

The non-gamer

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Abstract

This article is a sociological analysis of those individuals who are not involved in the gamer's culture even though they live in a society in which technology has assumed a fundamental relevance in the perception of (un)reality and the presentation of virtual worlds. In such a world, the individuals have access to, and the ability to afford the necessary technology, to play videogames on computers, mobile phones or video consoles, deny that possibility and constitute nowadays an increasing minority. I will examine the sociological aspects and psychological characteristics of this group of individuals who share their time with friends and relatives who play videogames. These 'future minority' currently live in houses surrounded by technological devices, their work is often influenced by technology, they use transport that is managed by technology, but prefer not to enter virtual worlds in their leisure time; they choose the realities expressed in atoms rather than bits, and in doing so, they reject the opportunity to enter the unlimited possibilities offered by virtuality, avoiding the professional, cultural and educational skills that gamers acquire through the use of videogames.

This article also examines the non-gamer from a personal perspective, (auto)analysing the researcher as a case study of the non-gamer in today's western society. I have had to deal with the ambivalent long term professional interest in analysing and researching virtual worlds and videogames whilst simultaneously having a lack of personal interest in playing and accessing the potential offered by technology and virtuality. My professional and personal concerns collide at this point and result in a contradiction that I will explore as a member of the non-gamer social group.

Key words: videogames, gamer, non-gamer

I am not a gamer, that is a fact and I have often wondered why. This article is a sociological and psychological research about those who, like me, do not play games simply because we do not want to even though we live in a digital world where we are surrounded not only by technology, but also by the recreational side of it.

The role of the non-gamer in this western twenty-first century society has to be analysed in a continuous dialectic relationship with the gamer. Hence, being a non-gamer has its benefits and disadvantages, socially and psychologically. These are aspects on which I will focus in this article, examining the social repercussions of being, or not being, a gamer. I will particularly reflect on these aspects with a case study based on the researcher as an example of a non-gamer, to observe-how and why the lack of videogame practice and habits can affect someone in today's society.

Sociology of the gamers and non-gamers

Given that videogames are as wonderful as they are, why wouldn't you play them? The simple experience of being a gamer can be described as the simple feeling of a pull, of looking at a game and wanting to play it. You can see what you need to do in the game, you can see how to do it and you want to do it' (Juul, 2010: 2).

Videogames are the paradigm and most representative product of this twenty first century post-industrial society that is highly technologized, and has evolved towards an economy based on the technology of entertainment. In such a society, being a non-gamer should be understood almost as a counter-cultural movement in which the individual rejects the possibility of obtaining entertainment, information and values through one of the most important channels. This is a choice that resides in the person and which depends on several cultural, sociological and psychological factors that generally converges in the rejection of the virtual and interactive environments of videogames.

Part of the difficulty of defining what a videogame is, lies not only in the contemporary nature of the phenomenon, but also in its continuous development: is a learning game about the resources of a university a videogame or an educational tool? Is *Second Life*, a virtual environment that (inaccurately) reproduces our world in an immaterial universe in which we virtually live, a game or a technological imitation of life? A videogame must be understood as an electronic entertainment game that uses and follows the rules of computer technology, allows interaction in real time between the player and the machine and employs video display (Tejeiro and Pelegrina, 2003: 20). Therefore, according to this definition, a videogame includes all these mentioned virtual environments (why not have fun learning about the resources of a university?).

Nevertheless, a gamer must be understood in terms of the attitude of the player, the *pull* that makes the occasional player or the non-gamer become a gamer. It is possible to be a gamer of a particular game or genre of videogames. It is also possible to be a gamer during a specific period of time (and stop or resume the gamer activity after an interval). Being a gamer is not a perpetual or fixed label. Being a gamer is a constantly developing or evolving category that changes, when applying to an individual, depending on several factors such as the amount of free time available, personal conditions, economic resources, the games accessible, the completion of the games someone plays and enjoys, the preference for other hobbies or even the mood in a particular moment. Correspondingly, it is possible to distinguish gamers in a continuum which covers the very immersed gamers, hardcore players and the occasional casual players.

