi (as cited in Moustakas, 1994) this style of interview, using an open-ended question regarding the overarching experience of the participant and basing further questions on the natural flow of the dialogue, is recommended for phenomenology. The approach of phenomenology is also such that it allows the gathering of multiple perspectives with the intent of capturing the essences of these experiences. Social constructivism views work well with the idea of co-constructed data, which is what phenomenological interviews provide (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted face-to-face in various locations as requested by participants, this included homes, an office, and a community center. Prior to the start of the interview participants were read the consent form and provided their informed consent. They were made aware that they could discontinue or pause the interview at any time, however no participants chose to do so. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the author, who removed any information that would identify the participants during the transcription process. Recordings were deleted after being checked for accuracy. Interviews ranged in length from 28 to 40 minutes.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Moustakas’ approach, which involves exploring personal experiences with the phenomenon in order to set them aside, the identification of significant statements from participant interviews, grouping significant statements into themes, writing both
a textual and structural description of the experience and ending by combining these descriptions to provide the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher attempted to set aside personal feelings before analysis by conducting and analyzing a bracketing interview, in which the researcher discussed her own experience of a close relationship with an individual who gamed excessively and the impact the researcher perceived this individual’s gaming to have on his parents. The 47 minute bracketing interview was conducted by an experienced phenomenological interviewer. It was audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Moustakas. Following analysis by the researcher, a small group read through the bracketing interview transcript to check that the thematic findings of the researcher were in agreement with those identified by others with experience in phenomenological analysis.

The analysis process closely followed that outlined by Moustakas, with the researcher identifying significant statements and grouping these into themes. Data analysis was done by hand, utilizing old-fashioned cut and paste methods, where significant statements are singled out and then sorted into piles of similar quotes. Once these theme piles had been established, the researcher went back through the significant statements and used the participants own words to establish descriptive names for each theme. Seven themes were identified from the initial analysis, however discussion with other researchers and the researchers own judgement allowed the total number of themes to be reduced to five given the similarity of three of the theme categories. No themes were lost, rather three themes that had before been distinct were identified as subthemes of one major theme. Although the researcher provided thorough textual descriptions, the structural descriptions of the experience are somewhat lacking due to the
experience occurring in various contexts, however the essence of this experience, as experienced by these parents, is still presented in detail.

Thematic credibility was established by sharing portions of two de-identified transcripts with a well-established university phenomenology group that the author participates in. This allowed the author to verify that the themes found in this work were apparent to other researchers. Attending this group also provided the author with practice for thematic analysis in general by doing the same for transcripts provided by other group members. When the researcher had finished the analysis for all four interviews, she then presented her complete findings to the phenomenology group. The group agreed with the findings and quotes used to represent each theme but made suggestions for changes to the names of themes, which the researcher readily accepted.
Chapter Three

Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed five common themes. The first of these was the belief that the sons were missing out on life experiences due to their gaming behavior. This theme was broken down into subthemes, including the current costs of gaming in their sons’ lives, the concerns they had regarding their sons’ futures, and the hopes they had for their sons that seemed unlikely to happen if the gaming behavior was to continue. The next theme focused on the shared feeling that their sons were strange, odd, or different from most people their age. The third theme focused on parents’ shared perceptions of their sons as being intelligent and failing to meet their full potential due to their gaming. The theme, “It’s hard to know what to say” captured parents’ views that they had little influence over their children or minimal ability to control or impact their gaming behavior. The fifth and final theme discussed the views that their children are addicted to gaming and parents’ reasons for this belief.

“I think he’s missing out on a lot of life”

All parents indicated that they felt their sons were missing out on various experiences due to their excessive playing, however there were distinct dimensions to what parents felt were being missed. There was discussion of what excessive gaming had already cost their sons, concerns regarding what gaming might cost their child in the future, and hopes they had for their sons that they feared might be blighted if the gaming behavior continued.

