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1. Introduction

The goal of the study is to identify the lexical items within the comments section of an online Technology Entertainment Design (TED) presentation and what they indicate about the attitudes towards video games and gamers. The comments that provide the data are about the TED.com presentation “Gaming can make a better world” by Jane McGonigal. This set of comments was chosen because it contains casual opinions, which professional articles largely avoid, and includes discourse between commenters, which a singularly authored article would not have. This particular presentation is also ideal because it is about video games and gamers, which results in the comments also focusing on the positive and negative qualities of games and gamers, which is actually a difficult topic to locate on the Internet as most game-related sites or published articles are about video games, not video gamers. The comments are also freely available to study as TED.com is a public site and comments are publicly available according to their privacy policy.

Discourse analysis was used to analyze the lexical choices of the comments and divide them into the attitudes positive, negative, mixed, and neutral. Comments were also coded for whether they were general or personal, self-identification of being a gamer, and the motivations behind the positive or negative attitudes towards games. It was found that the comments contained marginally more positive comments than negative or mixed. The gamer stereotype was also commonly known and referenced by the commenters.
The study provides much needed insight into the perception of gamers and video games. There is a lack of linguistic studies of language and interaction on video games, which is developing into a legitimate area of study in other disciplines such as psychology and communication. The research of electronic communication suggests that there could be linguistic patterns and even changes in progress worth studying.

2. Objectives

The study aims to examine the commenters’ lexical choices and how these choices indicate attitudes towards video games, and to begin to develop a picture of common American perceptions of games and gamers. This is significant in that the value of videogames is currently a controversial and complex issue, and gaming as a hobby has had its fair share of controversy.

Gaming is often associated with addiction and mental health issues and is generally portrayed negatively by the media. News stories such as “Parents Neglect Starved Babies to Feed Video Game Addiction” (Associated Press, 2007) and “Man dies after Starcraft marathon” (Fisher, 2006) do little to convince the general public that gaming is anything other than bad. It has also come under fire from containing over-sexualized content and promoting misogyny. For example, iconic video game character Lara Croft of the Tomb Raider series has been criticized for failing to be an empowering female figure, as her voluptuous female body exists only to bring “fetishistic and scopophilic pleasures” to her male viewers (Kennedy, 2002). Video games have also been at the center of
controversies addressing their violent content. In 1994 the game *Mortal Kombat* was considered so violent that Congress approved the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) to implement a specific uniform rating system similar to the MPAA system for films (Kohler, 2009). Even within the academic community, divisive opinions of video games exist. For example, Bartlett, Rodheffer, Baldassaro, Hinkin, and Harris (2008) argue that games unconditionally make players more aggressive, while Ferguson (2010) strongly disagrees. Chatfield (2010) posits that these controversies create, “the ideal breeding ground for moral panic and for the widening of the divide between those who game and those who don’t.” This study investigates the attitudes of both gamers and non-gamers and the motivations behind their attitudes.

The perception of video games is clearly a complex issue, as there are numerous inconsistencies between fact and perception. Consider that video games have been a recreational activity since *Pong* was released by Atari in 1972, and that although forty years have passed, gaming is still often regarded as a hobby for children when the average gamer is thirty-seven-years old (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). Also, a larger percentage of women over eighteen play videogames than boys younger than seventeen, who are generally and wrongly considered to be gaming’s largest demographic (Chatfield, 2010). Furthermore videogames, regardless of platform, are a multimillion dollar industry. Real-time strategy game *League of Legends* averages 3.7 million hours played per day (Riot Games, 2011) and Zynga, the company behind *Farmville*, is valued at $20 billion (Raice and Smith, 2011). The common perception that most gamers are social
losers makes little sense when the massive successes in the industry suggest that videogames for all ages are hugely popular. The 2011 US National Gamers Survey reports that there are 145 million active gamers in the United States (Newzoo, 2012). The implication of this number is more than just that many gamers play games; but it suggests that perhaps most people play games. But why do so few claim this identity of “gamer”?

Research Questions

1. What attitudes about video games do the lexical choices of the commenters indicate? Are they positive, negative, mixed or neutral?

2. What lexical choices indicate the concepts or motivations that are the bases of these attitudes?

3. How many individuals specifically claim the gamer identity?

4. Do the lexical choices indicate that opinions are based on personal experience or generalizations?

From my own experience, my expectations of the results in respect to each research question are as follows:

1. Based solely on personal experience, I believe that the attitudes towards games and gamers are overwhelmingly negative. This expectation is mainly based on media coverage of video games, which tends to be negative far more often than positive. Due to this uneven representation, many people are introduced to gaming as an activity with many detrimental qualities and dubious benefits. These media messages can also effect on those who already game by causing them to question their pastime and to begin to perceive it negatively. I believe that the gamer stereotype affects overall attitudes towards gaming because it portrays all gamers as lonely individuals who care for nothing except gaming and lead unfulfilling and unhealthy lives. This affects non-gamer perception similar to how
media coverage does, it’s the only information non-gamers hear about games and gamers so they believe it and because of this I expect most of the opinions about games to be negative.

2. Gaming is perceived negatively because it is often considered a frivolous waste of time and gamers are portrayed as individuals who do nothing of value. I suspect that gaming addiction will be mentioned numerous times and that gaming will be compared to drug use. The concept of game addiction is often the first thing that non-gamers object to when video games are mentioned as many, many articles about gaming focus on this. I also expect that gaming will be considered a distraction from more productive activities. Finally I expect that there will be considerable concern about gamers related to the perceived separation of reality and virtual reality.

3. I expect that only a fraction of the commenters admit to being a gamer because of the gamer stereotype. Gamers are affected by the stereotype because it represents all gamers in a negative light and thus makes declaring identity as a gamer fraught with implications about one’s lifestyle. In my experience, many gamers consider it a risk to acknowledge their identity as a gamer because of the perceptions created by the stereotype. This is why I expect claiming gamer as an identity will be minimal.

4. Most opinions will be general and not personal. I believe that most gamers avoid personal admissions of gaming and refer to it more obliquely and that non-gamers do not have the experience to express an opinion beyond a generalization. Thus, the majority of posts are generalizations.
Attitudes towards gaming are important because they are more than just opinions. They affect what kinds of stories are covered by the media and they affect how comfortable a person is with his or her own hobby. The study focuses on the perceptions of video games and what motivates those opinions. It looks further into other aspects related to attitudes such as self-identification with “gamer” and each comment’s degree of abstraction.

3. Background

Video games have received little scholarly attention and thus there are many aspects that remain unstudied. This section provides important background information regarding games and gamers that cannot be covered in the literature review because none of the information has been professionally researched. In this section I define video games and gamers, explain the gamer stereotype, and give an overview of the presentation viewed by commenters, which are all key elements in the study.

3.1 Video Games

The term “video game” or “game” refers to any electronic game in any format: arcade, hand-held, console, computer or other. While “video game” can technically be a blanket term, when used in contexts describing modern behavior and circumstances, the term is usually referring to more contemporary game consoles such as the Xbox 360, Playstation 3, or Wii as well as Massively
Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) and social network-based games, which are played on personal computers.

3.2 Gamers

Generally speaking, a gamer is an individual who enjoys playing video games. The term, depending on the individual’s definition, may be more detailed depending on the kinds of games played or the number of hours spent each week or day on games. The New York Times article “With Smartphone Games, Downtime Becomes Pastime” claims that anyone who has played a game on their phone is a gamer (Schiesel, 2011). Voecks (2009) on Massively, a site dedicated to news about MMOs, argues that gaming for twenty hours or more a week does not necessarily make a player a “hardcore” gamer. Bates (2009) identifies five different types of gamer identities: new player, role-player, gamer, player, and independent, wherein a person who uses first person to refer to his or her character was considered a “player” and only those who used third person were “gamers.” “Gamer” at the very least means someone who plays and enjoys a video game, although it is often defined differently both inside and outside the gaming community. For the purposes of the study, “gamer” refers to anyone who enjoys any kind of electronic game.

3.3 Gamer Stereotype

The gamer identity is associated with a negative stereotype that similar to the term “gamer” is slightly different for each individual. While there is no empirical research documenting this perception, there are numerous examples of
gaming depicted in the media as strange or unhealthy behavior. As the *Today Show* points out “In your thirties you should have more on your mind than your videogames,” (Bell, 2011) suggesting there is something wrong with gaming as an adult. South Park also did an episode dedicated to the game *World of Warcraft*, wherein players were depicted being obsessive, unhygienic, and obese (Parker & Stone, 2010). Even *The Guild*, a web series about gaming, continually represents gamers as fanatics who are unable to lead normal lives (Evey & Day, 2011). Schiesel’s (2011) article for the New York Times contains several allusions to the gamer stereotype: “It’s O.K. if you’re, say, a middle-aged woman who harbors a secret obsession with mastering Angry Birds. I know there are a lot of you out there. It’s perfectly acceptable now if your co-workers or children find out.” This sentiment indicates a perception that many people game, but few actually admit to being gamers, which implies that the activity is associated with a negative identity. It also suggests that being a middle-aged woman who enjoys video games was previously not “O.K.” and that one would have to hide her “secret obsession.” The word “obsession” suggests that playing the game is more than a hobby; that it has become one’s reason for living. The mention of family suggests that gaming is such a shameful activity that parents cannot even let their children know they game or else they will lose their respect. Another article from the New York Times regarding the game *Grand Theft Auto 3* states,

Fans of the game, who must be 17 years old to buy it, are hardly a collection of weirdos and social misfits. An awful lot are like Mr. Trudeau, a 29-year-old computer programmer, and Mr. Smith, a 30-year-old sports marketer: professionals with successful careers, wives or girlfriends and, in many cases, children,” (St. John, 2002).
This statement not only suggests that no one would believe that men with careers, wives, and children would play a video game, but it also specifically states that the individuals that come to mind who would enjoy such a game are “weirdos” and “misfits.” While rarely specifically stated, I believe that this stereotype is often the basis for judging games and gamers.

