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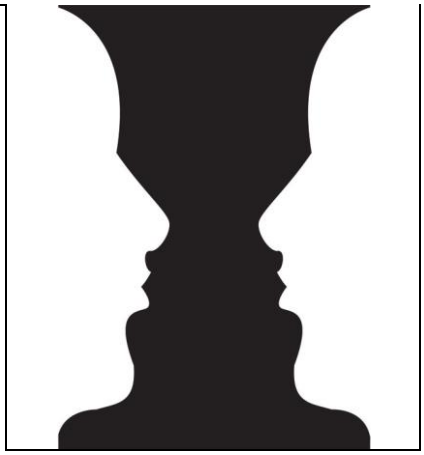

More than addiction: Examining the role of anonymity, endless narrative, and socialization in prolonged gaming and instant messaging practices

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Abstract
This ethnographic study explores a user's prolonged engagement within virtual gaming communities. Likening prolonged engagement with addiction, this research provides an alternative perspective into virtual addiction focusing on three interrelated themes: 1) anonymity, 2) endless narrative, and 3) socialization. By employing narrative interviews and virtual observations, the researchers examine two different cultural, racial and age groups' user experience within console and computer-based multiplayer environments. More specifically, they explore how the three factors (i.e., anonymity; endless narrative; socialization) relate to the prolonged and extended use within these virtual communities and highlight the multifaceted uses of traditional chat services, social media, and the convergence of media existing within these chat communities.

Keywords
Computer-mediated communication, video gaming, ethnography, instant messenger, online addiction

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore the prolonged engagement in socially mediated activities within virtual communities. As Barch & McKenna (2004) suggest, the Internet is a natural part of our everyday lives. Gaming, as an extended application of Internet technologies, is not exempt from this trend. With the convergence of media within gaming communities (MMORPG's, Xbox Live, etc.), users have an abundance of options to interact, engage, and entertain themselves sometimes for extended periods of time which has been viewed as addiction among some scholars.

Gaming addiction literature compares prolonged gaming practices to alcohol or drug abuse (Grusser, Thalemann, & Griffiths, 2007). Specifically, Chak and Leung (2004) suggest that adolescents become preoccupied with gaming, lie about their gaming use, lose interest in other activities, withdrawal from family and friends, and use gaming as a means of psychological escape. This dystopic framing of extended gaming is problematic as it simplifies a complex phenomenon: prolonged engagement in virtual settings involves more than just one task. Many users are performing multiple tasks at any given time. But the real question lies in what compels some users to be able to engage for an extended period of time? By examining, anonymity; endless narrative; and socialization among users within the virtual space, this study interrogates factors and motivations compelling players to occupy virtual spaces like gaming communities and chat rooms for extended periods.

Anonymity

Anonymity within the online community is considered as "people . . . take on various personas, even a different gender, and to express facets of themselves without fear of disapproval and sanctions by those in their real-life social circle" (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 34). The architecture and structure of online gaming environments inherently allow identity experiments - an aspect of anonymity.

Among the online gaming systems, the MMORPG is the most sophisticated having the most role-playing and social interaction, an attractive game interface, and endless game narrative. In fact, MMORPG is now the most popular, profitable, and unfortunately the most addictive online gaming system (Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). The anonymous nature of these spaces leads to much addiction allowing users to adopt and navigate multiple identities while online.

Griffiths and colleagues (2003) point out MMORPG allows "a range of identities (and genders) to be explored by playing a character created by the player. The identity can vary along the lines of race, profession, and deity alignment (morality)" (p. 82). At first glance, this quality seems identical with the "identity experiment" in online chat rooms. Nevertheless, the "identity experiment" in online chat rooms is in a text format not an image form, whereas the character that a player creates in MMORPG exists in a defined visual art form (e.g., an avatar). This character has a body, outfits, weapons, and so on. One recurring scenario reported is that of the player's body simultaneously fusing with the character image on the screen. For example, a person literally jumps when the

character he or she controls in the game is jumping. Researchers describe this phenomenon as shifting experience from the third person to the first person (Livingston, 2002). The first-person experience increases the intensity and immersive nature of online gaming. Unlike the "identity experiment" in online chat rooms where participants forge identities to "deceive" other people, this conscious practice in MMORPG may ultimately involve the player "deceiving" himself or herself. This is because other players in MMORPG know perfectly that the person on the screen is not the one behind the screen who controls the character.