Costs. Participants spent a lot of time discussing what excessive gaming had cost their sons. This involved actual money as well as educational cost, employment costs, and social costs.
First was Jenny in her mid-fifties, without a college degree, she worked full-time in the service industry and did not foresee retirement in her near future. Her 23-year-old son had graduated college, was living away from home, and worked minimally at a steady job Jenny felt was not fully utilizing his college degree. She self identifies as an extrovert and was most concerned about what she perceived as a lack of socializing. She expressed that,

I just think he misses out on being with people. Course, he says you're with people over the, when you're playin' the game because you play with people, but the people aren't there, they're in their own livin' rooms playin' so I just think he, you miss out on a lot of social life when you play a lot.

Donna, a participant in her early fifties, also noted social costs of her 24-year-old sons gaming behavior.

He has lost his so called friends um, and there's some that he interacts with that I don't even know that he, I, I know them by name but he doesn't keep relationships, social relationships. There's just a very small handful that I know of that will even speak to him anymore.

However for Donna’s son, social costs were not the only ones he experienced. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at college, her son was living with her once again while trying to find a job and an apartment. His gaming behavior along with his disorganized lifestyle that went with it lead to him flunking out of multiple colleges, repeatedly losing jobs, and incurring debt. This cycle eventually lead to his mother forcing him to join the military in the hopes that it would straighten out his life. She stated,
... high school, early college it was in and out. Multiple colleges, never finished one degree, had one reason or another why he couldn't do it [...] Went to a special college that he chose and just had to go there. So, um, got the grants and the scholarships and all that good stuff. He was supposed to keep a part time job. I assisted with school, and of course he never kept a part time job and that's been his history since he was able to work [...] jobs are disposable, people are disposable, things are disposable, we're all here for him. Um, so the cycle did escalate, so nothing was ever completed. He never got a college degree. So when he quit one school, came home using the excuse it was too expensive even though he wasn't footing the bill. Um, applied to another college. Never did the paper work and the leg work you have to do in a timely fashion so didn't make it there. After, then he'd stay home, find a job, then be unemployed for months, then find a job, then be unemployed for months, til I dogged him enough to go back into school and the cycle continued. It was part time jobs he never could contend to keep, cla, he never, he wouldn't go to class, he wouldn't [...] and the trend continued, so that's what prompted, after so many years, no degree, no nothing, just more angry, more negative, more isolation, other than hanging out with people I, that I think were digging him into a deeper hole than he was already in. Um, that's when I had the discussion with him. "It is time to pick your military. It's time to pick your branch of service because the bank is closed." [...] I don't think the last few months before military, I'm not even sure if he even had a job, honest to Pete. I really don't remember. Um, but the cycles continue. He's left in debt, left a mess for me to clean up cause he had bought a car and then didn't have a job that could keep up with the payments or the insurance or anything else. Um,
there was thievery going on at the time as well, but that's been off and on since middle school, late high school, or early high school probably, can't pin point it.

Henry, a white-collar worker in his early fifties, whose 25-year-old son was a student struggling to finish school, noted the multiple ways in which he felt his son's life was being impacted by gaming. He said,

I think it impacts his education, I think it's impacting his health, I think it impacts his social life, I think it I’m, uh, I mean like his personal life, his personal relationships with other people, his girlfriend, it's all affected by his love of a video game, um, he doesn't seem like he is interested in bathing or brushing his teeth or staying clean

Alex, Jenny’s husband, who was interviewed two years later about their now 25-year-old son, was unique in that although he did not identify any clear costs of his son's gaming, he seemed concerned that there may be costs associated with his gaming behavior in the future, which leads to the second subcategory of this theme, concerns regarding future costs due to gaming behavior.

**Concerns.** Alex’s son, now married and living with his wife, continued to work minimal hours at a job that did not fully utilize his college degree. Alex described how he had never worried about his son’s gaming before, but that he was beginning to do so.