3.4 The Presentation

The comments in the study are about or inspired by a publicly-accessible online video presentation from TED.com. It is entitled “Gaming can make a better world” and is by Jane McGonigal, a game designer and researcher. In the video she explains that so many people like to play video games because they contain elements that are more rewarding and stimulating than reality. McGonigal claims that those elements that people respond to can be used to create games to benefit society. She cites SuperStruct and World Without Oil as examples of serious games that resulted in the creation of applicable ideas and solutions. Her message is not that the world would be better if everyone gamed, but more specifically that the world could be better if more games tapped into gamers’ creative problem solving abilities.

4. Literature Review

This review focuses on the main topics of game studies: violence, addiction, culture, and identity. The research methods and findings of the current study are analyzed with regards to the approaches and conclusions of scholars of
similar topics. It also assesses the effects of these findings on the public perception of video games. Previous studies using discourse analysis, the methodology of this study, are also explored.

4.1 Violence

While not much research has been done about video games in general, the topic of violence has received much attention. The findings of these studies suggest that violence may have an effect on gamers’ perceptions of themselves as well as the perception of games by society.

A multitude of studies have looked into many different variables concerning gaming. Bartlett et al. (2008) had a group of first year undergraduate males play three different versions of the fighting game *Mortal Kombat*, a Super Nintendo version released in 1993, a Nintendo-64 version released in 1997, and a PlayStation 2 version released in 2002. The graphics are significantly more realistic in each subsequent version. Using the general aggression model, they found that violent video games are related to aggression regardless of how real the game appears. This suggests that even cartoon and fantasy violence can cause players to become aggressive. Williams (2009) also found that the more violence in a game, the more aggressive the player becomes. Many studies focus only on males (Bartlett et al, 2008; Bosche, 2010; Williams, 2009; Staude-Muller, Bliesener, & Luthman, 2008) Eastin (2006) investigated women, finding that women also become primed for aggression after playing violent games, especially if they are playing a female character who is fighting a male. Hartmann and
Vorderer (2010) and Staude-Muller, Bliesener, and Luthman (2008) both studied the after effects of violent video game play by measuring participants desensitization and moral disengagement, but did not find conclusive results.

There appears to be some degree of bias in these violence studies, however, because the majority of them studied men only, when women are at least 20% of the gaming population, as found by Williams et al. (2008), who further posited that the percentage is probably higher than what they had found. This is supported by Chatfield (2010), who reports that women make up 40% of all gamers. As such, the findings of studies with all male participants can represent the tendencies of male gamers, but cannot be used to describe all gamers as many are female. Williams et al. (2008) also found that the largest percentage of gamers are in their thirties, which indicates that the studies with only college-aged or younger participants (Eastin, 2006; Bartlett et al, 2008; Staude-Muller et al., 2008; Williams, 2009; Bosche, 2010; and Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010) would only represent the tendencies of a fraction the total gamer population. Studies aiming to generalize the effects of violence for the average player must begin recruiting older participants to represent the population as a whole.

Furthermore, methodical problems also exist. Krcmar and Farrar (2009) studied the effects of third-person and first-person perspectives as well as blood effects options on aggression. Their definition of violence includes both a credible threat of force and the actual use of force to harm another being. With the definition of violence being so broad, it seems somewhat excessive that the game the participants were given to play was *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*, in which the
entire purpose of the game is to be violent, as the main character is a hit man. A game in which the player can choose whether or not to be violent would also provide insightful findings as the perspective and blood options might affect a player’s decision to engage in violence, while in *Hitman* all players were forced to be violent due to the structure of the game. Lachlan and Maloney (2008) also addressed a similar issue with their study of 160 participants over four different games. They found that aggression varied based on multiple factors such as individual personalities, the game’s structure, and specific encounter scenarios within the game. For example they found that aggressive reactions were different based on the threat posed by an in-game character; killing a harmless character was different than killing a threatening character that posed a justifiable threat (Lachlan & Maloney, 2008). Hartmann and Vorderer (2010) similarly found that guilt over killing others in a game was less if it was for a just cause. Ferguson (2010) further addressed the issue of validity among other aspects that he believes are “limit[ing] our interpretation of video game violence and aggression research.” In his review of past research, he points out a number of concerns, including invalid aggression measures, nonstandard use of aggression measures, third variable effects, small effect sizes, publication biases, and several other problems (Ferguson, 2010) that have resulted in misleading conclusions about video game aggression. He also describes three positive aspects of gaming (visuospatial cognition, social involvement, and use in education) that have been researched by a number of scholars, but have not received much attention.
4.2 Addiction

After violence, game addiction is another key public concern regarding games, but it has received much less attention than violence studies. King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths (2010) suggest that this is because classifying video game addiction is more difficult than for other examples such as drugs or gambling. They admit that even after much thought and research, the “components model of addiction” they adopted for their own study could potentially identify a healthy participant as an addict. Interestingly, the study found that few individuals were classified as addicted (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010), which suggests that the widespread public concern with this issue is misplaced. King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths (2010) conclude that, “Video games are not inherently addictive, they simply provide an outlet for emotionally vulnerable individuals to deal with, or perhaps escape from, their real life problems.” The study suggests that gamers may play more hours than some would prefer, but they are far from being addicted. Huh and Bowman (2008) also conducted a study concerning addiction, looking at what personality traits could be related to online video game addiction. Their most interesting find was that extroversion was significantly related to addiction, which is quite unexpected, as it has been generally assumed that introverts are the more likely to become addicted. Extroverts appear to be more likely to become addicted to online games because they crave and enjoy the connection and communication with others in
Despite the extent of public worry over video game addiction, not much is known about this issue.

### 4.3 Culture

A number of studies have investigated the perception and role of video games in modern culture. Both Williams (2003) and Miller (2006) point out the public’s tendency to panic at any new technology, from the telephone, to radio, to television, and posit that video games are simply a recent enough innovation that they are not considered commonplace yet. Miller (2006) further hypothesizes that new media create panic because people don’t know or understand how the new technology will affect the social order. In the case of video games, the public is afraid they will alter what is acceptable in terms of violence, health issues, and civic involvement. Williams (2003) studied the perceptions of video games as represented in the media over time. The initial sentiment was that games were bad influences and that players could be spending their time much more effectively. For a time media coverage of video games ended almost entirely, but increased again when they became financially successful and has since remained constant. Williams (2003) suggests that the later consistency of media coverage regarding video games stabilizes their status in general culture. Although the media coverage may indicate that video games will remain in the public eye, they still receive plenty of criticism and suspicion, as per Williams (2003), who considers them to be only “partially redeemed.” This is partially related to cultural media critics declaring that games cannot be “art” (Williams, 2003), although this
perception has been changing. On April 16, 2010 Roger Ebert, noted film critic, posted a blog entry entitled “Video Games Can Never Be Art” and received over 4,000 comments vehemently disagreeing. By July 1, 2010 he apologized for judging something without having experienced it himself and explored the meaning of “art” and whether video games could be included. Ebert also included the results of his Twitter poll about video games in which 55% of voters preferred to play a great video game than read Huckleberry Finn. This episode with Mr. Ebert suggests that perhaps video games are becoming more widely accepted.

The work of Denegri-Knott and Taylor (2005) indicate that this only partial redemption may be because many video games are played over the Internet, which is itself still being accepted into popular culture and is an even more recent technology than video games. They posit that our culture is still unsure of how to deal with content on the Internet as there are very few rules and many social conventions no longer apply in a digital space (Denegri-Knott & Taylor, 2005). The combination of video games and the Internet would thus be doubly threatening, as both entities are not clearly accepted or understood. Further adding to the confusion regarding video games, some scholars such as Golumbia (2009) postulate that many video games should not even be considered as “play” but as “work,” as they include many daily activities that outside of the game would indeed be considered work. Theories like this indicate that researchers are also confused by the role and allure of video games perhaps, as much as the public.
Murray (2006), however, suggests that games have always had a place in our culture and that we are in fact “hardwired” to play them. The purpose of games is for “exploring the world in nonsurvival ways” (Murray 2006), and this objective is still met in video games. He argues that video games are the logical next step as we transfer our physical games to a digital format. Finally, Ang, Zaphiris, and Wilson (2010) have investigated the way games inspire “extrinsic play,” which involves players enjoying activities based on a game, but not while playing the game. These researchers looked into how game communities create modifications (called mods) or extra content for existing games. In this way players are gaining enjoyment both in and out of games. Video games provide players with opportunities of engagement both inside and outside of their game worlds.