Researchers tends to interpret the "identity experiment" in MMORPG as similar to online chat rooms (Griffiths et al., 2003). However, the intensive first-person experience in MMORPG demands much more commitment toward the character that one plays. Will a person be more prone to violence if he or she engages in gun shooting in MMORPG? Will a game player who acts as a civil rights leader in MMORPG be more sympathetic to human right issues in the real world? The correlation between a person's game character in MMORPG and his or her offline life is much stronger when compared to the "identity experiment" in online chat rooms. In other words, a game player's psychological formation of a virtual identity in MMORPG (and its consequent influence on him or her) needs further investigation. This will give us a better understanding of this particular kind of "identity experiment." The researchers suspect the identity experiment might be related to the feature of anonymity within the virtual context.

Endless narrative

Unlike other video games which have defined endings, MMORPG's are endless. Researchers explain this is because there is a never ending system of goals and achievements that promotes players to "challenge" their abilities in the games one level after another (Whang & Chang, 2004; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Wan & Chiou, 2006). In Wan and Chiou's interviews with 10 Taiwanese adolescents with online game addiction, all 10 participants indicate their unconscious need for power and achievement. Similar reactions to MMORPG coming from addicted players are described in other research and news reports (Whang & Chang, 2004; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). Additionally within gaming, endless game narrative is directly rooted in replayable narratives. Many gamers indicate playing campaigns again and increasing difficulty to attain further achievements (Gray, 2011). Within the virtual world of chat, the nature of the technology ensures on-going and constant engagement (Baron, 2008).

The Internet that was once portrayed as "the third place," such as coffee shops that help people get through the day (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001), is now becoming a place where people socialize, access information, receive education, find entertainment, or do business. Its growing functionalities and applications substantially fuse people's virtual and real life (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Livingstone, 2002, 2003; Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Furthermore, it has gradually grown from being a "third place" that people could occasionally drop by into a "must-visit" place (e.g., online gaming or chat) for people every day, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Socialization among players

Whang and Chang (2004) indicate "socializing to meet new people or upgrading one's skills to advance his or her level in the game" (pp. 596-597) are the two most common behaviors in online gaming. One suspects there is a clear line between those who want to make friends and those who want to upgrade their skills in online games. Ng and Wiemer-Hastings (2005) argue that social interaction and collaboration among game players is essential in MMORPG, especially when players confront difficult levels. While this comment is consistent with Whang and Chang's point, it blurs the line between socializing and upgrading to another level in online games. It also questions the essence of socialization among players in online games. Do people socialize to upgrade to another level, or simply to form friendships or both?

In Whang and Chang's (2004) survey study on lifestyles of 4,786 online gamers in Lineage, a popular Asian online game, they ask participants about their attitudes towards interactions with other players. Their survey consists of nine value factors, e.g. social oriented, traditional, outlaw, achievement, anti-group and so on. Each value factor has two to four questions. Overall, there are twenty five questions, e.g. "You often chat with new players you meet in the game," "You've chosen not to join any clans [groups]," or "You always follow the decision made by your clan." They classify these game players into three different categories: (1) the single-oriented players who neither focus on accomplishment nor identify with any community in games (28.2%); (2) the community-oriented players who are socially-oriented and maintain good relationships with other players in games (44.8%); and (3) off-Real world players who are anti-social and have more aggressive behaviors in games (26.9%). However, Whang and Change do not give operational criteria for these three categories, nor do they address the possibility of their overlapping.

Griffiths and colleagues (2003) conduct their survey with 3,495 online game players on Allakhazam, a fan site for EverQuest, another popular Western online game. Participants are asked whom they usually group with when playing games. The results vary, showing: (1) "whoever is available when they need partners to play the game" (34%); (2) "friends they had met while playing the game" (24%); (3) "guild mates" (16%); (4) "real life friends and family" (14%); and (5) "do not group" (12%). These choices are designed as mutually exclusive items. In other words, there is no overlapping among them.

However, in their conclusion Griffiths and colleagues merely report three types of online game players: (1) those who group to play (players who group with whoever is available when they need partners for the games) (34%); (2) those who play to group (players who play with people they know either in online games or in the real world) (55%); and (3) those who do not group (12%). Clearly, they combine those participants who group with "friends they had met while playing the game" (24%), "guild mates" (16%), and "real life friends and family" (14%) into one single category—"those who play to group" (55%). The authors of the current paper argue these categories should have

been separated since each of the category represents different types of interpersonal communication.

