

**TORN BETWEEN WORLDS:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF HOW GAMERS
MAKE SENSE OF FEELING STUCK BETWEEN
THEIR VIRTUAL AND REAL LIVES**

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of long-term adult gamers who feel 'stuck' between their real and virtual lives, focusing on players of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) 'World of Warcraft: Classic'. Embedded within a pragmatic worldview, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to uncover the nuanced meanings and underlying constructs of problematic gaming (PG). Six male participants were interviewed, and the analysis revealed four Group Experiential Themes: "Escape to Neverland," "Fool's Paradise," "Rise from the Ashes, Fall from Grace," and "From a Familiar Hell to an Uncertain Future." These themes reflect the deep antagonistic friction between participants' parallel existences, where the empowerment and relief found in virtual worlds sharply contrast with the disconnection and discomfort felt in real life (IRL).

The research highlights the immobilising effects of compounded opportunity costs and the cyclical reenactments of unresolved trauma within gaming contexts. It advocates for a therapeutic approach that views long-term gaming not as a weakness of character but as a meaningful response to underlying pain. Counselling psychologists and allied practitioners are encouraged to explore the specific nuances of gaming behaviours, supporting clients in integrating their online and offline identities and fostering genuine growth.

This study makes a significant contribution by offering new insights and practical suggestions for complementary interventions tailored to long-term

gamers, a demographic often overlooked in current treatment models. The researcher's own journey of recovery, combined with reflexive practices, ensured that the findings were deeply attuned to the participants' lived experiences. By illuminating the psychological mechanisms that keep gamers entrenched in virtual worlds, this research lays the groundwork for more effective clinical interventions and calls for broader research into the experiences of adult gamers, aiming to empower them to reclaim their lives and futures.

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Abbreviations

BA	Behavioural Addiction/s
BPS	British Psychological Society
CoP	Counselling Psychology
DSM-V	The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
GD	Gaming Disorder (as classified by the ICD-11)
IGD	Internet Gaming Disorder (as classified by the DSM-V)
ICD-11	International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PG	Problematic Gaming
SUD	Substance Use Disorder
UEL	University of East London

Gaming Abbreviations & Terminology

ACCOUNT	The player's registered profile to access the game
ADDON	A software extension that modifies or adds features to WOW gameplay
AFK	"Away from Keyboard"; the player is temporarily inactive.
AUTIST	Pejorative slang, used negatively in gaming to refer to someone's behaviour or decisions.
BANNED	Prohibited from accessing the game due to violations of terms of service
BEAR	A Druid transformation form used primarily for tanking
CHONKY	Slang for something bulky or heavily armoured
CLASS	The type of character chosen by the player, defining abilities and roles
CLASSES	Various character types available to players
COOLDOWNS	A mandatory wait time before a skill or item can be used again
DAMAGE	Harm dealt to enemies or players
DIRECT-MESSAGES	Private communications between players within the game
DPS	"Damage Per Second"; a role focused on dealing damage to enemies
DRUID	A versatile class capable of filling multiple roles, such as healing, tanking, or dealing damage
EXPERIENCE	Points earned from completing tasks and defeating enemies, necessary for levelling up
GREBO	Slang, often for someone unkempt; rarely used in WOW or gaming

GRINDING	Performing repetitive tasks for experience or loot
GUARDIAN DRUID	A WOW character role focused on absorbing enemy damage in bear form
GUILD	A group of players who team up to play together regularly
GUILD-MASTER	The leader of a guild
HEAL	To restore health to oneself or allies
HUNTER	A class known for ranged combat and animal companion
IRL	In real life; real life; the real world. Often used in gaming to designate 'the non-gaming world'
ITEMS	Various objects that can be equipped or used by characters
LEVELLING	The process of gaining experience points to advance a character's level
LFM	"Looking for More"; a call to gather additional players for group activities
LOG	A file recording game events and statistics for performance analysis in WOW
LOOT	Items or rewards obtained from defeating enemies or completing challenges
LOOT COUNCIL	A method of distributing loot where designated members decide who gets specific items
META	The most effective tactics available, often referring to character builds and strategies
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games
MOONKIN	A Druid transformation form focused on ranged magical attacks
MUTED	Restricted from chatting due to violations or settings
MYSTIC TIER TOKEN	A token used to obtain powerful gear

MYTHIC	The highest difficulty level in WOW (retail version), offering the toughest challenges and best rewards
NO-LIFING	Playing the game to the exclusion of other activities
PARSES	Detailed reports of gameplay performance, particularly in combat
PATCH	An update to the game that may fix bugs or add content
PULL	To initiate combat with an enemy
RAID	A large-scale mission requiring multiple players to complete
RAID-GROUP	The team assembled specifically for a raid
RAIDING	Participating in raids
RAID-LEADER	The player in charge of directing the raid group
RAISTLIN	A famous wizard from the books "The Dragonlance Chronicles" by Margaret Weis; not a WOW term
RASZAGETH HEROIC	A high-difficulty raid boss in the retail version of WOW
RESERVED	Items or roles set aside for specific players
RINSE, REPEAT	A term used to describe repetitive actions or strategies
RIVENDELL	An elven stronghold from Lord of the Rings; home to Elrond; not a WOW term
ROGUE	A class specialising in stealth and high damage
SERVER	The game server which hosts the game world
SHITTERS	Pejorative slang for players considered bad or undesirable
SLAPPED	Slang for heavily hitting, often used in defeat "I got slapped".

SPECS	Specialisations: variations within each class that define abilities
TALKING SHIT	Slang for insulting or boastful dialogue between players
TANK	A role that involves absorbing damage and protecting others
TOPPING THE METERS	Achieving the highest performance score in a WOW addon that tracks gameplay statistics
TOXIC	Negative and harmful behaviour towards others
TRINKETS	Small items that provide various bonuses
WARGLAIVES OF AZZINOTH	Famous legendary weapons associated with the character Illidan Stormrage
WORLD OF LOGS	A website/tool used to analyse detailed logs from gaming sessions
WOW	"World of Warcraft"; a prominent MMORPG existing today
WOW: CLASSIC	A replication of the original version of WOW from 2004

Chapter One

Introduction

In the flickering glow of a computer screen, where virtual landscapes stretch infinitely, a hidden world thrives—a world where adults can disappear for hours, days, even years. For many, these digital realms offer more than just a pastime; they provide a refuge, a place to escape the weight of reality. This world is deeply familiar to the researcher, once entrenched in its seductive loop of immersive gameplay, social connection, and the relentless pursuit of virtual accomplishments. The journey out of that world, marked by relapse and recovery, mirrors the struggles faced by countless others who find themselves stuck, unable to extricate themselves from the digital vortex that has become both sanctuary and prison.