I never did think anything bad would come of it but now that he's graduated college and he just doesn't really want to seem to get a good job and do all the things you expect them to do like get a house and, you know, have nice things, and he's married now too and I don't know how that's affecting marriage if at all but I know if I was his wife, I'd want him to try and do a little better, you know, show a, show a little more ambition in life
because he, he's a smart kid and he could really, really do good if he would just apply himself, so I'm more worried about what kind of problems he's gonna present in his married life, his grown up life now, I didn't think so much about it when he was young because I didn't really think it would hurt anything, now he's got a lot more to think about than just video games *deep sigh* but hopefully he will eventually get a good job and try to do right but I'm beginning to think, *laughing* you know, there's no guarantee I just don't know.

Both fathers voiced concerns about how their son’s gaming may be influencing his romantic relationship. Alex, a blue-collar worker with a high-school education, stated that his son worked only enough hours to pay his bills. He said he worried about how his son’s work ethic might be perceived by his partner. After reflecting on his and his wife’s employment situation, which required them both to work full time, he noted,

No matter how much she makes or what she does, it, it would, I think it would have to bother her that she's working as much as she does and he's not really making an effort to do his part […] if he don't make half the money she does, that's not the thing, I think it's just putting forth the effort, more so than how much you make, long as you make enough to get by on that's great, but I, I can't imagine my wife would put up with me very long if I didn't help pay the bills

And Henry, whose son was living with his girlfriend, simply noted, “it's not fair to her to have […] got the education, made the grades, got in the right places, to have to deal with a deadbeat, if he lets it get to that point”
Jenny was worried about how her sons gaming may impact his long term career possibilities. She noted,

I just think later on in life he's gonna regret that he did not do anything but play video games. I think he'll regret that he didn't take that step and get into a job that would lead into a career and you know, I keep trying to tell em if he would get a job now and work twenty years then he could retire, twenty, twenty-five years he could retire and not, you know, travel or, but it seems like he's not interested in travel or vacations or, he's not interested in anything but video games.

Perhaps the most disheartening of all was Donna’s concern for her son, with her statement, “my belief is he will self-destruct.” However, each parent also had hopes for their child, hopes for what a brighter future would look like which would appear to act as a counter to their concerns.

**Hopes interrupted.** Donna discussed her hopes for her son’s future, and, in part, what outcome she had hoped would be achieved by having him join the military. She stated, “you want him to find happiness and peace, that's in there too, and hopefully become productive in society instead of spending all your time in front of the computer, playing games.”

All three of the others’ hopes for their sons were more along the line of quitting gaming and having what they would consider a normal life, including a wife, kids, and a career that provided them with a stable financial situation.
Henry’s statement was an excellent example of this general wish:

I want him to get it, get the degrees, get the position he wants and have a good life, a good income so he doesn't have to worry about all the financial aspects of it, he can have more fun with his family, his wife, his kids

Whereas Jenny seemed to feel that for her hopes for her son to be achieved, the gaming would need to stop. She said,

“I don't know, I just keep hopin' and thinkin' that someday he'll realize, maybe and get tired of it and maybe go on with his life. I don't know, I had a nephew that was that way, he was obsessed with video games but eventually he got over it and course he was younger than what *son's name* is now but eventually he, he got over it and, you know, he's fine today. Married and got kids and, but I, for some reason, they're very addictive, very, very, so, I don't know. Someday he'll get off of them maybe and have a life.”

These desires for a “normal” life brought to the forefront another common theme, that these parents did not understand their children or their motivations behind gaming and perceived them to be somewhat abnormal.

Both Jenny’s and Henry’s interviews focused mostly on the theme “I think he’s missing out on a lot of life”. Although the quotes included for her in these sections were minimal, Jenny talked at length about the things she felt her son was missing, including dating, dancing, typical socializing with people his age, job opportunities, and travel experiences. Henry’s discussion seemed to divide fairly evenly between the subcategories, costs and hopes interrupted with him talking about the long list of things his son was sacrificing for gaming, such as his health,
education, social life, romantic life, and personal hygiene, as well as hopes he had for his son, such as finishing school and getting a good career.