Regardless of the defects in these two empirical studies, the researchers quoted above confirm that players do socialize with each other in online games. However, they leave the dynamics between playing games and socializing with other people unexplored. Socializing to make friends, to gain skills, or to achieve other purposes probably exist in a variety of forms and mean different things to different players.

Research methodology

The current study utilized a multi-sited, comparative ethnographic research design. This investigation was conducted using two different platforms (research sites), an adult clan of gamers of color within Xbox Live in the United States and pre-teen participants within Yahoo Instant Messenger in Taiwan. These participants and research sites were chosen for several reasons. First, research on addiction focuses either on adult populations or youth without ever comparing differences or similarities in use across the ages. Secondly, addiction in Asian settings are taken more seriously with media reporting addiction to be an epidemic concern (Zhang, 2013). Third, literature on these populations is limited and we are attempting to fill the void by taking an inclusive approach to diversify research participants. Our long-term engagement with these participants allowed us to move beyond the descriptive of 'how long' to 'why' gaining insider knowledge to their online practices. While we weren't guided by any particular research question, we were guided by the framework of grounded theory allowing what we learned to inform our frameworks. This extended case study method provides a more reflexive approach to allow the research participants to share their experiences with us.

The extended case method argues that the extensive ethnography of a case study can be used to "extract the general from the unique, to move from the micro to the macro, and to connect the present to the past in anticipation for the future, all by building on preexisting theory" (Burawoy, 1998, p. 5). According to this methodological perspective, the primary goal of ethnography is not to be able to tell us something about a population of similar cases, but rather to tell us something about society as a whole. At the same time, ethnography is seen as a way of producing social theory (Glaeser, 2005, p. 37). In this research, we attempt to engage both with the social world and with theoretical problems from the outset (see Glaeser, 2012, p. 56).

This multi-sited ethnography entails extensive description of social life in a given location, focusing on a small number of cases over a period of one year. In keeping with a classic approach to ethnography, the research included face-to-face observations and interviews both in person and virtually. Seventeen total participants agreed to participate. Nine of the participants are located in the United States (Xbox Live sample), while eight are from Taiwan (IM sample). The Xbox Live sample was interviewed face to face once with constant online engagement. Participants within the Yahoo sample were interviewed face-to-face, and through Yahoo messenger, totaling 3-4 interviews each. Additionally, they participated in a face-to-face group interview. The main interview

themes included when they began engaging with others online, the amount of time spent online, and the context of their interactions with others online.

The demographics information of these participants are listed below:

Table 1. Xbox Live Participant Description and Demographics

Gamertag*	Age/ Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Years on Xbox Live	Gaming Hours/Week
MissUnique	28/F	Black/*AfrAmer*	9	25-30
ThugMisses	31/F	Black/AfrAmer	4	50+
cdXFemmeFataleXcd	29/F	Black/AfrAmer	10	50+
ShedaBoss	26/F	Black/AfrAmer	9	40-45
MizzBoss917	23/F	Black/Latina	4	40-45
XpkX RicanMami	23/F	Black/Latina	8	30-35
UReady4War2	26/F	Black/AfrAmer	10	50+
YeahSheBlaze	19/F	Black/AfrAmer	3	25-30
Patroa917	22/F	Black/Latina	5	25-30

***Pseudonyms were created to protect the participants online identities

Table 2. Yahoo Messaging Participant Description and Demographics

**Name	Age/Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Years On Yahoo Messenger!	Online games /Online Friends
Jane	11/Female	Asian/Taiwanese	1	Yes
Peggy	11/Female	Asian/Taiwanese	3	Yes
Wendy	11/Female	Asian/Taiwanese	3	Yes
Sharon	11/Female	Asian/Taiwanese	1	Yes
Jack	11/Male	Asian/Taiwanese	3	No
Kevin	11/Male	Asian/Taiwanese	1	No
Tom	11/Male	Asian/Taiwanese	1	Yes
Mike	11/Male	Asian/Taiwanese	1	Yes

****We used English names to accommodate readers who might not be familiar with Chinese.

Findings and analysis

By using the participant's narrative of their virtual activities, the research highlights the need to further examine the variety of ways that virtual users use their time within online communities. The following section illustrates how these three elements: socialization, endless narrative, and anonymity, relate to a user's prolonged engagement in multi-mediated communities.