4.4 Identity

The gamer identity is often misunderstood and stereotypes are constantly being refuted or confirmed by various studies. Williams at al. (2008) not only refuted the claim that gamers of an MMO are predominately young men, but also refuted the idea that video games are only played for escapism purposes. They found that the average gamer was in his thirties. They also found that the most common motivation for playing the game EverQuest 2 was the achievement, not immersion in the game. Bates’s (2009) research also indicates that multiple kinds of gamers exist beyond the stereotype of the gamer that plays to escape reality. His gamer identities include “role-players,” whose goal is blend in with the games
world through both action and language, “gamers,” who focus on mastery and statistics rather than narrative, and “players,” who combine the two. Thus escapism via the game content does not play an important role for all gamers, who are often generally assumed to be role-players. Williams et al. (2008) point out that *EverQuest 2* is considered a role-playing game, but only three of its many servers are dedicated to role-playing, marking the activity as somewhat uncommon even within the community.

With regard to females, Royse, Lee, Undrahabuyan, Hopson and Consalvo’s (2007) study found that their female participants fell into three groups: power gamers, moderate gamers, and non-gamers. Power gamers play to achieve, compete, and explore, while non-gamers chose not to play at all. Only the moderate gamers played video games to escape reality, and the researchers felt that the escapism had more to do with controlling one’s environment than escaping into another world. Interestingly, Royse et al.’s (2007) non-gamers were the only interviewees to suggest that gaming was a waste of time. The non-gamers also believed that players of video games were likely to be socially inept, and furthermore, they were the only group to mention game addiction (Royse et al., 2007). It is important to remember that gamer identity is still being defined and that gamers do not all share a single gaming identity.

**4.5 Discourse Analysis**

The approach data code in this study is based on discourse analysis, focusing on the lexical choices and speech acts of the posters of Internet
comments. Discourse analysis is a well-established linguistic research method, but has not been widely applied to the many electronic communication methods of today (Scheyder, 2004, Upadhyay, 2010). Due to this lack there is a considerable dearth of precedent concerning these contemporary communication methods. For example, Scheyder (2004) studied indirect speech acts in a chat room where students, instructors, and teaching assistants could communicate about a class. However, there was very little back and forth, as the majority of dialogue was addressed directly to the instructor and most communication ended once a question was answered (Scheyder, 2004). This indicates that a more natural environment is needed for indirect speech acts than a chat room, which was created for the sake of student-teacher communication. Upadhyay (2010) used a more natural environment, the comments sections of political articles online, for his study of identity and impoliteness in electronic communication between readers and obtained more significant results. He found that commenters used impoliteness to identify themselves as members of an in-group, whether conservative or liberal (Upadhyay, 2010). The data for the current study was gathered from a source similar to Upadhyay’s (2010), so it will contain natural and prolific examples of online dialogue.

Another relevant aspect of discourse analysis is the use of labels. Bolinger (1980) describes that labeling or reification, the act of naming something, indicates that an entity which was once an abstraction is now a reality. In this sense any term such as “video game addiction” is a reality in the mind of the speaker, whether or not it is a scientific reality. Bolinger (1980) also suggests that
we create new labels for new situations, especially when we perceive that those situations may be problematic. He cites the word “profit” as a word that had existed for some time, but “profiteering” was not creating until underhanded profit making became a problem in the early twentieth century (Bolinger, 1980). This could be the case for “gamer,” in that the word was created as a punitive term to describe a new problem in society, although this idea is only speculative.

4.6 Attitudes and Blame

The current study looks closely at attitudes about games and gamers as indicated by varied linguistic means, and although this particular topic has not been researched, there have been studies of cultural perceptions that raise several issues relevant to gaming. Pittam and Gallois (1997) conducted a study investigating how speakers positioned themselves regarding the spread of HIV/AIDS and the use of out-groups to place blame. The out-groups, not surprisingly, were blamed the most frequently (Pittam & Gallois, 1997). Interestingly, blame was not generally attributed to homosexual men or drug addicts, who are often associated with spreading HIV/AIDS, but to promiscuous heterosexuals. This study indicated that out-group blame could be an important element in negative attitudes about gaming. The in-group is identified as non-gamers, but this raises the questions of who they are blaming and what are the problems are that promoted the gaming: are they blaming the game companies or the gamers themselves? Who is the out-group? My intuition is that the gamers themselves are the target of this negativity, although game studios would be another sensible target for blame.
In another attitude-based study, Tomi (2001) analyzed American perceptions of Russians today and during the cold war. She found that the in-group, i.e. Americans, does everything it can to distinguish itself from the out-group (Tomi, 2001). She also describes that the in-group controls the out-group through stereotypes, as the stereotypes are the filter through which others view and judge the out-group (Tomi, 2001). The stereotypes are also fixed, which does not allow for any changes in perception even if the out-group has changed over time (Tomi, 2001). In the case of this study, the in-group is the non-gamers who created and reinforced the stereotype of the lazy, asocial, and awkward gamer, who is a member of the out-group. Although the out-group is growing ever larger (McGonigal (2011) reports that there are 183 million gamers in the United States) still the stereotype stands. This indicates that social perception outweighs group size. If 183 million Americans play video games, it should not be considered a fringe activity, but it still is. The non-gamers and their attitudes still control the perception of games and gamers. Tomi (2001) also asserts that people who previously had no opinion unquestioningly accept the stereotype as truth. This is as true for video games as it is for anything else. An example can be found in an episode of the NBC television series Life (Alvarez, Ravich & Sackheim, 2007). In the episode a police officer needs to reach level ten of a specific game to solve an element of a crime mystery. When asked by another police officer if he can beat the level he replies, “Detective, I'm 30-years old, I live with my mother and I have a Captain Kirk costume in my closet,” which reinforces the stereotype that gamers are unsuccessful, pathetic, and do not take part in socially acceptable activities.
regards to this stereotype’s inclusion in the episode’s plot, it is unlikely that the writers had an anti-video games agenda, but it is much more likely that they unquestionably accepted the gamer stereotype as they worked a gamer into the episode. This also suggests that they assumed the majority of their viewers would be members of the non-gaming in-group and would thus agree with such a depiction. Clearly, the use of the gamer stereotype is important in coding for attitudes about gaming.

5. Method

The goal of this study is to examine the lexical choices that indicate attitudes about gaming and gamers as expressed in the comments section of a TED presentation. The attitudes are determined via the lexical choices of the postings in the comments section of the website. From my own experience, I expect that gaming and gamers are negatively perceived by both gamers and non-gamers as expressed in the comments. This expectation is based on the negative gamer stereotype and the stigma of gaming often portrayed by the media. I measure the number and frequency of negative, positive, mixed and neutral attitudes as well as the “gamer” label and the scope (degree of generalization) in each comment.

5.1 Data Collection

The comments are in response to a TED presentation entitled “Gaming can make a better world,” given by Jane McGonigal, an author and game
designer. The commenters likely, although not necessarily, watched this presentation before they posted their opinions on gaming and gamers.

The comments from the “Gaming can make a better world” TED Talk were chosen for a number of reasons; the first being that TED.com published the video. This is significant in that TED is a respected non-profit organization dedicated to spreading ideas to better our world. TED professionally produces lectures, called TED Talks, by innovators in any field. Thus, the comments on the presentation “Gaming can make a better world” are not only from gamers, but also from a much more general perspective than would be available from gaming-centric websites. The source is an ideal one for determining the negative or positive attitudes associated with gaming and gamers because it contains opinions concerning video games both from gamer and non-gamer points of view. The aim of the study is to investigate attitudes towards gaming and gamers which should include both gamer and non-gamer opinions in order to be considered representative. Furthermore, large samples of spontaneously produced, publicly available opinions concerning the identity of gamers, such as the comments on the “Gaming can make a better world” presentation, are uncommon. Game-centric web sites, such as Joystiq or Gamestop, are more focused on game news and reviews than gamer identity and are not likely to include any non-gamer opinions even if they did. This TED Talk produced a rare discussion of gamer identity; one that is public, spontaneous, and incorporates non-gamers. These comments are ideal because they were produced spontaneously. The commenters were not pressured to share their thoughts as in an interview or questionnaire, but shared
them freely, which provides a more accurate and uncensored discussion for coding.

The method for the study is discourse analysis, a method of study which investigates how the performance of an utterance is said relates to what is meant by the speaker. Discourse analysts consider linguistic factors such as politeness, turn-taking, intonation, gestures, speech acts, lexical choice and others to significantly affect an utterance’s meaning. Words carry meaning, but meaning is also conveyed via some of these other linguistic factors. Discourse analysis is appropriate for this study as the personal information of the commenters is not publicly available; thus the only data available for analysis is what the commenters said and how they said it. Discourse analysis can analyze the interaction between individuals, making it ideal for a study where personal information of the participants is at a minimum. This study focuses on features such as lexical choice, tone or attitude, and labels as other factors such as gestures, intonation or turn-taking are not available in a written text.

5.2 Data Coding

The data collection procedure first involves accessing the comments on the “Gaming can make a better world” presentation at TED.com. The corpus consists of the first one hundred comments from the date of the initial posting of the presentation to one month after, then the first one hundred starting after two months, and the first one hundred after six months. The comments were printed for coding by hand and then were recoded digitally using NVivo9 coding
software. In both coded versions the comments were kept in their original order to maintain any dialogues between commenters.

As TED is an internationally known program, it is not uncommon to find non-native speakers of English commenting on the presentations. In the current study comments of non-native speakers were omitted, as they might not be representative of the attitudes towards games and gamers in the United States. Furthermore, I do not want to risk misinterpreting non-native grammar or vocabulary choices as well as misunderstanding any cultural differences. The commenters’ countries of origin are not publicly available, so omission was based on each commenter’s username, non-native grammar and vocabulary, use of a TED translator, and any self-identification of being a non-native English speaker.