“I just don’t understand”

Jenny was the most straightforward in expressing her view that her son was “odd”. She noted,

Everybody on both sides of our family, my husband’s family and me, my family, they all know that he is an odd child, I mean, they've always said he's an odd child, he, he doesn't have much to say, he'll speak if you ask him a question, he'll answer it but as far as volunteering a conversation, he's not gonna start one, ya know, unless it's about a video game or somethin' so he could care less if he's at family functions, he just mostly st, you know, stands there and watches everybody talk and *laughs* didn't join in unless they do specifically ask him somethin’ now, he, you know, will talk to em then

Henry questioned his son’s motivations and priorities, noting that although his son was struggling greatly with his college course work, he would often choose to spend time and energy focusing on gaming instead. He noted, “he doesn't seem to socialize, but he will sit down and make a spreadsheet or something like that over strategies to a game but he won't sit down and study his assigned book work for his classes.”

Donna’s interview involved many repetitions of the phrase “I just don’t understand”. Donna was unable to comprehend why her son would chose to game, given the conditions that her son games in, saying,

I don't understand either; how you would sit in a dark room and do stuff instead of going outside or playing or, even as an adult, getting a job, going on dates, doing... doing
normal stuff that kids always did, but instead you hole yourself up in, in, in a dark room and pretend you're something you're not.

She used many vivid descriptions of what her son’s gaming looked like to her and despondently repeated that she didn’t understand his actions.

Alex simply highlighted the lack of common ground he shared with his son by saying,

he didn't want to have much conversation about anything other than games or, you know, he, I don't know, one thing too, he's always been a lot smarter than me *slight chuckle* and it's just hard for me to talk about a lot of the things that he's interested in and he's not really interested in a lot of the things I do so we, we talk, we get along great but we just don't have a whole lot in common.

“I just think he could do a lot better”

A theme that arose in every interview and seemed to compound the frustration felt by parents was that these sons were all intelligent and, their parents felt, failing to meet their full potential.

When talking about her son, Jenny spoke quite passionately, saying:

He could do anything, I mean, and I think that's the challenge in the video games is that they keep kids interested because it is a challenge for them to think and to do and if he would get a job, if school had challenged him, but there was no challenge there so he just, I won't say he wasted, I mean he got a degree but he didn't study, he didn't do, I mean, he just breezed right through, there was never a challenge there to make him interested enough to care so if he would ever find a job that would be challenging that, you know,
would make him think and challenge him, he would be a very good employee *laughing*
I mean, very, very good, *laughing* cause he wouldn't, he wouldn't stop till he solved the problem

Henry seemed to place a great deal of importance on education, stating that while he had attended some college, he never completed his degree and regretted not doing so. He talked repeatedly about the impact excessive gaming was having on his son reaching his goal of obtaining a degree. He noted,

he's failed some classes, there are some classes that [...]he cannot seem to get passed and sometimes I wonder if that's because he doesn't apply himself to the classes the way he does to a video game. I know he can do anything he wants. He's smart and he's, I don't know, just he can do it, if he sets his mind to it. He's always been able to.

Having already identified his son as being smart, Alex harped on his son’s lack of ambition regarding work. Statements he made enforcing this view included, “I guess that, that bothers me more than anything that he just don't have the ambition to try to do better.”, “sometimes I like to use the word lazy when I talk about him”, and “He’s not the workenist kid that ever lived”. This theme was the main focus of Alex’s interview. He spoke repeatedly about his son’s lack of ambition in regards to having a career, contributing equally to his marriage, and becoming a homeowner.

Given Donna herself has an advanced degree and works multiple jobs, including a full-time white-collar job, a part-time service job, and a seasonal blue-collar position, it’s easy to see why her son’s lack of work ethic and ambition is a point of contention. When discussing her son, Donna noted, “He's too smart for what he does and he's always been too smart for what he does
but it's his choice, his life.” And went on to note his lack of ambition as well, stating her son, “would never complete a task, would start things, always a talker, he's got dreams, he's got plans, he's got stuff, no gumption to actually get off your butt and do it.”