Socialization among users

Virtual communities constitute an important attribute through which social dialogues are mediated. The expansion of communication within Internet technologies has allowed for a myriad of ways to reach people in different geographic locations. While addiction literature within gaming mostly focuses on individual practices, incorporating the social element into the discussion, elevates the conversation beyond the individual and examines the importance of the community in an individual's online activities (e.g., gaming, Facebooking, instant messaging, etc.). As Ahuja and Galvin (2003) identified, virtually connected social groups are an important part of the future of socialization. The participants within this study also revealed that socialization is the social capital primarily employed giving digital users a sense of belongingness.

Research on youth and social networking shows that teenagers use this form of multimedia to enhance their real life relationships or expand their social lives connecting with people beyond the boundaries of age, gender, race, profession, and geography (Bradley, 2005; Chak & Leung, 2004; Chou & Peng, 2007; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter et al., 2006; Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone, 2003; Symantec Corporation, 2009). Instant Messaging (IM) system, heavily employed in most virtual communities including gaming, is more likely used to supplement an individual's social life, especially for high school students and college freshmen (age between 15 and 20 years old).

The data differed slightly within our study. For instance, all of the participants used IM with their classmates, friends and relatives. Additionally, several of them only employed the technology to communicate with those they met through online gaming; however, the online friendship to most of them is not as essential as their offline friendship. Only Wendy and Jane indicated that they felt a strong connection with their online friends. IMing is a part of their social life whether online or offline. The role of IM in the Taiwanese study group participants' social lives, might not be as essential as it appears to be in the teenagers' lives in the quoted literature.

While research suggests that social interactions within Xbox Live are mostly negative (Gray, 2012), the social aspect within the Xbox sample in this study was positive and mostly empowering towards one another as they attempted to resist the oppressive reality that often constitutes online gaming. The following excerpt among the clan within Xbox explains this trend as they used their power of socialization to develop their community online.

> *Patroa917:* When I get on, I don't even fuck with the rest of Live… as soon as I log on, I get a party invite and I get right on with my girls.
> *MizzBoss917:* Yeah I can't say when the last time was I chatted in Live. That's sad though, cuz we pay money for the full experience and can't even enjoy it.
> *Mzmygrane:* Well that may be true, but you have found great friends that you spend time with right?
> *MizzBoss917:* Yeah that's true
> *ThugMisses:* And I get online for them. If they aint on, I usually log off.

This brief exchange actually captures the reality for many women and people of color in virtual settings. Because of some of the negative interactions they've experienced, they self-segregate and just game with others similar to them in identity (Gray, 2011).

An additional aspect of socialization introduced by participants within the sample is the use of social media to participate within gaming culture. For example, all of the participants in the Xbox live group, participate in the Facebook page, *Black Girl Gamers.* This highlights gamers' continued participation within gaming culture using social media. While this page was created to share gaming content and personal experiences in console and computer gaming, it became a sort of "third place" providing support and community for these users.

Socialization introduced within the context of the current study reflects a more nuanced approach than just finding gaming partners and gaming only. It is inclusive of a variety of activities online ranging from gaming, to chatting, to expanding social life, to finding support group, to using other apps and mobile technology, etc.

Endless narrative

Narrative is not limited to a storyline within a game, but includes the conversations associated with the games. So with the continued dissemination of technologies within virtual gaming communities, there is ultimately no end to the narrative. We define "endless narrative" broadly and recognize that it could hold a variety of meanings within different contexts. We define narrative as not only the endless story that now constitutes games but also the endless narratives from the stories created while engaged in the social aspect of gaming culture and communities. We specifically privilege the narrative that people develop and create around their sense of identity through interactions with text, voice, and discourse within virtual communities.

The Yahoo IM and gaming sample reveal the expansive and intertwined relationships created within and around the technology. IMing is rooted at the core of these participants' relationships not only online but also in person. Participants in this study seem to share a view these types of interactions are essential to enhancing their real life relationship with this type of online engagement. And the nature of these relationships lead to an on-going, endless narrative as the physical relationship is now supplemented online. The excerpts from the interviews below reveal this reality:

> *Jack*: "I feel better [after complaining to my friends on Yahoo! Messenger]. My friends give me comfort more or less. I trust them more and feel closer to them"
>
> *Kevin*: "It [IMing] gives me more time to talk to my classmates. I understand them more and we gradually become closer to each other."
>
> *Jane*: "When I have a fight with my classmates at school, it is embarrassing for me to apologize in person, but I can apologize to the person on Yahoo! Messenger when he or she is online. I feel less embarrassed apologizing to my classmate this way."