The coding procedure identified the attitudes reflected in each comment based on lexical choice and tone. Lexical choice includes any vocabulary used when describing games, gamers, or the cause and effects of gaming. Metaphors or comparisons describing gaming or gamers are also analyzed. Comments are coded as positive, negative, mixed, or neutral. Only text concerning games, gamers, or the cause and effects of gaming is coded for attitude. Any comments or opinions about the presenter or presentation are not included. Since the purpose of this is study is to investigate how people feel about games in the present, the idea in the presentation that gaming in the future could have many benefits for society is not a focus. I am not concerned with the hypothetical future attitudes of gaming, rather the attitudes towards gaming as they are now. However, the TED presentation spurred many to share their current attitudes and experiences with
games and gamers as well as their opinions of the presentation. Thus the
comments about games are included and coded for attitude, while the opinions
about the logic of the presentation are excluded and not considered when coding.

Attitude coding is based on lexical choices and cultural desirability.
Comments associated with gaming containing vocabulary that represents concepts
such as leadership, teamwork, skill building and any other qualities considered
desirable in American culture are considered positive. Comments that contain
ideas for new games are coded as positive because they indicate that the writer
has a positive attitude toward games in that he or she advocates that more games
be created and made available. Comments containing criticism or insults of
gaming or gamers are coded as negative. Also, qualities considered culturally
undesirable, such as addiction, time wasting, laziness, and others, are coded as
negative when they are associated with gaming. Furthermore, positive comments
contain adjectives and adverbs that indicate that gaming or gamers are healthy,
normal, and fun. Negative comments contain adjectives or adverbs suggesting that
gaming is bad, unhealthy, and unnatural. Personal pronouns also indicate attitude.
Pronouns such as “I” or “we” used when discussing gamers are coded as an
indication of solidarity thus positive, while gamers referred to as “they” are
considered an indication of otherness, thus negative. Also, replies to comments
that indicate solidarity with the previous post are coded the same as the parent
post, but are marked as “indirect” as the commenter offered no explanation of his
or her own. These indirect agreements are only coded if the parent post is about
games or gamers and not solely about the presentation.
Attitudinal tone is taken into consideration only in instances of sarcasm. Lexical items suggesting that the intended meaning is the opposite of what was written note sarcasm. If positive or negative attitude is located in a sarcastic statement, it is coded for the opposite attitude.

Positive comments contain only positive lexical items and tone, while negative comments only contain negative lexical items and tone. Mixed comments contain both positive and negative lexical items. For example, a mixed comment may include a positive attitude towards gaming because it can promote teamwork, as well as a negative attitude because gaming can waste time. Neutral comments accept that gaming exists as a popular pastime, but do not indicate any particular attitude about it.

A positive comment example is the following:

not all games focus on killing - although most first person shooters (hence the genre name) do tend to focus on that. Strategy games teach people basic resource management and tactical/strategic management of different units. An old game called "Capitalism" actually taught a player how to run a corporate empire, from making factories and buying/mining/growing raw materials, to setting up an industrial machine that supplies itself and trains your own workers - or in another sense, it taught the importance of doing these things.

In this comment the poster does not indicate that there are any drawbacks to playing video games. The posting also mentions that “not all games focus on killing,” which is considered a positive attribute, as well as mentioning that the game teaches something to the player, which is a benefit to the player and thus considered positive.

A negative comment example is the following:
My take on these games is that they are "electronic narcotics", another way we have figured out to hit our dopamine reward system. This talk did nothing to change that impression.

This posting considers video games an electronic drug addiction, and as addiction is culturally undesirable, this comment is coded as negative. The final sentence is disregarded, as it refers to the presentation only, without reference to games.

A mixed comment example is the following:

I don't know whether this sounds crazy or what, but I believe there are some elements of truth. People who love playing computer games can be more daring to venture into the unknown, willing to try, not easily gives up, more persistent, more optimism but I think the problem is, games basically feed on our reward system and as someone termed it, the "electronic narcotics" [sic]; much like sex and food, releases endorphins and dopamine - at the end, they become addicted; THE QUESTION IS: when they are addicted, will they get up, willingly stop the game, and get back to the real world especially since the game world is much more rewarding than the real world?

This posting suggests that gamers are more optimistic and persevering than the average person, which are positive comments, but it also questions whether gamers are addicted to their games and unwilling to operate in reality, which I considered to be negative implications.

Self-identification concerning gaming is also coded to investigate how this affects the intensity of a commenter’s opinions. Self-identification with gaming is also coded to discover how many individuals specifically identify or specifically do not identify as a gamer. Any phrase such as “I am a gamer” or “as a gamer” would be considered self-identification. Negative statements of self-identification, for example “I am an ex-gamer,” are also coded. Self-identification also includes a less conspicuous acceptance of gaming labeled “implied gamer.” An implied
gamer is a person who explains that he or she plays games, but does not refer to himself or herself as a gamer. Examples of this would be “as someone who plays a lot of games” or “I play Halo and World of Warcraft.” Self-identification may not be present in every comment.

The use of the term “gamer” beyond self-identification is also investigated. This is tracked by counting each non-self-identifying use of “gamer” or “gamers” in the positive, negative, and mixed comments to determine if it was used more or less depending on a commenter’s attitude.

The scope of the postings was also coded as either personal or general. The level of specific experience with games or gamers is coded to investigate how personal or general attitudes tend to be. Comments are coded to be either personal or general. A personal comment is about the poster’s specific experience with gaming or gamers and is based on personal experiences. Personal comments include pronouns such as “I, me, my, our, we,” and “us” in descriptions of a specific experience. They also include statements such as “in my opinion” or “in my experience.” Personal comments are specific and do not include hypothetical statements. General comments reference gamers as a group and do not include personal experiences. They use words such as “they, them,” or “people,” but also use “we” when not referring to a specific group. General comments include hypothetical statements.

An example of a personal comment is the following:

A game I'll recommend is EVE Online... It taught me so much about people management, team leading, economics, the value of cooperation, etc etc.
The commenter is referring to his or her own experience playing a video game and what was learned from it.

An example of a general comment is the following:

People play games for recreation, by definition, not to escape real life - it is real life while they are playing. They don’t ‘spend time in virtual worlds’ - they are in homes or schools. Games are not instead of real life but part of it.

The posting refers to “people who play games” and “they,” which do not indicate that the commenter is referencing a specific example of a gamer. The “people who play games” are a generalized group.

5.3 Data Analysis

After coding the data, the various nodes were totaled and percentages were calculated for attitudes, scope, and self-identification. Comments that reference the presentation only or posts by non-native speakers are not included in any percentages.

The motivations for each attitude were identified after all of the postings were coded for attitude. Then the specific reason or reasons for the attitude were isolated and organized into themes. The themes were created organically while coding as patterns emerged. There were two lists of themes, one for positive motivations and one for negative. The positive themes include reasons from the list of positive comments and the positive aspects of the mixed comments, and the negative themes are from the negative comments and the negative aspects of the
mixed comments. For example, this mixed comment includes positive and negative themes:

Gamers develop skills - but don’t suddenly stop using them when they stop playing, skills are carried into work or study as a matter of course. An ‘edutainment’ like Superstruct has value, but, like a game, it has narrow parameters and restricted goals. It is moderated, and doesn’t take into account people outside the game.

The phrase “Gamers develop skills - but don’t suddenly stop using them when they stop playing, skills are carried into work or study as a matter of course” is about benefits of gaming and contains two positive themes. “Gamers develop skills” is categorized as part of the “games develop skills” theme, while “[they] don’t suddenly stop using them when they stop playing, skills are carried into work or study as a matter of course” is a part of the “games do not cause virtual disconnect” theme. The second half of the example is a motivation for a negative attitude that belongs in the theme “games don’t offer real knowledge.” This approach to theme categorization was applied to every positive, negative, and mixed comment.

While coding it was noted that the gamer stereotype was often referenced by those with positive attitudes or believed to be true by those with negative attitudes. Due to this interesting pattern, any reference to the gamer stereotype was coded to determine how often it was mentioned.

In this section I have explained that the study examines the attitudes towards games and gamers in online postings. Discourse analysis is used to analyze the lexical choices of each commenter and to label each comment as positive, negative, mixed, or neutral. Discourse analysis is also used to code the
other variables such as scope, self-identification, and implied gamer. The data analysis involves calculating percentages for the information that was coded as well as organizing the motivations for positive and negative attitudes into themes.