A rare vantage point informs this research, shaped by dual perspectives—both as an insider with lived experience of gaming dependency and as an outsider undertaking clinical training. There is an acute awareness of the allure of virtual worlds, the comfort they provide, and the pain they can numb. However, the insidious nature of this comfort must also be acknowledged, as it quietly erodes real-world connections, aspirations, and identities. The literature review in Chapter Two highlights that most research on gaming focuses on adolescents, reinforcing the perception that problematic gaming is a phase that may be outgrown. Yet, a critical question remains: what happens when the gamer does not outgrow this phase? When the digital world becomes a long-term residence

rather than a temporary escape? Long-term adult gamers remain woefully under-examined, further compounded by their reluctance to seek help. In a society that often stigmatises both addiction and gaming, the barriers to help-seeking are formidable. Many individuals may not even recognise their need for intervention, having woven their virtual lives so tightly into their identity that disentangling the two seems impossible. Clinicians, in turn, may lack the training or insight to explore gaming dependency with the same curiosity and compassion applied to other behavioural concerns. Consequently, the long-term adult gamer, trapped in a virtual existence that hinders real-world engagement, remains largely unseen and unsupported by both clinicians and researchers. This disconnect between lived experience and clinical understanding represents a significant gap in both practice and research—one that this thesis seeks to address.

In an increasingly digital world, where the lines between online and offline continue to blur, this issue is not just pertinent; it is urgent. The global gaming industry is projected to reach 3.02 billion gamers worldwide by 2029 (Statista, 2024). Advances in artificial intelligence are revolutionising the industry, creating dynamic, personalised, and immersive experiences with limitless potential (Porokh, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, with a 39% increase in gaming time reported during lockdowns, underscoring gaming's emergence as a dominant form of both social interaction and entertainment (Ofcom, 2022). As these virtual spaces become more central to everyday life, the number of adults deeply embedded in them is growing. Yet,

these individuals remain largely invisible to the mental health community, who often overlook the significance of gaming in their clients' lives.

Embedded within a pragmatic worldview, this research utilises Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the complex interplay between the real and virtual lives of six long-term adult gamers. As outlined in Chapter Three, this methodological approach aligns with the researcher's philosophy, prioritising the practical implications of knowledge while embracing a reflexive focus guided by Pillow's (2003) framework. This approach manages the tension between personal experiences and those of the participants, acknowledging the parallel processes that could influence interpretation. The findings, detailed in Chapter Four, reveal not just the depth of the participants' entanglement with virtual worlds but also the profound impact this has on their real-world functioning, relationships, and sense of self. This research illuminates the cyclical patterns of trauma reenactment, regenerating shame, and immobilising dread that keep these individuals tethered to their screens, offering a nuanced understanding of gaming dependency that transcends the simplistic notion of addiction.

The potential impact of this research is significant. In Chapter Five, this study discusses and challenges existing paradigms in both clinical practice and academic research by bringing the experiences of long-term adult gamers to the forefront. It calls for a shift in how we understand and address gaming dependency, advocating for therapeutic approaches that are compassionate, nuanced, and tailored to the unique experiences of adult gamers. This thesis

offers clinicians novel tools and interventions grounded in the specific themes that have emerged from the research. These approaches recognise gaming not merely as a hobby or a habit, but as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that can both heal and harm. The study highlights the need for greater awareness among clinicians, urging them to consider the digital lives of their clients as integral to their overall well-being.

As virtual realities are becoming ever more immersive and ubiquitous, the need to understand and address the experiences of long-term gamers has never been more pressing. This thesis invites clinicians and researchers to look beyond the screen, to see the individuals behind the avatars, and to engage with their struggles, their hopes, and their realities. It is a call to action, to bridge the gap between the virtual and the real, and to offer meaningful support to those navigating the precarious balance between these two worlds.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Overview

This literature review starts with a broad examination of gaming addiction, addressing its conceptual foundations and associated controversies. The focus then narrows to investigate why certain individuals develop a dependency while others do not, examining individual susceptibilities against broader data trends. Further refinement explores the role of psychological motivations and real-world need-fulfilment in gaming behaviours, ending with the blurred and intricate relationships between gamers and their virtual avatars. The review concludes with a targeted assessment of current treatments, identifying gaps that shape the specific research questions of this study. This methodical narrowing enhances understanding of the extensive gaming literature and identifies critical areas for intervention.

2.2 Conceptualising Gaming Addiction: Components, Controversies, and the Case for Problematic Gaming

The inclusion of "Gambling Disorder" in the DSM-5 under the new chapter "Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) marked a pivotal shift in the field of addictions; for the first time, the definition expanded to include a non-substance-related behaviour.

Following this redefinition, researchers began scrutinising a range of behaviours for their potential to develop into addictive patterns. Supported by a biopsychosocial framework (Griffiths, 2008), evidence suggests that activities like working (Andreassen et al., 2012), exercising (Berczik et al., 2012), shopping (Black, 2007), hypersexuality (Carnes, 2001) and smartphone use (M. Kwon et al., 2013) may also meet criteria for addiction. Among the behaviours under scrutiny, gaming has emerged as a particularly controversial area of clinical concern. To understand how gaming is being evaluated as a potential addiction, it is important to examine the foundational model that informs the diagnosis.

2.2.1 The Components Model of Behavioural Addiction

Most models of addictive behaviour define addiction as a persistent, uncontrollable urge to consume a substance or engage in an activity, resulting in significant personal harm and interpersonal conflict (King et al., 2013). This definition, however, is broad and may oversimplify the nuanced experiences of individuals with behavioural addictions.

Building on earlier work by Brown (1993), Griffiths (2005) introduced the 'components model of addiction', which has become a foundational framework for understanding both substance-related and non-substance-related addictions. The model, depicted in Figure 1, posits that six fundamental characteristics are universally present in all addictions: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse. These

criteria, according to Griffiths, must be consistently met for 3-6 months to distinguish addiction from mere habitual behaviour.

Figure 1

A Components Model of Addiction

1	Saliency	Activity becomes the most important activity in the person's life	Dominates their thinking (preoccupations and cognitive distortions), feelings (cravings) and behaviour (deterioration of socialised behaviour)
2	Mood Modification	Subjective change in a person's mood state	Activity used to produce a reliable and consistent shift in a person's mood state as a coping strategy to 'self-medicate' and make themselves feel better in the process
3	Tolerance	Increasing amounts of the particular activity are required to achieve the former effects	E.g. In gambling, tolerance may involve the gambler gradually having to increase the size of the bet to experience a mood-modifying effect that was initially obtained by a much smaller bet
4	Withdrawal	Unpleasant effects which occur when the activity is discontinued or suddenly reduced	Such withdrawal effects may be psychological (e.g. extreme moodiness and irritability) or more physiological (e.g. nausea, sweats, headaches, insomnia and other stress-related reactions).
5	Conflict	Intrapsychic and/or interpersonal conflict around the activity	Continual choosing of short-term pleasure and relief leads to disregard of adverse consequences and long-term damage which in turn increases the apparent need for the addictive activity as a coping strategy
6	Relapse	The tendency for repeated reversions to earlier patterns of the particular activity	At worst, even the most extreme patterns typical of the height of the addiction to be quickly restored after many years of abstinence or control

Note: Adapted with permission from Griffiths (2005)

2.2.2 Internet Gaming Disorder: Definitions and Criteria

Supported by decades of research into video game addiction (Griffiths et al., 2012), "Internet Gaming Disorder" (IGD) is the second behavioural addiction introduced in the DSM-V, listed under section 3 "Emerging Measures and Models". It is characterised by persistent and recurrent online gaming—often involving other players—that causes significant impairment or distress (APA, 2013). A diagnosis of IGD requires the endorsement of five (or more) of nine

criteria (see Table 1). These criteria are compared with Griffiths' six components model (2005), to illustrate their intersection. Pontes and Griffiths (2015) subsequently developed the 'IGD-20' which is commonly deployed to diagnose the disorder.