Certainly, players that just occasionally play a solitaire on their computers or play videogames on their mobile phones whilst waiting for the train are not to be categorised as non-gamers, but casual players who do not have the interest, time, energy or commitment to engage in a more *serious* game. However, it is important to note the apparent contradiction, that casual players sometimes dedicate more time and effort to the casual videogame than hardcore players. Therefore, the commitment and immersion into the game seems to be the principal difference between

gamers and casual videogame players but we can also find the relative lack of attraction to the quality of the graphics and the 'preference for positive and pleasant fictions' (Juul, 2010: 8).¹

In this sense, there is an incapacity to define the personality and average social conditions of the gamer with consistency. The only clear conclusions are that social status, social deviation, activities and hobbies indicate that playing games is not related to any psychological pathologies and also that their social relationships, number of friends, introversion or loneliness are not significantly different between gamers and non-gamers (Tejeiro and Pelegrina, 2003: 105) Therefore, neither gamers or non-gamers can easily be identified in our society, apart from how they use their spare time.

In fact, the only reliable category analysing the mentioned concept of the gamer is the absolute non-gamer: one who never plays games. What are the consequences of this minority in a world driven by audio-visual interactive technology? Juul points out that 'When videogames developed a new expressive and creative language of their own they also shut out people who did not know their language' (Juul, 2010: 10). Hence, there is a sort of segregation in which a non-gamer cannot easily access the 'world' of the gamer as non-gamers have to go through a learning process to understand the gaming conventions. The culture of the videogame needs not only socialization but also certain physical abilities that the individual can only develop with practice. Nobody becomes a gamer in one day.

To become a gamer it is necessary to invest time and patience, elements which are much appreciated in today's society. Therefore, non-gamers usually state lack of time as the primary reason for not playing games according to a European Study (Juul, 2010: 14). This, however, cannot be the only reason for not playing games. Leaving this aside and also those who

¹In this respect, a new common situation that has been noted in the last few years are those players who are reconnecting their gamer past experience from games such as *Tetris* and *Pac-Man* with the new videoconsoles such as wii that requires little knowledge of the games, skills, effort, commitment and time. These players are re-discovering the pleasure of playing computer games, that they once abandoned because of personal commitments or time restrictions. According to Juul, 'this is the moment when we realised that everybody can be a videogame player' (Juul, 2010: 1-2).

cannot afford to buy videogames technology, there has to be certain personal, cultural and social conditions for *choosing* not to play games; this option can only be found in the territory of the aesthetics and also in the election to use leisure time away from the interactivity of a technological medium. This means that for a current minority, activities in a non-virtual environment are still more attractive, interesting and enjoyable than those practiced through a technologically interactive medium.

Simultaneously, the social perception of non-gamers has been gradually (d)evolving and today, we often find the social prejudice and stigma of a non-gamers as someone who is clumsy and old fashioned, at least relating to technology (Vera Muñoz and Espinosa, 2000: 7). Therefore, from an original starting point, in the 80's, when gamers were categorised as loners who spent their free time playing with technology, in today's technologically dominated world, being a non-gamer is stigmatised in exactly the same way, like a stranger who does not use one of the most important tools for entertainment. This paradox reflects the changes that have happened to our society in the last three decades, where technology has been introduced to all of the different aspects of our lives, including recreational purposes. Not using technology in our leisure time sometimes creates an impediment to communicate or enjoy time with our friends and relatives.

Evidently, gamers find videogames fun and non-gamers do not, or at least not enough to spend their leisure time playing with them. Juul indicates that 'there is ultimately no one sentence description of what makes all games fun; different games emphasise different types of enjoyment and different players may even enjoy the same game for entirely different reasons' (Juul, 2005: 19). Hence, what we find is that although lack of time is named as the primary reason for not playing games, fun is the most common motivation that differentiate gamers from non-gamers; this aspect has to be reduced to the enjoyment provoked by the interaction with a technological device, the aesthetic element intrinsic to the graphics of the videogame and the domination over a virtual environment, which is often related to a competitive element with oneself or other players.

However, whilst fun can be the reason for playing or not playing videogames, nonetheless these mediums also have important repercussions that can affect educationally, culturally and professionally those who do not play videogames. Carstens and Beck show that gamers have an entirely different set of skills to non-gamers, therefore

sooner or later, those who grew up without videogames will have to understand the gamers. That means not only learning what they are all about, but finding ways to redesign educational and training curricula around their needs (Carstens and Beck, 2007: 1).