6. Results/Discussion

After collecting and coding the data, several clear patterns emerged. The results focus on the attitudes, the gamer stereotype, positive and negative themes, self-identification, scope of the comments, and the use of the term “gamer.” Attitudes expressed in the posts concerning video games and gamers were compiled. The attitudes are coded based on the lexical choices of the commenters and were labeled positive, negative, mixed, or neutral. There are examples of the gamer stereotype, which portrays as all gamers as socially awkward and obsessive, in the data, interestingly, in both positive and negative comments. Also some themes were compiled based on the positive and negative lexical items relating to video games from the positive, negative, and mixed comments. These themes represent specific motivations for positive or negative attitudes toward video games. Self-identification, or identifying as a “gamer,” is coded to explore how often it occurred as well as instances of implied gamer, where the commenter describes that he or she plays video games without using the term gamer. The degree of generalization of each post is coded to discover how personal or general the commenters were in their descriptions of games and gamers. Finally the use of the “gamer” label is coded for how prevalent its use was across the three major types of attitudes: positive, negative, and mixed.
6.1 Attitude

Attitudes about games and gamers are the main focus and inspiration for the study because there has been no previous research investigating this topic. The results are somewhat surprising. Of the 300 posts in the sample, 63% (N=191) were relevant to the study, as they referenced video games and were written by English native speakers. The most common attitude is positive at 42% (N=80). Mixed attitudes represent 29% (N=55) of the posts, and negative attitudes represent 28% (N=54). Neutral attitudes were rare, but were present nonetheless, and comprised a minimal .01% (N=2) of the postings. The four different attitudes were distributed evenly in each of the three samples, which suggests that while only three hundred posts were coded, the samples are representative of the whole corpus. For example positive attitudes consisted of 44% (N=28) of the first sample, 41% (N=26) of the second sample and 41% (N=26) of the third sample. Similar patterns emerged for the other three attitudes.

I expected the attitudes towards games and gamers to be overwhelmingly negative, and this is clearly not the case. Positive attitudes were the most prevalent. However, no particular attitude dominated the postings as there were nearly the same numbers of negative and mixed postings; and positive postings did not outnumber the others by much. Roughly 60% of all the postings suggested that there are negative qualities to gaming, while about 70% of postings include positive aspects of gaming. This shows that while positive attitudes are growing, there are still many individuals who question games as an acceptable leisure activity. This indicates that attitudes about games are not as negative as I had
expected and may also suggest that attitudes are changing. This could mean that
games are losing their negative stigma as more and more individuals play video
games in their leisure time. It could also suggest that more non-gamers, who
would normally avoid games, are being exposed to video games through non-
traditional means, such as smartphone games or systems like the Wii or Kinect,
and are changing their opinions. Other factors such as the success and growing
popularity of game conventions such as BlizzCon, PAX, and E3, or video game
charities such as Child’s Play, which donates game consoles, games, and other
game peripherals to hospitals to benefit sick children, could also be changing
attitudes about games. This study did not investigate reasons for changing
attitudes, but it did find that the number of game advocates is growing, while the
number of game opponents is shrinking.

6.2 Gamer Stereotype

Even with the growing positive attitudes regarding video games, the
gaming stereotype still exists. There were references of the stereotype in positive,
negative, and mixed comments. In positive and mixed comments these references
were often in quotation marks to indicate that the poster was aware of the
stereotype, although others were simply a statement of disagreeing with the
negative portrayal of gamers. For example, “20 years from now no one [sic] will
think twice about the ‘evil horror of gaming’” or “Thank you for recognizing that
games are not just sucking away the minds of our youth.” Both of these comments
show that the posters are aware of the stereotype and disagree with it. While
positive or mixed postings were aware that the gamer stereotype is a gross
overgeneralization, negative comments tended to use the stereotype as a truthful
depiction of gamers. In this example, “gamers often look tired and have a hard
time relating to other people,” the commenter is accepting the aspect of the
stereotype in that gamers obsessively play late into the night and that they are
antisocial. This other example references the lazy, unhealthy, and living with ones
parents (or other “meal ticket”) aspects of the gamer stereotype:

gamers sit around, eating crap (or nothing at all), with no consequences for
their virtual actions (so you just blew away another guy; "doesn't that feel
GREAT to take another's life" read with A LOT of sarcasm), ignoring
ACTUAL people (most often the ACTUAL people who pay for the
electricity, broadband, etc. that gamers use and don't pay for).

The fact that neither of these example comments mentioned whether the posters
had played games or knew someone who played games suggests that they are
generalizing gamers based on the stereotype. Because they seem to maintain a
very negative perception of gamers based on the stereotype alone, it suggests that
the stereotype itself still has the power to influence opinions about gaming even
with positive attitudes about games generally on the rise. Besides simply
referencing the stereotype, commenters directly addressed it on several occasions.
This quotation was in response to a post stating that gamers are addicts who enjoy
the violence in games, “I will forgive you for your ignorance and acceptance of
the sterotypes [sic] the media as [sic] placed on games, but this is still a viewpoint
of ignorance.” This direct address further validates that the gamer stereotype
exists and that gamers are aware of it. This study has found that the comments
indicate that attitudes about gaming are becoming more positive, but it is also
clear that the gamer stereotype is recognized by gamers and applied by non-gamers.

6.3 Self-Identification

Self-Identification was another aspect of the study. The comments were coded for any instances of individuals labeling themselves as a gamer to investigate how readily people accepted the term. It was found that very few people were willing to admit that they play or have played video games. Only .07% (14) of the commenters accepted the gamer identity; six from the positive comments, three from the mixed comments, and five from the negative comments. There does not appear to be a significant pattern to indicate that one’s attitude towards gaming affects whether one accepts the gamer identity.

The disinclination of self-identification is more likely related to the gamer stereotype. Accepting “gamer” as an identity is risky because it associates one with the negative image enforced by the stereotype. Clearly few people are willing to accept an identity that is judged and ridiculed. Despite the fact that very few accepted the gamer identity, many comments described specific games with enough accuracy to imply that the poster had played the games, and was thus a gamer. It was also noted that in many other comments, the poster admits to playing games, but does not claim “gamer” as an identity.

The latter comments were prevalent enough that they were coded as “implied gamer.” Implied gamer comments are comments where the poster states that he or she currently plays or has played video games. It was decided that
comments that only describe games required too many assumptions as to whether the poster really had played the game or was only familiar with it in a more external way. Implied gamers comprised 1% (N=27) of the data, suggesting that the commenters were much more comfortable describing themselves as “people who play games” instead of “gamer.” This seems to support the theory that the gamer identity is generally avoided due to its negative persona. However, it could also indicate that the commenters interpret the term “gamer” differently. For the purpose of this study, “gamer” refers to anyone who derives enjoyment from any kind of electronic game, but as previously mentioned, there is no one definition of the term. Some suggest that only those who spend twenty or more hours per week engaged in gameplay are gamers, while others claim that even ten minutes of smartphone games makes one a gamer. Depending on the commenter’s interpretation of the term, he or she may be included or excluded from the identity based on his or her own gaming preferences or tendencies. For example, a commenter’s concept of “gamer” is a person who spends twenty or more hours gaming per week, while the commenter himself only games ten hours per week. In this case he would not consider himself a gamer. Another commenter may think that a gamer is someone who plays only first person shooter games, and as she plays first person shooters she considers herself a gamer.

It is unclear why the commenters did not describe themselves using the term “gamer” because they often explained that they did indeed play video games. It could be that they wished to avoid the stigma of the gamer stereotype or that they simply did not fit into their own definition of a gamer.
6.4 Use of “Gamer”

This study explored both the gamer stereotype and the prevalence of the gamer identity, and it also investigated how often the term “gamer” was used in each attitude (positive, negative, mixed, and neutral) to refer to people who play video games. This was done by counting the number of times “gamer” was used in each of the four attitudes, excluding when “gamer” was used as self-identification. The results for the neutral category is zero, for the positive, 11% (N=10), for the mixed, 35% (N=31), and for the negative, 54% (N=48). This suggests that the more negative one’s opinion of games, the more likely one is to use the term gamer. Even those with positive opinions of games and gamers avoid it.

Belief in the stereotype is the probable cause of the differences in “gamer” use. It corresponds to Tomi’s (2001) theory that the in-group, non-gamers, can influence the out-group, gamers, with stereotypes. Those with positive attitudes, who are more likely to be gamers, are aware that the stereotype is unjustly false and thus avoid the term so they can prevent the judgment and negativity inherent in the label. Those with negative attitudes, who are more likely to be non-gamers, assume that the label is the truth and are not even aware that it is a stereotype. This is concurrent with Bolinger’s (1980) theory of labels.

This can also be seen in the way that games and gamers are discussed in each attitude category. The positive comments had a definite focus on the benefits of games, and were not particularly forthcoming in terms of the qualities of gamers. In fact, gamers were only mentioned ten times out of a total eighty posts.
This is because positive comments tended to discuss games and gamers as separate variables, for example, “Games and music are never bad. Neither are drugs. It's the people and how they use them.” Games provide the content and the opportunities for player improvement and the players either take advantage or don’t. Negative comments described gamers more as victims of games and thus the two terms are used hand in hand. Games cause players to become addicted, to need frequent rewards, and to be distracted from all other activities. Gamers did not choose to do these things, games made them. Most negative posts assumed that players have almost no agency when it comes to the perceived effects of video games. Mixed comments were a combination of both perspectives.

The term “gamer” appears to be avoided by those with positive opinions of video games and used most frequently by those with negative opinions of video games. I suggest that the gamer stereotype is really the heart of the issue, as non-gamers don’t realize that by referring to “gamers” as a group they are appealing to the negative stereotype, and gamers want to distance themselves from the term.