Table 1.

Model Comparison: "Components" Model (Griffiths, 2005) vs. Internet Gaming Disorder DSM-5 Nine Criteria (APA, 2013)

Components Model (Griffiths, 2005)		Internet Gaming Disorder DSM-5 (APA, 2013)
Saliency	1	1. Preoccupation with Internet Games (The individual thinks about previous gaming activity or anticipates playing the next game; Internet gaming becomes the dominant activity in daily life).
Mood Modification	8	8. Use of Internet Games to escape or relieve a negative mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety).
Tolerance	3	3. Tolerance – the need to spend increasing amounts of time engaged in Internet games.
Withdrawal	2	2. Withdrawal Symptoms when Internet gaming is taken away. (These symptoms are typically described as irritability, anxiety, or sadness, but are no physical signs of pharmacological withdrawal).
Conflict	5, 6, 7 and 9	5. Loss of interests in previous hobbies and entertainment as a result of, and with the exception of, Internet games. 6. Continued excessive use of Internet games despite knowledge of psychosocial problems. 7. Has deceived family members, therapists, or others regarding the amount of Internet gaming. 9. Has jeopardised or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational career opportunity because of participation in Internet games.
Relapse	4	4. Unsuccessful attempts to control the participation in Internet games.

Note: Reprinted from Pontes et al. (2014).

In 2018, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) recognised "Gaming Disorder" (GD), defining it as a persistent gaming pattern that disrupts control over playtime and prioritises gaming over other daily activities and interests (World Health Organisation, 2018). GD has become a growing concern, particularly among adolescents (Chitra et al., 2023). Global prevalence rates for GD—encompassing both IGD and GD studies—are estimated at 2.96%, comparable to the prevalence of obsessive-compulsive disorder (Stevens et al., 2021, 2023).

2.2.3 Diagnostic Controversies and Identity Assumptions in Gaming Studies

The validity of diagnostic criteria for IGD remains contentious, leading to concerns about the accuracy of video game addiction assessments. For instance, the “tolerance” measure, which assesses the need for increased gaming time to achieve the same satisfaction, is often criticised for its lack of context, making it difficult to distinguish between clinical and sub-clinical cases (King et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Lemmens et al. (2015) argue that the “escape” criterion lacks specificity, while Rehbein et al. (2015), in a study of 11,000 German adolescents, found that "escaping adverse moods" and "preoccupation" were rarely indicative of IGD. Additionally, the “preoccupation” criterion, which refers to persistent thoughts about gaming, may be oversimplified; the nature of these thoughts could be more significant than their frequency (King & Delfabbro, 2014). These diagnostic ambiguities, coupled with inconsistent measurement tools, undermine the validity and reliability of research in this area.

Further complicating gaming studies is the conflation of video game players with ‘gamers’—a term often used interchangeably but with distinct meanings. A ‘video game player’ refers to anyone who engages in gaming, regardless of frequency or intensity, while a ‘gamer’ often implies a deeper identification with gaming as a central aspect of one's identity, which may or may not be related to time spent playing (Shaw, 2012). Studies that fail to differentiate between these groups risk oversimplifying the complexities of gaming behaviours and

identities (Kort-Butler, 2021). Additionally, if the definition of ‘gamer’ evolves over time, as Stone (2019) suggests, aggregate studies spanning decades may struggle with inconsistencies, further complicating research outcomes.

2.2.4 Problematic Gaming: Beyond Traditional Diagnosis

The unification of this field is further limited by widespread inconsistencies in gaming terminology. Even the DSM-V states that IGD is also commonly referred to as “Internet Use Disorder, Internet Addiction, or Gaming Addiction,” conflating an internet-based dependency widely argued to be distinct (Griffiths, 2014; Kuss et al., 2017). Adding to the chaos, a cascade of terms—including ‘pathological video gaming’ (Gentile et al., 2011), ‘video game addiction’ (Pontes, 2018), ‘problematic online gaming’ (Király et al., 2014), and ‘problem video game use’—are used concurrently to define the phenomenon.

Given these inconsistencies, the present study opts for the term “problematic gaming” (PG) as an umbrella term specifically for studies that do not measure disordered gaming (GD) directly. PG is used to describe all forms of video game engagement—whether online or offline—accompanied by the key criteria of impaired control and harmful effects (King et al., 2013). This approach allows for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of gaming-related issues without being constrained by specific contexts like internet usage or platform dependency. However, where studies explicitly measure for GD, this study retains the original terminology to maintain consistency with the specific constructs being examined.

2.3 Gaming on Trial: Unpacking Individual Differences from Aggregate Data

The health impacts of gaming have long been debated, focusing primarily on its addictive potential and associated harms (Andreassen et al., 2016; Mentzoni et al., 2011). While gaming's positive effects are acknowledged, persistent concerns continue to influence health policies, such as China's stringent one-hour daily gaming limit for youth (Xiao, 2021). However, the supposed direct link between video gaming and well-being is often argued to be confounded (Magnusson et al., 2024) and misunderstood (Rooij et al., 2018).

2.3.1 Potential Harm of Gaming

Historically, research on gaming primarily examined its link to real-world aggression (Grimes et al., 2008). More recent studies have expanded this focus to include harmful effects such as the displacement of significant real-world activities (Drummond & Sauer, 2020), exposure to toxicity and extremism in gaming environments (Kowert et al., 2022; Saleous & Gergely, 2023) and extremism (Kowert et al., 2022), and exploitation through small in-game mobile purchases or 'microtransactions' (Petrovskaya & Zendle, 2022).

When gaming escalates from a pastime to an addiction, its negative impact intensifies, particularly among adolescents. PG is linked to declining academic performance, poor sleep (Kwok et al., 2021; Zaman et al., 2022), and

heightened depression, anxiety, and psychoticism (De Pasquale et al., 2020; Ricci et al., 2023). A six-year study showed that adolescents with PG experienced worsening mental health issues compared to nonpathological peers (Coyne et al., 2020), suggesting a significant reduction in quality of life (Beranuy et al., 2020).

Additionally, brain imaging studies associate GD with decreased working memory and reduced connectivity in brain networks crucial for executive function, motivation, and cognitive control (Ngetich et al., 2023; Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2020), similar to changes seen in other addictions, raising concerns about GD's cognitive and psychological impact.

2.3.2 Potential Benefits of Gaming

A growing body of research highlights the positive effects of moderate gameplay on emotional well-being. For instance, video games can induce positive affect (Jones et al., 2014), and help individuals manage or cope with challenging life situations (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019). Eum and Doh's (2023) thematic analysis revealed that autobiographical memories tied to gameplay aided in reconstructing narratives around bereavement, assisting players in processing grief.

Gaming has also been shown to enhance cognitive function and neuroplasticity. It can improve visuospatial attention (Gambino et al., 2023), boost short-term memory (Xie & Clark, 2023), and foster creativity by enhancing executive

function and brain plasticity (Ganter-Argast et al., 2023). The educational benefits of gaming are well-documented, with studies like Abbasi et al. (2022), demonstrating the positive impact of game-based technology on early learning. Although long-term studies are still needed, initial reviews by Zayeni et al. (2020) suggest video games could serve as valuable tools in psychotherapy, either as alternatives or adjuncts to traditional methods.