> *Peggy*: "I felt more comfortable talking to my sister on Yahoo! Messenger. It seemed awkward to say things to her in person." "I asked her [Peggy's sister] questions that I would not ask her in person."

These statements reveal the endless communicative possibilities associated with IMing. They employed this technology to discuss a variety of things with their friends. IMing, one of these participants' the after-school activities, provides more time and opportunity for them to get in touch with their peers. Without seeing the person on the other end, Yahoo! Messenger to some degree becomes an anonymous space that provides a safety net allowing its users to feel more comfortable in talking with others.

Most participants in this study indicate that IMing more or less assists them in maintaining a good relationship with their peers. This is cohesive with findings in other research that IMing has a positive effect on a person's relationships and it seems to become a major component in a person's social life (Bradley, 2005; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter et al., 2006; Livingstones, 2003; Peter et al., 2007).

Within the Xbox Live sample, the participants were equally inclined to use social elements of the community as an extension of their gaming practices creating this endless narrative. Among this sample, they acknowledge the multimediated reality they exist within. They are able to extend their experiences beyond the console. The following excerpt reveals the inclusivity of their gaming practices to supplement their experiences beyond normal gameplay:

> *XpkX RicanMami:* Now I play online mostly but it's multiplayer. I do the campaigns when I got somebody else to do them with me.
> *Mzmygrane:* Well how much time do you devote to each one?
> *cdXFemmeFataleXcd:* Well I would say the majority of my time is in multiplayer.
> *ThugMisses:* Well I be at work so I get online. Like the app to see who on and what they doing. So those are hours I spent online so that's why it seem like I'm always on. But I just be looking at they updates.

Within the Xbox Live context, endless narrative actually comprises multiple activities in which to engage within the community. For example, game replayable constitutes a significant segment of endless narrative with gamers playing campaigns and missions multiple times. Gamers also acknowledge and define their online, multiplayer experiences within the scope of endless narrative given the constant nature of virtual gaming environments. Gamers even recognize their ability to communicate with others employing social media, mobile technology, and apps extending the narrative creating endless opportunities.

This is significant for participatory culture. As Harris (2008) illustrates in her discussion of online do-it-yourself culture, this type of engagement allows marginalized people the ability to create and control their own public self. While we did not specifically engage realities associated with our participants race or their genders, we acknowledge that their identities are carried with them in virtual settings. The social extensions of gaming environments provide an outlet for marginalized users to become active participants in hegemonic arenas such as technology and video games.

Anonymity

Anonymity proved to be the most contentious aspect for both the Instant Messaging and Xbox groups. For the IMing group, anonymity proved to be a point of empowerment allowing some of the most introverted among us a place to finally be able to participate in culture. On the other hand, anonymity within Xbox created hostile environments for many marginalized gamers. But still, this aspect was the one that gave all users the comfort to continue to engage for extended periods.

Research reveals that most children now make a significant portion of their friends online. The Norton Online Living 09 report (Symantec Corporation, 2009) shows that 55 percent (up from 45 percent in 2008) of the children they surveyed have made friends online, averaging 37 online friends. This report does not provide any information on where and how children meet online friends. In the Yahoo sample, only girls, Peggy, Jane, and Wendy, have online friends and they met them all through online gaming. Their online friendship often starts with a typical online greeting "Ang Ang" which literally means "good morning," "good afternoon" or "good evening" among Taiwanese IM users. The significance of these greetings reflect the intricate and familiar nature of the social network developed online. This greeting is almost necessary in some settings to build and create online friendships. As we discussed in the section of "Socialization," IMing is a technology for these participants to maintain and enhance their real-life relationships. Within the online gaming platform, they also adopt IMing to expand their social network with gamers they met online (Gray, 2015). Wendy depicts how she becomes friends with game players in Jin-Wu, an online dancing game, literarily meaning "dance up a storm."

> Well, you first dance with the person. You may feel that the person can become your friend. If you like the person then you can add the person to your friend list in Jin-Wu. After a while, you may become more familiar with the person and become online friends with him or her. Then, you ask for the person's Yahoo! Messenger account.