6.5 Scope

I also coded how often attitudes about games were based on personal experiences and how often they were based on generalizations. Personal comments specifically refer to a commenter’s personal experience with gaming and gamers and general comments broadly refer to games and gamers. It was found that 82% (N=153) were general and 18% (N=34) were personal. The general comments were evenly distributed across the three main attitudes as
positive was 38% (N=59) of the total general comments, mixed 30% (N=45), and negative 32% (N=49). This signifies that generalizing the gaming experience is common regardless of attitude. Personal comments were not so equally divided: 55% (N=18) were from positive comments, 30% (N=10) from mixed, and 15% (N=5) from negative. These results suggest that a person who has personal experience with games is more likely to have a positive opinion of them, and correspondingly, that someone who is unfamiliar with games is more likely to have a negative opinion. This could be due to the gamer stereotype coloring non-gamers’ opinions of games before they have a chance to try one.

6.6 Themes

One of my research questions was to investigate the motivations behind positive and negative attitudes towards games and gamers. These motivations, which I refer to as themes, were compiled into groups after the initial coding of attitudes. They are called themes because many similar ideas were expressed in various ways suggesting that the categories were more like general themes than specific motivations for having positive or negative attitudes about games. The themes indicate what rationales are given when explaining a like or dislike of games and gamers and the themes also show what rationales are the most common. Themes are further subdivided into three levels based on the number of times a theme is mentioned. Each token was only counted once and the length of each token was not taken into account. The three levels I have identified are a) major themes, mentioned fifteen or more times, b) minor themes, mentioned
between eight and fourteen times, and c) lesser themes, mentioned between three and seven times. There are a total of twelve negative themes and seventeen positive themes. These are listed below:

Negative Major Themes: games are addicting, games create a virtual disconnection, games are a distraction, and games promote escapism.

Negative Minor Themes: games involve an unhealthy time investment, games create an unhealthy focus on rewards, gamers are unpleasant people, and games do not develop skills.

Negative Lesser Themes: games focus too much on violence, games don’t offer real knowledge, games have no positive applications in the world, and games are unpleasant to play.

Positive Major Themes: games inspire dedication, games involve collaboration, games are mentally stimulating, games develop skills, games can teach, and games do not cause virtual disconnect.

Positive Minor Themes: games foster communities, games increase creativity, games aid in coping with failure, games are generally good, games inspire optimism and idealism, and games are fun.

Positive Lesser Themes: games give players status, games do not negatively influence people, violence in games is not an issue, gamers are good people, and games can positively affect the world.

6.6.1 Negative Themes

The negative themes were compiled from the negative and mixed comments. All mixed comments include at least one positive and one negative aspect of games or gamers and the negative aspects were coded and added to the various negative themes. There were a total of twelve negative themes. Of the twelve, there were four major themes: games are addicting, games create a virtual disconnection, games are a distraction, and games promote escapism. The minor themes, of which there were four, included: games involve an unhealthy time
investment, games create an unhealthy focus on rewards, gamers are unpleasant people, and games do not develop skills. Finally there were four lesser themes: games focus too much on violence, games don’t offer real knowledge, games have no positive applications in the world, and games are unpleasant to play.

6.6.1.1 Major Themes

The most frequently referenced theme is “gaming is addicting,” which was mentioned twenty seven different times. The use of the term “addiction” is somewhat misleading, as the commenters are not referring to a chemical addiction to games with cravings and withdrawals, but are referring to individuals that choose to play video games over other activities and then end up playing the games too much. The idea of addiction is often referenced, but no commenter suggested that the “addiction” was anything more than individuals playing many, many hours of games, which is more of a lifestyle choice than a true addiction. In fact, one commenter first refers to addiction in his post, and then refers to the same idea as “absorption,” further suggesting that chemical addiction is not the true issue. What is important here is that the posters perceive the choice to spend many hours playing video games as so misguided that they consider the player an “addict” and thus unable to think clearly about his or her choices. In brief, they do not consider that the player is able to stop playing video games. Many consider the games themselves to be addictive, although others hold more specific aspects of games to blame, such as reward systems or achievements. Others more directly refer to games as “electronic narcotics,” compare them to other drugs, or even
claim that games and drugs can be described using the same words. However, none of the comments seem to be suggesting that gamers are unable to stop playing, but that they don’t want to. As one commenter said, “It’s just a puzzle programmed by another human being to challenge you and to get you to keep playing (and paying the subscription fee or whatever).” This quotation indicates that games are designed to be absorbing and that people do not want to stop playing them; moreover, it does not propose that games turn players into chemical addicts. Thus the term “addiction,” although ultimately misleading, suggests that gaming is indulged in too much, and it also insinuates that gaming is unhealthy and worthy of concern.

Another major theme was “games create a virtual disconnection.” The concept of virtual disconnection is somewhat multifaceted and was a serious concern in many postings. It includes being totally absorbed in a virtual existence, e.g. “others get lost in a world that is not congruent with reality,” “a feeling of detachment from Reality,” and “there is a real problem as long as there is a real world, real people, real work and a real body to tend to,” which demonstrate the concern that engaging in a virtual experience could result in near total disassociation with reality. Interestingly, the word “reality” was often written with a capital letter, indicating its importance in the eyes of the posters. Virtual disconnection also includes actively avoiding functioning in reality and preferring virtual reality. Players might not be totally absorbed, but they will choose a virtual reality when given the chance. Statements such as, “sure, you have game guilds, why not be drawn into part of a real guild, perhaps through a shared interest in
sport, cooking, music, dance, acting,” and “Regardless of the online simulations and scenarios we could solve, there will always need to be the people who can execute in the real world,” imply that gamers choose to avoid the real world whenever they can. These two aspects of virtual disconnect hint that these posters disapprove of experiences outside of reality because they are not “real.” The concept of virtual disconnect also includes the inability to apply skills or knowledge acquired in games to the real world, i.e. “is the difference between real world accomplishment and virtual accomplishment” and “I don't understand … the skills which they developed with gaming to apply on real world problems since there is vast [sic] difference between the virtual world of gaming and the real world” both suggest that these commenters fear that any time spent on a game will ultimately be useless because nothing learned in a game can be applied in reality. Virtual disconnection was a significant criticism of video games, which suggests that many commenters are suspicious and uncomfortable with the idea that people choose to spend large amounts of time in a virtual reality.

“Games are a distraction” was another major theme. These comments are concerned that gamers could be putting their effort into more practical activities. This is not a particularly complex idea, but it was clearly very important to many commenters as it is a major theme. The posters argue that time spent gaming would be better spent in creative endeavors, learning languages or economics, or helping to rebuild New Orleans and Haiti. They are concerned that gaming “ultimately has no point” and that constructive activities are being forgotten.
i always thought that it is kind of a crime....so many people spending so much time solving "useless" problems or learning "useless" abilities with so much enthusiasm. all that wasted human power!

“Wasted” was a common verb in this theme as many commenters were concerned at the “colossal waste of time” and “energy that appears to be being wasted” regarding games. This is another reference to the potential of productivity that was inevitably lost to games. The focus of this theme is that games are perceived as a distraction from more useful and productive activities.

The final major theme was “games promote escapism,” which focused on the idea that gamers escape to games to avoid coping with reality. This idea is similar to virtual disconnection, as both are based in functioning in virtual reality. In virtual disconnect a gamer does many things that he or she would do in real life, but prefers to do them in a game’s context or becomes unknowingly absorbed into a game world. Escapism is different because a gamer who indulges in escapism consciously wants to forget the real world and does not try to engage in normal activities in a game world. These statements highlight this idea, “Wouldn't you think that all those hours spent in utopia could keep you from noticing real problems in your life and the lives, countries, climates around you.” Escapism is about the player forgetting about any problems in society or in his or her own life. Commenters point out that “gaming is often the product of procrastination” as individuals attempt to forget about their work and obligations. Escaping into games is considered detrimental by the commenters, implying that players avoid coping with their problems because they can just escape into games.
6.6.1.2 Minor Themes

The first minor theme is “games involve an unhealthy time investment,” which suggests that commenters believe too much time is being spent on video games. This is different from “games are a distraction” because that theme focuses on the potential of time spent gaming and “games require an unhealthy time investment” focuses on the amount of time spent. The comments for this theme indicate that far, far too many hours are being spent on games and this is not good. The comments claiming “all those hours spent in gaming,” “massive amounts of time invested,” and “kids are spending as many hours playing World of Warcraft as attending school” did not offer specific reasons why these gaming hours are harmful, but expressed distress at this trend. Other posters specifically stated that no more hours be spent on games than is currently being spent, “I do not think that that we should promote increasing the hours of game play.” The commenters were concerned by the number of hours put into gaming and held negative attitudes about games because of this.

The “Games create an unhealthy focus on rewards” theme indicates concern that the constant feedback and rewards in video games are unhealthy and create the unreal expectation that reality does the same. The comments “Instant feedback and instant gratification results from tackling virtual world problems” and “Role Playing Games, in particular, are designed to provide so much positive feedback,” both support the concept that games are loaded with rewards. These multiple and frequent rewards are troubling to the commenters because they fear that gamers will not be able to function in reality where rewards are much more
rare. “My concern as previous [sic] poster cited is games are design [sic] to be rewarding where as [sic] life is not,” illustrates that gamers will lack motivation in life unless there is some sort of recognition is available. This is troubling to the commenters because the idea that all gamers will be unable to function without constant rewards predicts an ominous future where gamers are unable to accomplish anything.