2.3.3 The Complexity of Gaming Outcomes: Individual Susceptibility and the Limitations of Aggregate Data

A paradox emerges in the data, where both positive and negative effects of gaming are supported, leading to inconclusive results at the aggregate level. If gaming inherently posed a significant risk, a strong correlation between gaming duration and adverse mental health outcomes would be expected. However, evidence shows that game-time alone is an unreliable predictor of PG. While some studies suggest game-time as a risk factor (Verma et al., 2022), most research supports the absence of a consistent relationship between mental health outcomes and time spent playing games (Johannes et al., 2021; Vuorre et al., 2022).

Moreover, the portrayal of gaming in academic literature may be influenced by researcher bias, particularly in fields like psychiatry and psychology, where negative attitudes toward gaming are more prevalent. A study by Segev et al. (2016) found that the stance on gaming within research varies significantly depending on the discipline, with certain fields more likely to publish studies

highlighting negative impacts. This potential bias suggests that the conclusions drawn about gaming may not fully represent a reliable view of its effects.

These issues highlight the importance of examining the individual player's relationship with the game rather than relying solely on aggregate data. Razum and Huić (2023) demonstrated that when gamers view playing as a purposeful activity, such as learning English, they are more likely to practice balance and integration, reducing potential harms. Similarly, a meta-analysis found that gaming during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic mitigated stress, anxiety, and depression (Pallavicini et al., 2022), although it also identified risk factors for PG, such as poor familial support and supervision. These findings suggest that gaming presents both opportunities and risks, with outcomes highly dependent on the player's context and intentions.

2.4 Profiling Problematic Gamers: Risk Factors and Beyond

To understand why some players fall into dependency while others do not, it's crucial to examine the interplay between video game design, environmental influences, and individual psychological factors. This complexity mirrors the multifaceted nature of other addictions, where no single factor is solely responsible (Király, Griffiths, et al., 2015; Zhuang et al., 2023).

2.4.1 The Role of Dopamine

The "Hook Model" (Eyal, 2014) explains how addictive technologies like video games, use triggers, actions, variable rewards, and investments to create addiction. The variable rewards, based on intermittent reinforcement (Skinner, 1957), stimulate dopamine release in the brain, strengthening the action-reward association and fostering addiction (Sapolsky, 1999). Dopamine, a key neurotransmitter in reward-seeking behaviours (Blum et al., 2000), is released in anticipation of rewards like social media interactions or game achievements, leading to pleasure (Schultz, 2000). This cycle of dopamine release can evolve into technology addiction over time (Lanaj et al., 2014).

2.4.2 Structural Risk Factors

Game developers design games to exploit the brain's reward systems, increasing the risk of dependency. Structural characteristics, or "dark patterns" of design (Zagal et al., 2013), are engineered to maximize engagement. The "flow state," described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), represents deep player absorption when challenges and skills are balanced, enhancing focus and pleasure. Developers craft games to maintain this state, making disengagement difficult (Hamari et al., 2016). Enhancements like avatar customization and narrative techniques further increase engagement (Ng & Lindgren, 2013), while microtransactions exploit impulse triggers (Rita et al., 2024).

Of all gaming genres, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are the most extensively researched and consistently linked to

PG (Király et al., 2023). This focus on MMORPGs likely stems from their complex, immersive nature, which combines social interaction, role-playing, and endless progression—elements that collectively heighten the risk of dependency. However, the literature reveals significant variation in the reported prevalence of PG among MMORPG players, with figures fluctuating between 3.6% and 44.5% (Hussain et al., 2012). This wide range can be attributed to differences in study methodologies, sample populations, and the criteria used to define PG, highlighting the challenges in obtaining reliable estimates across diverse contexts.

2.4.3 Environmental Risk Factors

The parent-child relationship is critical in PG formation. Hostile family environments—marked by conflict and low cohesion—are linked to higher dependency risk (Schneider et al., 2017; Sela et al., 2020). Similarly, perfectionistic and overinvolved parenting styles are associated with GD (Coşa et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2024). Insufficient parent-child interaction can result in poor emotion regulation, leading to externalising behaviours (Gaetan et al., 2016; Modecki et al., 2017).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), highlights the emotional bond between mother and child as a predictor of later addiction (Parolin & Simonelli, 2016). An immature child is unable to recognise and alter their affective states and requires a process of interactive regulation over time (Schore & Schore, 2007), a biological synchronicity that—if the affective resonance is ‘good enough’—is

eventually proceeded by a separation, or the child's "psychological birth" (Mahler, 1975). The child is then able to develop in the direction of autonomous self-regulation, a protective factor against dependent activity (Taipale, 2016).

Outside the family, peer rejection (Feng & Zhou, 2023) and loneliness (Lee et al., 2019) are significant risk factors for PG. Gaming may become a coping mechanism for psychological isolation (Volpe et al., 2022). Isolation has long been studied as a key environmental factor contributing to addictions, where the opposite of addiction is not suggested to be sobriety—but connection (Alexander et al., 1981). Conversely, connection with pro-gaming peers and influencers can exacerbate PG, with cultural reinforcement from platforms like 'Twitch' increasing GD risk (Király et al., 2023; Yildiz Durak et al., 2023).

2.4.4 Individual Risk Factors

Not all players develop problems, suggesting the importance of individual risk factors like gender, personality traits, and comorbidities. Men are consistently shown to be 2.3 times more likely to report GD than women (Stevens et al., 2023). A meta-analysis involving 16,536 participants found GD positively associated with neuroticism and negatively with extraversion (Şalvarlı & Griffiths, 2021). However, broad systematic reviews are argued to obscure important interplay between trait dimensions (Gervasi et al., 2017), requiring further work into trait patterns of gaming dependency.

Gaming problems often coincide with various comorbidities, including social anxiety (Karaca et al., 2020) fear of missing out (Li et al., 2023), depression (Ostinelli et al., 2021), and suicidality (Erevik et al., 2022). A study of 110 young people found that 40.9% who reported non-suicidal self-injury also reported PG (Y. Yang et al., 2023). Additionally, GD is linked to negative metacognitions (Akbari et al., 2023) and maladaptive schemas of 'disconnection and rejection', and 'impaired autonomy' (Sakulsriprasert et al., 2023; Vieira et al., 2023). Individuals at high risk for gaming dependency are also prone to substance abuse (Di Carlo et al., 2023), highlighting the wide-ranging comorbid risks.

Neurodivergence is another critical factor. Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which disrupts motivation and task initiation (Volkow et al., 2011) increases vulnerability to GD (Koncz et al., 2023; Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2020). While gaming environments provide unrelenting feedback, helping those with ADHD focus, they also heighten dependency risk. Similarly, studies link autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with PG, particularly around social difficulties and impulse control deficits (Dell'Osso et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2022). Interactive video games are also being used to treat socio-behavioural issues in children with ASD (Prabavathy et al., 2023).

2.4.5 Beyond Risk Factors

Understanding the interplay between structural, environmental, and individual risk factors is crucial for developing treatment frameworks and predicting susceptibility (Rho et al., 2018). However, these factors alone cannot fully

address the complexities of disordered gaming. Clinicians must also explore the underlying motivations driving gaming behaviours and how they fulfil psychological needs or serve as coping mechanisms for deeper issues.