In this systematic way of making online friends portrayed by Wendy, it is apparent that an online friendship grows in the public context of the game's chat room. Then this interplay evolves into a more private space which is Yahoo! Messenger.

Wendy was also the online user to describe her prolong gaming experiences as addiction. "I play online games every day. . . . I am addicted to online games. It is why my school work is getting worse," she said in one of our interviews. With a very lenient rule, she spent most of her after school hours on the Internet – "I can use the computer as long as I finish my homework. I always finish my homework at the childcare center. So, I have nothing to do when I am home". On weekends, she dedicated her time to online games – "I can be really crazy about playing games on weekends . . . I sleep for few hours and play online games for the rest of the day."

Wendy's experience is an intersection of endless narrative, anonymity, and socialization. It reveals that having a number of things to engage in can keep one involved for hours in the virtual context. By her own admission, she spends a significant

amount of her time online chatting and gaming. She has developed meaningful relationships with other gamers and users that she doesn't know personally. Although she maintains her real-world responsibilities, it is apparent her online activities have become the priority of her life.

While the Yahoo sample employed anonymity as a means to expand their social lives, the Xbox sample reveal that anonymity is the major reason leading to their diminished enjoyment within gaming culture. An example of an identity experiment due to the anonymous spaces of virtual communities comes from the Xbox Live setting and it centers on an all-female clan who engage in gender swapping to thwart virtual harassment within the space. While traditional gender swapping focuses on players choosing avatars of genders opposite of their physical bodies (Lou et al., 2013), gender swapping in this context deviates from this a bit. The Militant Misses clan engages in holistic gender swapping where they will actually game as if they are male players. Not only do they have masculine avatars, but they also don't feminize their gamertag, nor do they verbally articulate with others within the space for fear of being 'outed' as a female.

The Militant Misses as a clan were more focused on hardcore gaming as opposed to socializing within the space. They created this segregated space because they weren't being taken seriously as hardcore gamers. As a result, they created their own space and took a militant approach in ensuring all of their members were adequately trained and prepared to fight in clan matches. The space was created as practice grounds to prepare fighting males. Interestingly, MM rarely played against other female clans because they thought women were inferior to men. Members of Militant Misses did not take other women serious as gamers. So these women extended the identity experiment to every facet of their gaming experience and the anonymous spaces of virtual communities allows this.

> *Mzmygrane:* So how do you get away from your gender online? How come they don't know you're a girl until you tell them?
> *UReady4War2*: Well we don't play with all that girly stuff in our gamertags.
> *Mzmygrane:* What do you mean?
> *UReady4War2:* We have just regular gamertags. No Miss this or Miss that. And we use dudes for avatars.
> *Mzmygrane*: OK so what else?
> *UReady4War2:* Well we don't use the chat. Well we only use it with each other. Because we can't disguise our voice like in other places.
> *Mzmygrane:* So you essentially play as dudes?
> *UReady4War2*: Yep. That's the point. And because we online, we can. Don't nobody know.

The Militant Misses have adopted a virtual identity that reflects their negative experiences within the space. The Militant Misses did not enjoy being oppressed within the space and had identified a means to avoid inequalities. The anonymous spaces of virtual communities allows for this gender swapping and identity experiment.

Discussion and conclusion

Three themes evolve from our findings – socialization, endless narrative, anonymity. While the findings align with the literature on interactions within virtual communities, the data suggests that these three elements are strongly interrelated. We see how an individual's social networking is expanded in the virtual context through socialization with the assist of anonymity either by default of the IMing system design or the gaming design. Socialization and anonymity along with the activities available within the context result in the endless narrative scenarios that we observe in some of the participants. Therefore, we are unable to dissect these three themes from one another. The complexity of the emerging virtual communities (within an individual's life) requires an intersecting examination approach. The literature must begin to expand its limited focus on defining this behavior as purely addiction. While there may be some indications that the nature of these communities leads some people to participate in sometimes unhealthy means, only examining the number of hours that an individual engages in these virtual communities seriously diminishes the value of those activities especially to the user.

These results also reveal a need to examine prolonged engagement in these communities from a cultural lens. We understand there are issues related to gender, race, and even gaming design in our participants' experiences. Due to the focus of this study, we limit our discussion to the three themes. But we acknowledge the diverseness of our sample and urge for a more culturally responsive approach in interrogating prolonged engagement in the virtual context. We should also expand this to be more inclusive of social media as extensions of the once singular environments.

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