“**It’s hard to know what to say**”

Henry first stated, “I've made my comments about video games and he should be studying more and I think it gets on his nerves and I'm sure it's caused a little bit of grief between us,” but later went on to describe how he feels about addressing his sons excessive gaming in more detail, saying,

It's hard to know what to say and when or how adamant to be about it because I'm not paying for his education, he's got the grants, he's got the, the uh the student loans […]I try to be there to help guide him and to answer questions if he wants guidance but he doesn't seem to want any about that and, and maybe he doesn't see it as a problem, but then sometimes as easily offended as he seems to be when you say something about it, maybe he does know it's a problem, I, I just hope that I mean enough to him that no matter what I say he will still love me.

Alex also talked about how he felt that because he was no longer supporting his son, this made it more difficult to address his son’s gaming behavior. He noted,

we've never really had to give him money or take care of him, it's not like we're really keeping him up so, and that makes it even harder to talk to him about wanting him to do better because, I guess he just figures it's just none of our business and in a way it's not but he is our son.
Donna discuss how the slight control she once had over her son’s gaming behavior vanished with age. She said,

when he was younger I had some controls, um, not a lot mind you, cause I've always worked a lot, um, but some, and if I caught him doing stuff I could take it away or ground him or, or, or take away the controllers. You can't play games without controllers, you can't do this without, without internet access, if ya unplug it, um, but once you reach supposed adulthood of 18, which is supposed, we'll put that in quotes, um, you tend to lose some of that control even if the threat is "well you live under my roof", that doesn't seem to work in his case. I know it does from talking to other parents, it works in their case, but with, with my son it never worked, even when he was younger.

And Jenny spoke forlornly about her lack of attempts to control her son’s playing in the hopes that allowing him to play freely would lessen the urge to play so much later, noting,

I have a niece that sets limits, she only lets her kids play a certain amount of time and her kids are still little but, will that work? I don't know. When they get up in college they're gonna do what they want to and because they're parents haven't let em play as much as they wanted to, I just wonder if it, if it won't work the opposite, you know, they think they're doin' them a favor, like *sighs* and that's what I said the whole time he was here and in high school, "Let him play now and then when he goes on to college then maybe he won't be interested." Well, that didn't work either.

Both fathers discussed their feelings that their circumstances limited the control they had over not how much they could say to their sons, but how much credence their sons should give what they said. It seemed that based off the assessment that the circumstances required their sons
to give their advice little credence, they simply did not advise them as they may have otherwise. They likely formed these beliefs based off the relationship they shared with their own fathers. The mothers seemed to either be oblivious to or were pointedly ignoring how much credence their sons might have given their advice. More precisely, mothers seemed to feel that circumstances were irrelevant and assume that sons should still listen to the advice of their mothers. This led to both Jenny and Donna laminating the lack of control they have over their sons at this stage in their lives.

“I believe he’s addicted”

The final theme common in all of the interviews was the use of addiction terminology and the belief that their sons were addicted to playing video games.

Jenny’s mention of her son’s reaction to being away from video games was probably the most disturbing and worrisome to hear, she stated,

when I force him to do a family activity or somethin', he's like jonesin' like nervous and upset, like, somebody that's on drugs or somethin', you know they, well, not as bad as on drugs but he can't stand to be away from his video game for too long.

Her description of her son’s behavior seems to clearly indicate withdrawal behaviors.

Henry felt his son’s vehement denial of his gaming being a problem indicated that he was addicted, he said,

I believe he is addicted, um, just by the way he reacts to comments about it, how he reacts to um, criticism […] It's the typical denial of being addicted to anything, "Oh, I can
quit anytime," "No, I'm not addicted," "No I can't, this, you're just making it up," "no I can quit," "no there's no problem"

When asked to describe why he felt using the term addiction was justified in the case of his son, Alex responded with,

it was just the amount of time he would spend and you couldn't really even talk to him or get him to be interested in anything else, he would, he would eat in front of the computer and go to sleep in front of the computer, he just lived right there in front of it playing games.