2.5 Playing with Purpose: Psychological Drivers Behind Gaming Behaviours.

Understanding the psychological drivers behind gaming is key to distinguishing between casual and problematic gaming (PG). Motivations such as escapism, achievement, and socialisation play a crucial role in shaping gaming behaviours and can contribute to dependency. This section explores these motivations and how they fulfil psychological needs or serve as coping mechanisms, offering insights into the development of PG.

2.5.1 Motivations to Play

Motivations have long been recognised as essential in understanding addictions (Cooper, 1994), and similarly, they are crucial in the development of GD (Király, Urbán, et al., 2015). Key motivations identified in gaming research include enjoyment (Boyle et al., 2012), fulfilment of purpose (Shi et al., 2019), escapism (Melodia et al., 2020) and immersion (Jennett et al., 2008).

Among these, escapism has been particularly linked to PG as it offers an environment for users to avoid real-life problems and emotions. Bäcklund et al. (2022) synthesised the available literature on the relationship between

motivations and GD symptoms, finding moderate effect sizes across 46 studies. Despite the varied outcomes—common in gaming research—there was consensus that ‘escapism’ is associated with GD, as gaming enables users to detach from real-life issues (Kuss et al., 2012; J.-H. Kwon et al., 2011; Yee, 2006). This link is especially strong in studies focusing on MMORPG gamers. For instance, in a study of 202 MMORPG players (mean age = 27.85 years), ‘escapism’ emerged as the strongest predictor of GD among sensation-seekers (Biolcati et al., 2021).

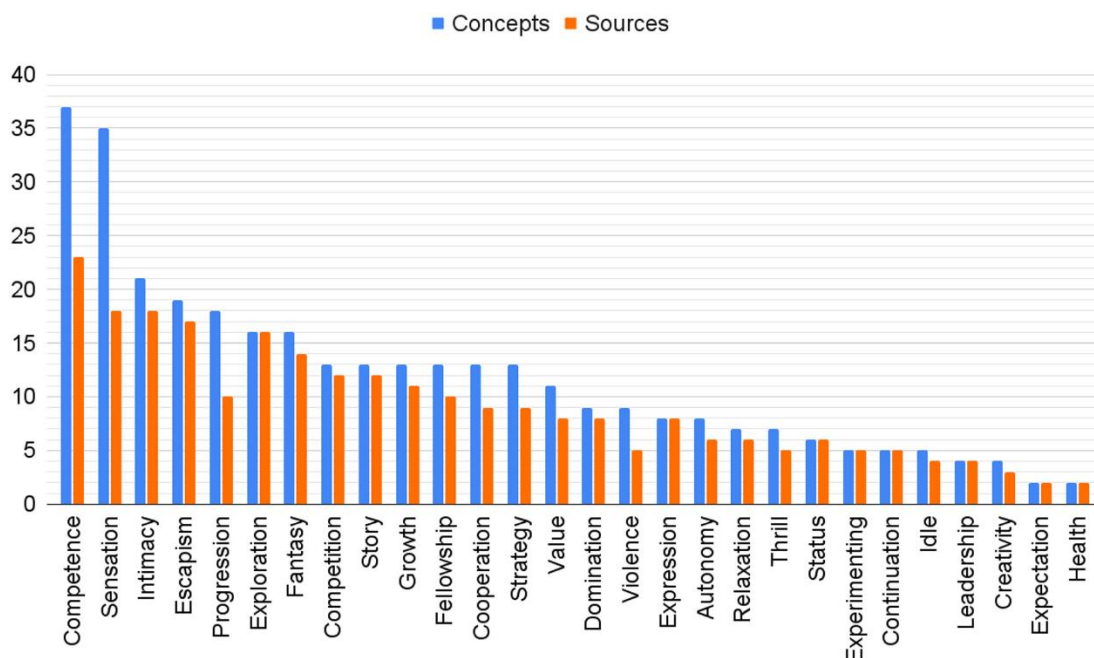
Achievement-related motives, such as challenge, competition, and progression, are also associated with GD, particularly in MMORPGs (Wang & Cheng, 2022; Zanetta Dauriat et al., 2011). Similarly, socialisation, encompassing aspects like collaboration, competition, relationships, and social influence, is another strong predictor of GD in MMORPG players (Herodotou et al., 2015). As shown in Figure 2, a recent meta-ethnographic study by McKechnie-Martin et al. (2024) synthesised 28 dimensions of play, providing a standardised language to describe the varied motivations of gamers.

While McKechnie-Martin et al.'s (2024) meta-ethnography provides valuable insights, several limitations warrant consideration. The rapidly evolving nature of the gaming industry suggests that the identified Dimensions may become outdated over time, requiring updates to remain relevant. Although the study attempts to focus on underlying motivations rather than specific game mechanics, new motivations could emerge as games and interaction methods develop further. Furthermore, the study's reliance on English-language

publications led to a predominantly Western sample, raising concerns about the cross-cultural applicability of the identified Dimensions. Future research incorporating studies from Eastern contexts would be essential to ensure broader relevance.

Figure 2

Dimensions of Play: Occurrence Chart



Note. Chart displaying the number of extracted *Concepts* aligned with each *Dimension*, next to the number of sources they were extracted from. Reprinted from McKechnie-Martin et al. (2024).

2.5.2 Fulfilling Basic Psychological Needs

Gaming may turn into dependency when it fulfils basic psychological needs (Kaya et al., 2023). According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008),

three core needs drive psychological well-being: competence (mastery in activities), autonomy (self-directed action), and relatedness (forming meaningful connections). Virtual worlds are intentionally designed to satisfy these needs, often contrasting sharply with the frustrations and disconnections of offline life (Rigby & Ryan, 2011). For instance, MMORPGs enable players to achieve competence through challenges and competition, foster autonomy via character development, and facilitate relatedness through collaboration and team-building activities.

The need-density hypothesis (Rigby & Ryan, 2011) suggests that pathological gaming is most likely when basic needs are unmet IRL but are abundantly satisfied in virtual environments. This theory is supported by Allen and Anderson's (2018) regression analysis of 314 students, which found that GD scores increased with a greater discrepancy between need satisfaction in real and virtual worlds. PG, then, may serve as a coping strategy, allowing gamers to compensate in-game for real-life deficiencies (Kardefelt-Winther, 2015).

Research on PG consistently supports this proposition, highlighting how various gameplay aspects offer opportunities that may not be available IRL. Multiplayer games, in particular, provide environments where players can accumulate power, either individually or within teams (Omerbas, 2023). In-game achievements can enhance player reputations, garnering respect that might be absent IRL (Lafrenière et al., 2009). Players driven by achievement motives may pursue virtual victories due to a lack of real-life accomplishments (Király, Urbán, et al., 2015). The social benefits of gaming are also significant,

particularly for those with low self-esteem or limited social capital offline (Kim et al., 2022). Players with insecure attachment styles, who often struggle with relatedness IRL, may find social comfort in online interactions (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). MMORPGs further facilitate competition, with hundreds of gamer-groups (“guilds”) offering social recognition opportunities (Lisenkova et al., 2023).

This hypothesis could explain the dangerous cycle of dependence that games can create, where virtual worlds provide relief from real-life problems but also hinder gamers from addressing these issues effectively. A strong sense of accomplishment in-game may make it challenging for gamers to leave behind this success for a real world where they have yet to achieve similar levels of recognition.