Another interesting minor theme is “gamers are unpleasant people,” which describes the kind of childish or defeatist behavior gamers can exhibit. This theme is related to the presentation in which gamers are presented as being generally motivated and optimistic people. Clearly these commenters disagree and they share their own perceptions of gamers’ behavior: “honestly there are no abstract qualities in gamers,” “the online gaming community has the most notional, belligerent, impulsive, and selfish people I've ever seen,” and “Gamers do not always believe that an epic win is possible.” Another common idea within this theme was that gamers are selfish. This came up several times: “To be honest when I'm involved in a game, …, ultimately I'm in it for me, I'm looking out for number one, the big dog, the mac daddy,” “they are looking for a win, a profit or a personal score,” and “gamers tend to ignore teammates and team goals with the express goal of getting ahead.” What is especially interesting about “gamers are unpleasant people” is that it is never made clear if the sentiment is that games are bad because bad people play them or if games are bad because they affect people negatively. In any case, the alleged behavior of gamers was enough to create negative attitudes in a number of commenters.
The last minor theme is the assertion that “games don’t develop skills.” The focus of this theme is that games don’t develop skills at all or if games do, the skills are not useful. This commenter is of the camp that games do not develop useful skills, “Learn to read. Obviously not a skill you pick up by gaming,” and this commenter does not believe games develop anything, “WoW [World of Warcraft]? please, its a preset world with a preset path, with simple to solve tactics.” Another idea brought up in the presentation was that most gamers have played 10,000 hours of video games and this is why they are so good at them. This was not accepted by many of the posters, “Playing 10,000 hours of farmville makes you... well good at playing farmville. for the 10,000 hours you aren't always improving at anything. After about 20 hours [sic] you've gone as far as you have gone.” This theme is based on the idea that there is no benefit to be gained from playing games so players should not put so much time into something useless.

6.6.1.3 Lesser Themes

Surprisingly, “games focus too much on violence” is a lesser theme, which I had expected would be a much more significant issue to those with negative attitudes towards games. It seems that games affecting real world behaviors such as time investment, escapism, and expectation of rewards are more troubling than a game’s actual content. There were a few commenters who were worried about the content and significance of violent games. The comment “not ALL games send a message of 'you can do it' as much as they do 'you can kill it,'”
demonstrates a concern about the portrayal of violence that violent games give to players. Violent content in video games was distressing to several posters, but overall it was a minor concern.

The theme “games don’t offer real knowledge” is less related to skill development and more related to education. The commenters believe that games are too simplified to impart meaningful knowledge about a subject. The sentiment “Sometimes these systems can be complicated, but they are still, with out [sic] a doubt, simpler than real life,” was a common one. It was suggested that the “narrow parameters and restricted goals” of games meant that any information gained from them would be so insubstantial as to not be worth the effort.

Another lesser theme, “games have no positive applications in the world,” focused on the inability of games to benefit society or the world. As games have not cured cancer, solved world hunger, or resolved other unspecific world problems, the commenters seem to have agreed that games are not useful in any capacity. The conclusion here was that only real world action can have any benefits and that gamers should “put the damn controller down, and get out where real help is needed.” Games are considered by the commenters not to benefit anyone, not even the player as seen in “games don’t develop skills” and “games don’t offer real knowledge.” Thus it seems reasonable to the commenters that they would have such a negative opinion of games.

The final lesser theme, “games are unpleasant to play,” is a strange one, as it gives multiple reasons why games are frustrating and disagreeable to play, when several other themes focus on video games’ qualities of drawing players in
for hours and hours. The commenters for this theme did not describe games as something they lost themselves in, but as situations where they were bored and disappointed. The following are two examples explaining how games can be extremely frustrating:

When you are in a "raid" with 25 people, and everyone has to do the exact right thing at exactly the right time, you will fail quite often. And still, these 25 people stick together for very long, frustrating hours, tired and bickering.

Online games have never kept my attention for more than one night before I start searching for the fun, partially because most online games do not provide the epic story she mentioned until the character's level is maxed out after a grueling, repetitive series of mundane tasks with little significance over 80 plus levels of gameplay.

This perhaps gives some insight as to how gamers are often misunderstood, as the idea of someone spending many hours at a game he or she doesn’t enjoy is a strange one. Games are described as addicting, incapable of imparting knowledge, gateways of escapism, the cause of virtual disconnection, overly violent, and now they are described as not even enjoyable.

The negative themes covered a lot of ground in terms of uncovering what aspects of gaming may result in negative attitudes. Addiction was expected, as were “games as a distraction” and “games involve an unhealthy time investment.” It is surprising that violence did not receive very much attention, as I expected that it would be a major detractor against the perception of video games. It is also interesting that the negative qualities of both games and gamers were remarked upon, although neither was a major theme. Virtual disconnection was another
aspect that was unexpected. Commenters gave many reasons for their negative attitudes towards game and gamers.

### 6.6.2 Positive Themes

Just as there were more positive attitudes than negative in this study, there are also more positive themes. There are seventeen positive themes, in contrast to the twelve negative themes discussed above. There are six major themes: games inspire dedication, games involve collaboration, games are mentally stimulating, games develop skills, games can teach, and games do not cause virtual disconnect; six minor themes: games foster communities, games increase creativity, games aid in coping with failure, games are generally good, games inspire optimism and idealism, and games are fun; and five lesser themes: games give players status, games do not negatively influence people, violence in games is not an issue, gamers are good people, and games can positively affect the world. The themes were collected from the positive and mixed attitude postings.

#### 6.6.2.1 Major Themes

The most commonly cited positive theme was “games develop skills,” which contrasts with the minor theme claiming the opposite. The comments also indicate that the skills that players are acquiring are applicable not only in games, but also in reality. Many of the commenters were not specific in what kinds of skills were developed in games: “Gamers develop skills,” “In a game, you can improve your skills,” and “All children learn life skills through games.” While other posters were more specific: “I've learned management skills that have
benefited me in the workplace,” “Games such as World of Warcraft develop people skills,” and “you can improve decision making.” These comments assert that games do indeed build skills and that those skills can be applied to real life.

“Games can teach” is another positive theme that counters a negative theme. Many comments were extensive descriptions explaining how games can impart knowledge, such as, “Strategy games teach people basic resource management and tactical/strategic management of different units,” or “I know a guy that really improved his English through playing RPG and FPS games.” It was also noted by several commenters that they realize games are simplified versions of complex problems, but they still believe that knowledge can be gained from them. One commenter stated, “I’ve learned (though in a superficial way) the benefits of eolic and sun energy, as well as it [SimCity 3000] expanded my vision of how complex and huge a city can be.” These postings indicate that people believe that learning from games is both possible and meaningful. Commenters also valued the ability of games to impart knowledge as entertainment: “If games can make learning more fun, then thank you games!” and “We should embrace its ability to engage, inform and educate through voluntary and participatory play.”

Games are perceived by many to be effective in teaching various skills or content.

Another major theme was “games involve collaboration.” This theme also counters the negative representation of gamers as selfish and greedy by focusing on the teamwork required by many games. A commenter who said “What non-gamers [sic] generally don't appreciate is the amount of coordination and the social aspect that goes into advanced online games,” went even further to suggest
that non-gamers are unaware of this phenomenon. It is also pointed out that these collaborations are “produced independent of geographical distances,” and that anyone can be a part of this experience regardless of location. These comments frequently used the terms “collaborate,” “teamwork,” and “cooperation.” The comments describe that the collaboration in games is a valuable experience and thus suggest that games are worthy of a positive opinion.

“Games inspire dedication” is about the hard work and commitment that gamers put into their games. This idea contradicts the notion that gamers need constant rewards to function because, “You want to try your hardest and give your best” and “we get that drive to keep trying,” show that games motivate players to stay focused and keep trying without a focus on rewards. Games inspire players not only to persevere through the game’s content, but also do it with enthusiasm. Concepts such as perseverance and enthusiasm are culturally ideal, which is why many commenters referenced “games inspire dedication” as a positive side to gaming.

The major theme “games are mentally stimulating” addresses the idea that games generate strategic thought and develop mental capacities. This is similar to “games develop skills,” but critical thinking and strategy were mentioned enough times for “games are mentally stimulating” to deserve its own theme. The commenters explain that games expect the player to acquire and apply strategy and problem solving skills to win as in, “The focus should be on the fact that kids spend 10,000 hours, not in playing games, but in 10,000 hours making critical decisions, solving problems, reacting quickly.” It is also suggested that non-
gamers are likely unaware of how mentally stimulating games are as in, “they [non-gamers] would be amazed and shocked at the level of thinking that was required to be a successful gamer.” If a commenter is aware of the potential games have in developing critical thinking, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards games.

The final major theme, “games do not cause virtual disconnect,” was likely a response to the many accusations that games are causing virtual disconnect from the negative postings. The references in this theme explain that gamers do not become absorbed in a virtual world because virtual worlds do not exist.

People play games for recreation, by definition, not to escape real life - it is real life while they are playing. They don’t ‘spend time in virtual worlds’ - they are in homes or schools. Games are not instead of real life but part of it.

One posting makes it clear that gamers are always aware that they are playing a game and are never under the assumption that while they play they are in “another world.” The comments also refute the idea that gamers will always avoid reality when possible as in, “A gamer may have an emotional, time or even monetary investment in a game, but it can be turned off,” and “when I feel motivated to do something that matters, I _stop_ playing games.” These statements show that gamers are able to control how much they play and how much emotional investment they put into a game. The final aspect of virtual disconnection, that games are so different from reality that gaming skills could never be applied to real life, is also addressed. The comments “Gamers develop skills - but don’t
suddenly stop using them when they stop playing, skills are carried into work or study” and “It's obvious to anyone who plays [a game] that it is nothing like the real world. That doesn't mean that the skills learned there are not applicable outside the game,” both contend that game skills are able to be applied in real life. While virtual disconnection was a major theme in for both positive and negative attitudes, commenters with positive attitudes state clearly that they do not believe virtual disconnection to be a serious issue; in fact they assert that it does not exist.