When talking about what she thought it might take for her son to change his behaviors, Donna stated,

I don't expect it to improve until he hits rock bottom, um, and in his eye he ain't there yet. If it ever improves. And I um, I don't know, like I said, I don't know if you can blame it all on any one thing, but I will blame a chunk of it on video games.

Her use of the term, “hits rock bottom” is classically used when discussing addiction.

Jenny perhaps summed up all of the participants beliefs about their sons’ gaming with this statement,

it is a problem, I mean, when your whole world or life revolves around a video game […] there’s worse things he could be addicted to but, anytime you let something control your whole life and consume your whole life like video games do him, he lets video games do his life, then it's a problem and he does have a problem, I just keep thinkin' some day
maybe he'll get over it. I don't, I don't know what you do, do you send em to rehab for video games?

Despite each participant contributing to each theme, participants tended to spend more time focusing on particular themes. As stated previously, Jenny and Henry’s interviews both focused most heavily on the “I think he’s missing out on a lot of life” theme, whereas Donna and Alex’s interviews focused on the “I just don’t understand” and “I just think he could do a lot better” themes respectively. The most discussed theme was “I think he’s missing out on a lot of life” with Jenny, Henry, and Donna all contributing heavily. Both Donna and Jenny were strong contributors to the “I just don’t understand” theme, however Donna’s emphasis was that she did not understand her son’s gaming behavior, while Jenny talked more generally about not understanding her son overall. When looking at the “I just think he could do a lot better” theme, Alex was the only participant whose entire interview seemed to really radiate this theme. Despite the others talking about their son’s wasted potential, this theme was present, but less important for other participants. Although every participant contributed to the themes, “It’s hard to know what to say” and “I believe he’s addicted”, they did so in different ways. In reference to “It’s hard to know what to say”, fathers and mothers seemed to discuss this topic differently, making it a less cohesive theme than the others. Finally, references that lead to the development of the “I believe he’s addicted” theme were scattered throughout every interview, but Jenny was the only one who spoke about this at length.
Chapter Four
Discussion

Previous research suggests that excessive gaming has costs for players, particularly in terms of lost time that could be spent on other activities (Griffiths et al., 2004; Griffiths & Hunt, 1995; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009a; Nagygyörgy et al., 2013). In a small subset of gamers, a combination of personality and MMORPG characteristics leads to chronic overplaying, with their behaviors sometimes becoming so severe as to indicate internet gaming disorder or gaming addiction. Theory would suggest that these severe cases of excessive gaming behavior would likely impact family members as well. The current study utilized phenomenological interviewing to gain an understanding of the experience of parenting an emerging adult son who games excessively. Analysis found that these parents were all deeply concerned for their child’s video game playing behavior. They each discussed costs, concerns, and hopes for their child, difficulty understanding their child, the belief that their child was not meeting his full potential, the difficulty in knowing how to influence their child, and the belief that their child was, in fact, addicted to gaming.

Henry and Jenny seemed to spend the most time discussing how their son’s lives were being impacted by their gaming behavior. Repeated educational failings, under-employment, neglected health, and stunted social relationships were all mentioned and align clearly with what research has found individuals give up for the sake of gaming (Beranuy et al., 2013; Griffiths et al., 2004; Griffiths & Hunt, 1995; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009a). Given that every parent interviewed believed their child to be addicted, it is surprising to note that only one parent, Jenny, mentioned one of the seven signs, withdrawal, typically agreed to be present in the case of gaming addiction (Griffiths, 2010). However, it could easily be claimed that all of the
participants’ sons seem to be suffering from internet gaming disorder when looking at the proposed criteria of experiencing withdrawal symptoms, neglecting other interests, and, potentially, that gaming causes the individual clinically significant impairment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This concern with their sons being addicted prompted both Jenny, Henry, and Alex to try to talk to their sons about their gaming behavior. However, both Henry and Alex noted that they felt limited in what they could say about their sons gaming behavior given the son was no longer financially reliant on them. This brings to the forefront how truly unclear the job of parenting an emerging adult can be at times. These parents clearly still felt the need to advise and guide their children. However, given their own experiences at that age, their other social instincts suggested this was no longer their place. Clearly this internal tug of war weighed on parents, which suggests that the principle of linked lives from life course theory of development (Elder, 1995) may be relevant in understanding the situations these families are experiencing.