2.5.3 From Pain Relief to Dependency: The Role of Gaming in Affect Regulation

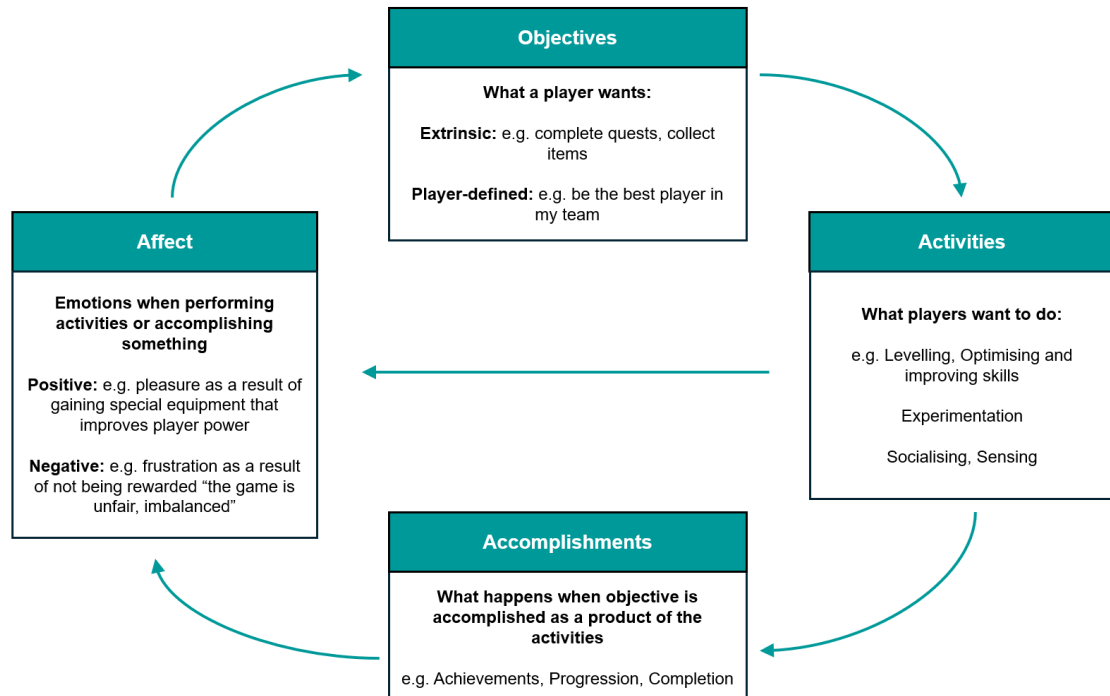
Researchers suggest that the significant relationship between escape motives and PG may be best understood through the lens of self-medication (Balhara et al., 2018). The self-medication hypothesis (Khantzian, 1997) proposes that individuals with insufficient functional coping skills turn to substances—or in this case, gaming—to manage painful emotional states and self-esteem problems. When applied to gaming, the escape motive represents the gamer’s attempt to find emotional stability by disconnecting from real-life discomfort. Supporting evidence indicates that escape and competition motives partially mediate the

relationship between general distress and GD (Király, Urbán, et al., 2015). Collectively, the research shows a strong link between GD and factors such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and the escape motive (Laconi et al., 2017), highlighting the need for a deeper investigation into these connections.

In a grounded analysis of player engagement, Schoenau-Fog (2011) identified a crucial affective component of gaming, proposing a model that illustrates how both positive and negative affect reinforce and sustain player engagement—shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Relations between Objectives, Accomplishments, Activities and Affect.



Note. Adapted from Schoenau-Fog (2011).

The model suggests that the frustration or completion of in-game objectives can generate affective responses that help regulate emotional instability by overriding, replacing, or soothing negative emotions experienced IRL. While this framework offers valuable insights into the self-medication process within virtual worlds, it is important to note the study's limitations. The identified categories of player engagement may not be generalisable across different target groups or game genres, and there is a potential for researcher bias, particularly in the interpretation of open-ended responses. Further research is needed to validate these findings across diverse populations and gaming contexts to ensure the robustness of the model.

Moreover, broader literature is currently debating the global self-medicating effect of virtual worlds and other digital stimuli. The speculative Male Sedation Hypothesis (Williamson, 2022) posits that digital stimuli from video games, pornography, and social media are sedating young men, diminishing status-seeking and reproductive behaviours, which historically have contributed to societal instability and violence (Costello & Buss, 2023). While this may prevent disruptive behaviour, it is also theorised to be contributing to a more socially detached male population, less capable of taking direct action when required. This theory, although intriguing, requires further scrutiny to evaluate its broader implications.

The self-medication hypothesis also aligns with a trauma-informed approach to addiction work (Maté, 2008, 2012). Gabor Maté argues that addiction offers a credible solution to pain arising from developmental trauma. In the broader field

of addictions, numerous studies have established strong links between traumatic experiences and substance abuse (Zweben et al., 1994). Trauma-focused models, such as the self-regulation model (Padykula & Conklin, 2010), have been developed to address Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) by working with attachment insecurities and fostering a corrective intersubjective experience that enables self-regulation. Recent research suggests that childhood trauma and dissociation might play a role in the development of behavioural addictions (Imperator et al., 2023), underscoring the need for further exploration in this area.

In summary, understanding how PG behaviours evolve from pain and trauma requires an individualised approach. Clinicians aiming to address PG—often without personal experience of virtual worlds—would benefit from detailed accounts of how this dependency manifests. Insights into gamers' experiences could reveal subtle differences between PG and SUDs, guiding the development of targeted interventions that consider the unique dynamics of virtual environments.

2.6 Avatar as Alter Ego: Understanding the Personal Dynamics of Virtual Self-Representation

One unique interaction, serving as a differentiating factor between gaming and other addictive behaviours, is the phenomenon of players living vicariously through on-screen “avatars.” Avatars are the customised in-game characters that act as the virtual representative of the player (Ferchaud, 2024). Gamers

can develop a strong identification with their avatars (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017) projecting elements of themselves into their creation and online behaviours (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Boundaries between a player's identity and their avatar's role may blur, leading to deep emotional and psychological investment. It is important for clinicians to understand the dynamics of this relationship, as it is likely intertwined with escape motives and fulfilling real-world needs, potentially playing a key role in gaming dependency.

2.6.1 The User-Avatar Bond: Connection to Disordered Gaming

The User-Avatar Bond (UAB) refers to the psychological connections that develop between gamers and their avatars. Empirical evidence consistently supports an association between UAB and PG, particularly among MMORPG players (Mancini et al., 2024). Specifically, Burleigh et al. (2018) showed that higher levels of avatar-identification ('self-presence') posed a higher risk of GD and independently increased the risk of disorder among depressed gamers. Likewise, Liew et al. (2018) used mixed methods—combining psychological measures with physiological markers—to show that GD behaviours increased when players experienced their avatars as physiological extensions of themselves.

A closer look at the research shows that gamers form relationships with avatars in different ways, with some bonds posing greater risk of PG than others. In a study of 1,022 WOW players, Stavropoulos et al. (2023) developed three UAB profiles, "differentiated", "identified", and "fused" gamers. GD was significantly

lower in the 'differentiated' group, and mood-modification and preoccupation behaviours were distinctly related to 'fused' players. Similarly, Mancini et al. (2024) found that a stronger UAB was associated with lower self-efficacy—confidence in one's ability to achieve specific goals—whereas players who perceived themselves as consistent over time ('continuity') appeared protected from GD. The literature thus suggests that PG is more closely linked to avatars seen by players as digital projections or extensions of their offline selves.