According to these authors games reinforce certain beliefs about the self, how the world should work, how people relate to one another and also about the goals in life in general. This is because games become a *self-centre* universe in which the player has the chance to manipulate, pause and stop everything. These values, together with the control over digital technology, make gamers 'better prepared to deal with the challenges of the future'.

In this sense, in the broad scope of videogames, the competition element should be taken as a primary reason to play computer games; indeed, it is an intrinsic element for 'blocking out competing stimuli of a more threatening kind' (Robins, 1996: 120). Whilst competing, videogames also facilitate players to understand and assimilate rules. It is therefore a learning medium and simultaneously allows the player to break social rules and conventions without suffering the consequences (Levis, 1997: 182).

There are also a great number of skills learnt through playing videogames that gamers are able to apply to their professions. Certainly these skills are not useful to all the professions and also are not exclusive to gamers, but they constitute a potential advantage (or disadvantage if the individual lacks these skills) in the jobs market. The most obvious one is to have a dominance with computer and virtual environments (Winn, 2009: 2) but videogames can also influence competitiveness (Carstens and Beck,

2007: 2; Vorderer, 2003: 5), the ability to overcome problems (Pérez Martín, 2006: 2), concentration skills, (Martinez Verdú, 2007: 3), team spirit and commitment to the team when playing in groups (Tejeiro and Pelegrina, 2003: 48) and the continuous challenge to overcome problems and not give up (Vera Muñoz and Espinosa, 2000: 13 and Exteberria, 2001: 174).

When discussing the abilities learnt by playing videogames we should also consider the most acknowledged educational skill that videogame players acquire through the videogame experience: hand-eye coordination. Greenfield also points out that videogames require and develop certain video-spatial skills that represent an educational deficiency in its absence (Greenfield, 1984: 157). Of course it does not mean that non-gamers are uncoordinated, nevertheless gamers have demonstrated in several psychological studies their domination in hand-eye coordination and fast reactions time over non-gamers, something that has been used in training procedures in medicine (neurological surgery) and for pilots (Levis, 1997: 163).

Indeed, according to Gee, when an individual learns how to play videogames they are actually learning a new alphabet (Gee, 2004: 17). In this sense, non-gamers are videogame illiterates. Certainly, there is an evident disconnection from those social networks, virtual or physical communities, formed around the use of videogames technology. We find today social groups based on videogames activities practiced on-line; these virtual communities are alternative and complementary to the physical communities in which the individual can be involved, but non-gamers will not have access to them. This is connected to the experience of non-gamers who are not 'familiarised with computer games and will not only have a hard time navigating the environment but might also feel shocked by the gruesome acts he/she is compelled to play' (Sicart, 2009: 89).

The cultural relevance of videogames has an influence in the social values of the gamers as they can 'imitate the values shown by the protagonist of the videogames (...) rewarding certain attitudes in which the winner of the game is a violent assassin' (Vera Muñoz and Espinosa, 2000: 6 and 17) as we can see in popular videogames such as *Grand Theft Auto*.

Gamers receive a certain message through this medium, however, even if non-gamers do not adopt these values from videogames, it does not mean that they do not receive the same message from other mediums; this is one of the consequences of the media convergence in which we live today (Jenkins, 2004). Another important component that should be taken into consideration is that individuals with an aggressive personality might be more interested in playing violent games. For this point we should consider values and ethics as two different components and entities: the cultural values are transmitted from videogames and these can adopt violent forms, but the ethics are not only residing in the game, but also in the player.

A consequent social or cultural problem traditionally associated with videogame players comes from the impossibility of escaping the virtuality of the game, hence the gamer 'accustomed to control the fantastic world of the machine can feel unsatisfied and unhappy dealing with the uncontrollable real world' (Turkle, 1984: 167). Certainly, although non-gamers are also affected by the alternative worlds created by films or books, they do not suffer some of the consequences provoked by the assumption of different (videogames) identities, something that can promote certain freedom in the player when choosing an identity different to the one held in the real world, but can also cause an identity crisis or confusion about the reality of the self.

Psychology of the non-gamer

Not everybody feels the pull: not everybody knows what to do, not everybody wants to pick up the game and start playing (Juul, 2010: 3)

I will approach the study of the psychology of the non-gamer from a personal perspective, assuming myself the role of a case study. This is both because I am a 'confessed' non-gamer and also because it has always been my intention to understand why I do not feel an attraction to spend my free time playing games.