The principle of linked lives is the concept of interconnection and shared influence of one life on another when a relationship exists and can help explain how a relationship impacts the identities and development of each member of the parent-child dyad (Daly, 2007). Despite their belief that they have little say in their child’s behavior, parents’ views of themselves are still impacted by whether or not their child is achieving typically expected life events, such as finishing their education, establishing a career, or marrying, in a timely fashion. The fact that the child’s gaming behavior may result in these events being delayed or not reached at all can be distressing for both parent and child (Arnett & Fishel, 2013). It is likely due, at least in part, to these off-time occurrences of expected events in the lives of their children that the parents view their children as odd or different. This combination of not following social norms, as well as the
negative stereotypes that exist regarding gamers (Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012) and the changes in technology and socializing that have occurred since the parent’s own time as young adults, are all likely culprits in establishing the disconnect between these parents and their gamer sons. For instance, Jenny and Donna both repeatedly voiced the belief that their sons were not socializing, despite the evidence presented by Cole & Griffiths (2007) that the MMORPG game type involves a significant amount of socialization for most players. However Jenny especially felt that her son’s lack of visits to dance halls, bowling alleys, and football games, all somewhat dated versions of emerging adult socialization, meant he did not socialize. Although the social aspects of MMORPGs are impressive and both well recognized and highly valued among the players themselves, they appear to be disregarded by these parents.

This study provided a rich description of the experience of being the parent of an emerging adult son who games excessively, which had previously been lacking in academic literature. Unfortunately, due to the design of allowing participants to suggest where to meet, interview length may have been affected, with the shortest interview likely ending slightly earlier than it would have naturally, and three interviews were interrupted and had to be continued after a brief break. This may have impacted the full extent of some findings. Another limitation was that it did not explore the experiences of mothers or fathers separately, which may have had an impact on themes had the interviews focused solely on one group or the other. Analyses hinted at the possibility of gender differences. For example, fathers seemed to feel more constrained in how much input or advice they should be giving their sons when they were not contributing to them financially. However, given the nature of this work is to represent the commonalities of the experience, highlighting these differences did not seem appropriate or relevant given the limited sample size. Given this, one suggestion for future research would be to further investigate these
potential gender differences. Another interesting avenue for future research would be to interview and collect data on parents and gaming children as matched pairs. This would allow for a comparison between the parent’s perceptions of the child’s playing with the reality of the child’s gaming behavior as well as potentially provide an explanation from the child for some of the behaviors that seem to baffle parents. Unfortunately this may be difficult to achieve in cases where the child’s excessive playing has shifted into the territory of gaming addiction, given the potential for the child to be in denial about their gaming behavior. A further suggestion would be the use of event history calendars, which can be helpful for generating longitudinal data in retrospect (Morselli, Berchtold, Suris Granell, & Berchtold, 2016). This could be used to ask parents about the child’s gaming behavior and help to establish a timeline for the onset, increase, and factors contributing to parental concern regarding gaming.

The findings of this study suggest that there is a need to educate parents regarding what constitutes typical versus atypical gaming behavior. This will ease the minds of those whose children are gaming excessively and alert those whose children are leaning towards gaming addiction. It is also clear that practitioners treating those who are clinically addicted need to be aware of the parents’ anxieties and concerns. They should consider treating the family as a whole given the danger of inadvertent enabling or codependent behavior and the benefit of having the family involved in treatment, as suggested by Young (2009). In much less clinical terms, this study may help parents understand that they, their child, and the emotions they feel are not so odd after all.
References


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Vita

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