2.6.2 Self-Discrepancy Theory in Avatar Representation

Most research in this field interprets this phenomenon through the lens of the Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT, Higgins, 1987), which identifies three domains of self: "actual" (traits one currently possesses), "ideal" (traits one aspires to possess), and "ought" (traits others believe one should possess). Discrepancies between these self-domains can lead to emotional distress as individuals struggle to reconcile differences between who they are, who they want to be, and who they feel they should be. This tension often results in feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Mason et al., 2019). Jin (2012) applied SDT to virtual worlds in developing the Virtual Identity Discrepancy Model, defining "virtual self-discrepancy" as the gap between the gamer's real-world identity and that of the virtual avatar they create. Researchers theorise that roleplaying online as an idealised version of the self can reduce uncomfortable feelings stemming from perceived self-discrepancy, leading to an altered self-experience (Klimmt et al., 2010).

2.6.3 Avatar Dynamics: Self-exploration in Virtual Environments

Identification—the degree of attachment between a player and their avatar—is often stronger among players with idealised avatars (Courtois et al., 2011; Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Idealised avatars are particularly common in MMORPGs, partially mediating the stronger risks of PG in these environments (Mancini et al., 2019). For example, Bessièrè et al. (2007) conducted a study with 51 WOW players, examining the discrepancies between their actual selves, ideal selves, and avatars. They found that players constructed avatars significantly closer to their ideal version, often viewed as more conscientious, extraverted, and less neurotic than their actual selves. This discrepancy was notably greater among players with lower psychological well-being (evidenced by higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem). Additionally, in a study of 404 WOW players, selecting the Draenei race (blue-skinned, anthropomorphised beasts) was strongly associated with compensating for real-world deficits, leading to an increased risk of GD (Morcos et al., 2021).

Interestingly, some gamers also experiment with non-idealised avatars or “worse” versions of their offline selves (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017). However, this too is linked to PG, as anonymous gaming environments provide players with the opportunity to explore negative aspects of their true selves, which they might otherwise conceal IRL (Hu et al., 2017; Szolin & Griffiths, 2022). Collectively, the literature acknowledges that PG is strongly connected to avatar identification, an attachment nurtured by discrepancy-based compensation for IRL deficits and the opportunity to explore uninhibited digital selves.

From a psychodynamic perspective, the emotional attachments between gamers and avatars enable the projection of unconscious material, as described by Wolfendale (2007). In role-playing different identities, gamers project suppressed reflections or aspects of the self (Blinka, 2008; Burleigh et al., 2018). This process offers clinicians a new pathway to the unconscious when working with gamers, providing a unique opportunity to explore and address underlying psychological issues (Tisseron, 2009). Understanding this dynamic could prove instrumental in achieving positive therapeutic outcomes.

2.6.4 Blurring the Lines of Reality

The relationship between user and avatar is often bidirectional: while the avatar may be shaped by the gamer's real-world self-concept, it can also influence the gamer's real-life behaviour (Szolin et al., 2022). More broadly, non-volitional phenomena (e.g., cognitive or sensory intrusions), referred to as Game Transfer Phenomena (GTP), have been argued to influence a gamer's real-world behaviours (Ortiz de Gortari et al., 2016), with GTP severity associated with PG (Ortiz de Gortari & Gackenbach, 2021).

Behavioural transference between avatar and gamer has led to research on the Proteus Effect (PE), where a mutual transformation is argued to occur (Yee et al., 2009). Qualitative studies in this area offer detailed insights into the evolving attachments between gamer and avatar. For example, in a thematic analysis, Szolin et al. (2023) documented wide-ranging participant desires to imitate and

adopt their avatars' traits IRL (e.g., through hair and clothing choices, shared interests). This bidirectional influence, where the avatar shapes the gamer's self-concept and vice versa, leads to a deepening attachment as players increasingly align their real-world identity with their virtual persona, creating a process of mutual representation across worlds.

Evidence strongly suggests that disordered gamers experience high levels of self-discrepancy, leading to significant attachments to idealised avatars that alleviate this discomfort. Such mechanisms indirectly support the self-medication hypothesis and the motivation to satisfy fundamental psychological needs. More research is required to understand how bidirectional avatar dynamics relate to PG. As the lines between avatar and user continue to blur, qualitative enquiry into virtual self-exploration may offer further insights into this complex relationship.

2.7 Enhancing Therapy for Problematic Gaming: A Critical Exploration of Treatment and Research Opportunities

This section critically examines the current landscape of therapy for PG, identifying existing treatment methods, gaps in care, and areas for further research. By closely evaluating the current treatment paradigms, we can explore how therapeutic approaches might be enhanced to better address the needs of those affected by PG.

2.7.1 Current Treatment Paradigms

Over the last two decades, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has remained the most prevalent intervention for treating GD (Chauhan & Rastogi, 2023; King et al., 2011). CBT techniques help individuals identify and correct cognitive distortions that fuel excessive gaming, employing strategies for coping with everyday problems, self-regulation, and time management (King et al., 2010). Reviews of CBT treatment outcomes consistently confirm its effectiveness in managing short-term symptoms of GD, particularly in reducing anxiety and social avoidance (Han et al., 2020).

Mindfulness-based approaches have also gained attention for their potential in treating PG, especially in managing impulsivity and increasing distress tolerance, which are crucial for controlling gaming-related urges and cravings (Güldal, 2023; Sharma et al., 2021). Additionally, systemic approaches tailored to improving familial relationships have been introduced for GD treatment (Bonnaire et al., 2019; Nielsen et al., 2021). Integrative approaches, such as the PIPACTIC programme (Torres-Rodríguez et al., 2018), target the addiction while addressing comorbidities and family dynamics.

2.7.2 Therapeutic Shortfalls and Research Gaps

Several therapeutic shortfalls can be identified based on the current literature. First, there is an urgent need to address the emerging issue of non-help-seeking adult gamers who suffer from long-term gaming problems. Much of the research on diagnosis and treatment has focused on children and adolescents,

who are at a higher risk of developing GD (Chang et al., 2022; Lampropoulou et al., 2022). However, the stereotype of the young male gamer is outdated (Griffiths et al., 2012). Recent data from the United Kingdom shows that 31% of video game users are aged 30-39 (the largest demographic), and 20% are 40-49 (Statista, 2023). Despite this, older gamers are vastly under-represented in the clients accessing the UK's National Centre for Gaming Disorders—see Appendix I. Recent figures indicate that 94% of clients accessing the service (between Oct 2019-June 2021) were under the age of 25, with 70% aged 13-18. Adolescents, in particular, are reluctant to seek help for technology-related issues (Griffiths, 2015), and interventions for PG are typically initiated by family members (X. Yang et al., 2022). It is likely that younger gamers without adequate support may become older gamers that suffer in silence, continuing unhelpful behaviours instead of seeking change. If these individuals seek help later in life, they may find that available treatment programs are primarily based on studies of adolescents and are not well-suited to address the complexities of long-term dependency.