6.6.2.2 Minor Themes

The first minor theme of the positive postings is “games foster communities.” These comments focused on how important socializing is in many games and that many gamers enjoy games because of their social nature. Here is an example where a commenter is explaining how games can function as places to socialize: “Maybe it would help if you thought of games not as an end of themselves, but simply as platforms for people to meet. The only difference being that in games, you have graphically visualized avatars where there's usually only text.” There was also a discussion of the depth of game communities, as they may sound superficial because the community only exists because of the game. A game may be superficial, but a game community is most definitely not according to commenters: “The world of online games may be mostly fictional, but not the people I meet and interact with within the social structure” and “I was still surprised by just how deeply connected these people seemed to be to each other. The technology wasn't isolating them, it was giving them a new way to be
intimate.” The comments indicate that game communities are meaningful regardless of having been formed in the context of a game.

The “games increase creativity” theme describes that video games encourage creative thinking. The comments suggest that games can inspire creativity for its own sake as these excerpts indicate: “I'm a gamer and engineer and have indeed found an outlet for creativity in games,” and “Here's some music inspired by WoW, just to show that there is also an artistically productive community growing around it.” The commenters also mention that the creativity fostered in games can then be transferred to situations in reality, “Working our imaginations in a fantasy world can free us to see new possibilities in the real world.” The theme suggests that another benefit of video games is that they can inspire creative thoughts.

“Games aid in coping with failure” is a positive spin on the concept that often repetitive attempts are required to achieve a specific in-game goal. The postings emphasize that failing repeatedly in games is actually positive because it teaches players how to cope with frustration. This may teach perseverance as well as demonstrating that failure is often a part of success, as these references attest: “From games, especially losing, we learn to deal with failure and we get that drive to keep trying” and “Starcraft, another Blizzard game teaches you how to learn from failure by examining replays of the matches you play and then adjusting and optimizing our play.”

The minor theme “games inspire optimism and idealism” is about gamers generally being optimistic because they always believe that they can succeed.
“Players always feel as if they can continue, and will always strive,” emphasizes this point. This idea is closely related or perhaps a product of the theme “games aid in coping with failure” because as gamers learn to accept and cope with failure, they become more optimistic.

Just as there was a negative theme, “games are unpleasant to play,” there is an opposing positive theme “games are fun.” The positive theme does not appear to be a response to negative posts about games being unpleasant because there is not clear pattern as to when the “fun” comments were posted. The comments state that games are fun and enjoyable “and that's the way it should be, fun is a good thing.”

Another theme even more generic than “games are fun” is “games are generally good,” which includes all comments recognizing unspecific positive qualities in games or gamers. Vocabulary such as “benefits” and “qualities” were common in this theme, for example, “she is talking about abstract qualities that some - MANY - gamers bring to the gaming experience,” or “playing games has benefits.” Comments also included generic support of games such as, “I like games,” “Games can be a boon,” and “I encourage my kids to game.” While most postings were more specific in their support of games, enough were generically positive that they formed their own minor theme.

6.6.2.3 Lesser Themes

It was interesting that “gamers are unpleasant people” was a minor theme, while its positive counterpart “gamers are good people” is only a lesser theme.
This theme was quite uncommon and only one example was directly in response to a negative posting:

I am a gamer, have close friends, a good relationship with my family and I hold a full time job, raise my son by myself, take classes online and still invest 20 hours a week easily into games. I even watch football, exercise, go to clubs and have a good dating life. I even managed to stop playing to reply to your message.

This example implies that the poster is trying to discredit the gamer stereotype by providing a snapshot of his or her healthy lifestyle that includes gaming, but does not revolve around it. Gamers were made out to have generally good qualities in this theme as in the previous example as well as in this one, “Gamers don't look for a simple pat on the back. Imagine how boring such a game would be.” This quotation suggests that gamers want to earn their rewards through being challenged, not simply be handed an award for doing something simple. This theme focuses on the positive qualities of gamers, although it would seem that games are considered to more positive qualities given the distribution of the themes.

Another lesser theme, “games give players status” focuses on the status, reputation, and achievements given in video games. While not directly stated, it is implied from the comments that these components of games impart a sense of pride and confidence in the player, which is likely why it was included as a positive quality of games. This also indicates that the status of being a skilled player is more important than in-game rewards.

The last three lesser themes are all responses to criticisms of games and gamers. The first is “games do not negatively influence people,” which argues
that video games are not responsible for the negative choices of individuals. The following quotes demonstrate that the comments contradict many negative claims that imply that games cause addiction, virtual disconnection, and escapism in all players, “I don’t think games are to blame for the level of ignorance people (young and old) are generally demonstrating” and “The simple fact is; once you boil down the other genetic, environmental and social factors video games have a negligible effect.”

The comments within the “Violence in games is not an issue” are countering the negative assertions that games focus too much on violence. The commenters explain that many games do not focus on killing as in this quotation, “Tetris, Sim City, The Sims, Solitaire, Civilization, are a few of the biggest games of all time, and they are all non violent.” Violent games do exist, but the comments address the fact that many games are non-violent. The comments also point out that even in violent games certain kinds of actions result in more success than others for example, “one of the first lessons a player will learn is that being a homicidal maniac is the quickest way to get killed.”

The final lesser theme is “games can positively affect the world,” which provides several examples to disprove the idea that games are unable to improve society. Games that are about health were mentioned, e.g. “games such as 'remission', that can aid in a child's recovery from cancer or disease,” or “The Wii has already shown that by making physically challenging games to a socially competitive format, then it becomes easy to lure kids (and even the elderly!) into being more active.” Child’s Play, a charity run by gamers, was brought up as an
example that positive developments can be inspired by games. Two other examples mentioned how certain games have helped scientific research: “google ‘The Corrupted Blood Plague’. Universities and medical researchers were able to watch the spread of a virtual virus through the WOW servers,” and “there's a game about protein folding in which players solve real life science problems.” Also it was mentioned that games give individuals with Asperger Syndrome or other social or medical disorders a way to interact and contribute in a group. Commenters with positive attitudes towards games came up with several ways that games have benefited society.

I expected both skill building and community development to be considered benefits of games, but I had not anticipated so many other reasons. Games are heralded for fostering many positive qualities such as critical thinking skills, content knowledge, optimism, cooperation, and dedication. Perhaps as games grow more popular, players are noticing the various ways that games improve their lives.

The goal of the study was to discover the lexical choices indicating the commenters’ attitudes towards games and gamers and the results show that there are marginally more positive attitudes towards games than negative or mixed attitudes. However the negative gamer stereotype still exists despite the positive attitudes and it is still influencing both gamers and non-gamers. Gamers avoid using the term “gamer” to avoid the stereotype, while non-gamers use the term often and are unaware that term implies that all gamers have the negative qualities
of the stereotype. It was also found that most of the comments were general in scope, but the personal comments revealed that those with gaming experience are more likely to have a positive attitude towards games. Furthermore, a number of themes were compiled based on the lexical choices to represent the motivations for the commenters’ positive and negative attitudes. Positive themes ranged from community, to fun, to education, while negative themes included topics such as addiction, virtual disconnection, and violence.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to use empirical data to discover the lexical choices regarding attitudes towards games and gamers, which previously was based only on assumptions. The study found that even while games may be portrayed negatively in the media, there are more positive attitudes than negative. There are also numerous motivations for both positive and negative attitudes identified by the lexical choices of the commenters. Other findings included that gaming is usually described in generalizations, but when a personal experience is shared, it is more likely to be positive. Finally, the gamer stereotype is still thought by some to portray gamers accurately, and the term “gamer” is used mostly by individuals with negative opinions. The commenters who were gamers seemed to avoid the term even if they took great pleasure in playing video games.

This study found that more people in the comments had positive attitudes towards games, but those commenters did not identify as gamers and did not use the term “gamer.” I believe the most significant finding of this study is that the
gamer stereotype has made identifying as a gamer into a social liability. The term is now so stigmatized that even those who take pride in their ability to play and enjoy games seem to avoid it; they would rather skirt around this issue and explain that they “have played a lot of games” than admit to being a gamer. According to the results, as soon as one accepts “gamer” as an identity one will have to endure the assumptions that he or she doesn’t care about the real world, is dependent upon game rewards, and spends hundreds of hours wasting time. It is telling that comments with positive attitudes generally avoided the term “gamer.” They know how unfair the stereotype is and they don’t want to identify themselves with it. Plenty of negative commenters listed aspects of the stereotype to explain why they were anti-gaming. Gamers should take advantage of the increase in positive attitudes by embracing their identity as a gamer. This would result in more positive representations of gamers as gaming would become associated with a healthy lifestyle.

The gamer stereotype would also be an interesting topic for future research because it is unknown why it exists or what exactly it implies. The positive and negative themes are also another topic for future endeavors. It would be interesting to find out if these themes are universal or if they are specific to this data set. Furthermore, the term “gamer” could be further investigated and perhaps defined through a survey or interviews.
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