The first possible answer is that I simply dislike playing videogames; I do not see the fun, the pull, in them. In this sense, Juul maintains that the 'videogames pull is a subjective experience that depends on what games you have played, your personal tastes and whether you are willing to give the game the time it asks for' (Juul, 2010: 3). However, my argument is that I have many of the *conditions* to be a gamer: I really enjoy dealing with technology, I spend most of my time sitting in front of a computer, working and surfing the net, I have had computers on which I could have played games since I was 12 years old, I have completed a thesis about the effects of technology in the perception of reality, and most importantly, I am surrounded by friends and family who avidly enjoy spending hours playing games with computers or video consoles. Indeed, according to the research by ESA (Winn, 2009: 2), I have the average age and gender of a gamer, I am also white and with a university degree, another two of the most obvious characteristics of gamers, therefore I am the potential perfect gamer and yet I do not play games.

As a matter of fact, I was once a gamer. I was attracted to and seduced by the colours and sounds of the first home videogames that arrived in Spain in the 80's and together with my friends I spent long summer nights playing rudimentary games on a *Spectrum 48K*, but somehow our paths separated and whilst my friends continued to play games with more developed technology, I simply stopped playing videogames.

I have the impression that my life would be easier and probably more socially satisfying if I had continued playing games and became an adult gamer even if it would only be in a social context, for those occasions when the only activity organised is to play videogames and my solely role is to be a spectator of videogames. This is paradoxical since videogames have traditionally been accused of being a medium of isolation (Provenzo, 1991) and what I have experienced is completely the opposite: disconnection sometimes comes when someone is not attached to the virtual world. Social exclusion sometimes takes the form of the absence of technology, especially mobile phones, Internet (Kraut, Brynin and Kiesler, 2006: 40) and in my particular case, the lack of use of videogames. Indeed, Diego Levis points out

that 'one of the most extended preconceived ideas about videogames is that they instigate loneliness, but curiously kids prefer to play videogames with their friends' (Levis, 1997: 191). Indeed 70% of players prefer to play in company (Exteberria, 2001: 177) and according to Verdú, gamers are more extroverted than non-gamers (Martinez Verdú, 2007: 4). In a world driven both by technology and communication, we should specify the non-physical communication not as an anomaly, but a consequence of the social conditions in which we live. Therefore, gamers that socialize through on-line games are not isolated, but are individuals that choose that particular communication channel.

I like to play games, I am just not a computer gamer. I play almost any sport I have the chance to practice. Therefore, I like games and I like technology but I do not have fun with videogames. At this point I have reached the conclusion that the reason must relate to the virtual and digital environment, the interaction with a non-real environment. This is certainly paradoxical since I dedicated so many years to researching the benefits that virtual and interactive digital worlds have in choosing an identity, the freedom of expression, the escape from the stress and restraints of the physical world and the 'unlimited' creativity. But even though I wrote about those benefits I did not play games even once during my long years of research. Jesper Juul, points out that 'a videogame researcher is usually (and arguably should be) a big fan of videogames' (Juul, 2005: 17). So again, why I do not play games? The psychological answer matches in this point the social explanation of the non-gamer, I simply do not find fun (yet) in dealing with the graphics of videogames, the interactive components and immersing myself in virtual worlds in which I could have dominium. It is therefore a question of personal tastes and enjoyment, personal, but a choice that is shared by a minority of individuals that belong to a 'technological generation'. This undoubtedly affects the social, cultural and educational conditions of the individual.

Conclusions

In this technologically mediated 'information society' in which we live it is possible to categorise the population not only by their social class, education, genre or ethnicity but also apparently by the difference in their access and use of technology. The use of mobile phones and the Internet has its obvious benefits relating to communication, but videogames also hold certain advantages. Being a gamer in the twenty-first century in a western society means not only the possibility to avoid social exclusion from friends and family for not sharing the same interests and activities, but also it implies the possibility of acquiring certain educational, cultural and professional skills that gamers obtained from playing videogames. The act of being a non-gamer is therefore, in many cases, a choice, an election of the leisure time available, that even though is mainly based on the fun reported by playing games, has further consequences probably ignored by those, like myself, who do not play games. The non-gamers.

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