Second, as reviewed by Zajac et al. (2020), any strong conclusions about GD treatment-efficacy is prevented by a host of inconsistencies and methodological flaws. CBT treatments for GD are criticised for being directly translated from SUD programmes (King et al., 2011) and from gambling protocols that obscure the phenomenological differences of gaming experiences (Zajac et al., 2017). Additionally, CBT treatment outcomes often focus on short-term symptom reduction, such as “time spent gaming over the past two weeks”. This short-term focus raises questions about the long-term efficacy of CBT (Stevens et al.,

2019). For adult gamers who have struggled with PG for many years, an 8–12-week manualised CBT program may lack the sensitivity needed to address the individual complexity that emerges from the literature.

Third, there are potential generational and cultural differences between clinicians and gamers that may disrupt the therapeutic relationship, yet this issue seems largely overlooked. Applying Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) framework to PG treatment, many therapists, as 'digital immigrants,' may struggle to communicate effectively with gamers, or 'digital natives,' about alien environments. This digital cultural divide has been studied qualitatively in school environments (Gallo et al., 2016) revealing differences in communication styles that create barriers between client and counsellor. Additionally, therapists who fail to address personal biases or technology prejudices when working with gamers may further disrupt alliance-building (Cates et al., 2007). When working with long-term gamers who live in close symbiosis with their game and avatar, it is crucial to address this cultural mismatch to dive into the complexity and deeper personal meaning-making effectively.

Finally, despite progress in treatment, diagnosis, and understanding of PG, there remains a notable lack of evidence on the recovery process from gaming dependency. Vasiljeva et al. (2024) conducted a rare thematic analysis on 'gaming addicts' and found that 'recovery never stops,' underscoring the diverse experiences of individuals on their recovery journeys. This highlights the need for further studies that explore the comorbidities and complexities of PG,

providing valuable insights that can prevent recurring symptoms and enhance the prospects for sustained recovery.

2.8 Rationale for the Current Study

This study is guided by a literature review that underscores methodological flaws, diagnostic inconsistencies, and the need to explore complex experiences within understudied gamer groups.

To address the inherent issues with non-standardised measurements and contested addiction criteria, the focus will be on ‘problematic gamers.’ This group is defined by their awareness of impaired control over gaming and the recognition of its harmful effects, leading them to self-report as feeling ‘stuck.’ Additionally, participants will self-identify as ‘gamers’ to ensure sample homogeneity.

The study will specifically target adult gamers who have been ‘stuck’ for ten years or more. With MMORPGs captivating players for over two decades (e.g., WOW, released in 2004), the emerging issue of adult, non-help-seeking gamers remains underrepresented in a literature largely focused on adolescence.

A shift towards exploring individual experiences through qualitative methods is essential. Aggregate or quantitative data often lack the sensitivity needed to capture the nuanced interactions involved in gaming dependency. Clinicians,

often operating as ‘immigrants’ in virtual worlds (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), would benefit from case-by-case analyses that elucidate how real-world distress translates into gaming behaviours that might otherwise seem incomprehensible or be overlooked. While there are commonalities among addictions, the unique interactions in gaming environments—such as self-expression through an avatar—require a deep understanding of the personal meaning-making that drives these behaviours. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis offers an opportunity to delve into the cognitive and emotional processes of gamers, providing rich insights into their subjective experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This depth of inquiry is crucial for clinicians aiming to help gamers break free from entrenched, harmful, and recurring patterns of behaviour.

2.8.1 Research Question

An IPA study was proposed to explore the following research question:

“Among online gamers, what are the meanings and underlying constructs of feeling ‘stuck’ between their real and virtual lives?”

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Overview

The previous chapter distilled the literature on gaming addiction, establishing the foundation for the research question:

“Among online gamers, what are the meanings and underlying constructs of feeling ‘stuck’ between their real and virtual lives?”

This chapter details the methodological choices for this inquiry, from the philosophical foundations of the researcher to the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It begins with a reflection on the author's recovery from long-term gaming addiction, with further reflexive commentary (marked in grey, and using the first person) interwoven throughout. This reflexive strategy enables the reader to assess the value of placing a recovering gamer at the centre of the analysis, offering the context behind adaptations designed to enhance interpretative depth while maintaining reliability.

3.2 Exile: A Personal Tale

My drug was fantasy, and the unearthly realms—encountered first in books and then in video games—offered me peaceful sanctuary from our world. In my

desire to retreat, my foothold in the real world began to slip. I retreated slowly, a process that started with casual avoidance but ended in solitude. As loneliness turned to isolation and potential to despair, I clung more desperately to bright and immersive virtual worlds. I would barely feed myself yet nourish my online characters with love and attention. I became nocturnal. I lived in the shadows and concealed a dark secret. I had learned that I was utterly unremarkable: who would want me?

Then I found others like myself, a band of exiles who laughed at the futile attempts of normal people who deliberately chose to suffer the daily acts of living. What fools! My commitment to gameplay earned me recognition. I became someone, a valuable member of a community. I held positions of responsibility and led others to great victories. We delighted together and confessed to one another our darkest secrets. We treated each other with the compassion we withheld from ourselves.

As I aged, this rich and bountiful oasis started to dry: the once technicolour world bled to grayscale. The cold, brutal truth of my passing life called to me in a quiet yet persistent voice. It told me that, somewhere along the line I had gone wrong. It told me that my accomplishments were artificial, pixellated mockeries of what could have been.

I may be able to hide from others, but not from myself. I must open my front door and seek adventure. I need to begin to discover who I am or

might be. But. But I don't think I will right now. Not today. (Journal, October 2020).

I was stuck, only realising how tightly chained I was by my first attempts at movement. I hid from personal responsibility and emotions. I hid from myself, losing touch with who I was. I depended on others. I was unable to be present in relationships. Partners that I deeply loved, moved on. I bore witness to my own demise and felt powerless to stop it. I lost faith in the future and considered leaving this world permanently.

I hid my pre-occupation and dependency on gaming for 24 years. It has taken three years of therapy and recovery work to come back to myself. Now, I cut shame off at the knee with transparency and self-compassion. Now, I acknowledge and grieve for the irrevocable losses incurred. Now, I find hope in little daily acts of courage where I face discomfort, where I earn the right to self-belief. I embrace this new way of being, forged from the lessons of my past. I offer reflexive passages throughout this chapter upon these lessons, for I must balance the insight they provide against the lack of objectivity that they threaten.

3.3 The Research Paradigm

Research paradigms are constructed upon core beliefs about the nature of reality, its comprehensibility, and the mechanisms through which knowledge about it can be acquired (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). By providing transparency about these underlying beliefs, a researcher enables a deeper evaluation of the

methodology (Heavyside, 2017), for they expose the lens that guides their interpretation and decision-making (Creswell, 2009).

3.3.1 Pragmatism: What Works

The debate between realism and relativism appears overly simplistic to me, a binary forced by an existential drive to simplify complexity into understandable terms. This reductionist approach parallels tendencies observed in therapeutic settings, such as 'black-and-white thinking', often present in self-comparison. Such dichotomies may arise from cognitive strategies like stereotyping, which help categorise information, thereby reducing internal dissonance and easing cognitive load (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987). Reality, in contrast, is inherently grey, nuanced, and replete with complexity. Adopting a multifaceted view that combines various perspectives can provide more relevant insights, with the merit of each perspective varying by context.

These beliefs lead me to embrace pragmatism, which contends that no ontological position can claim a privileged access to truth (James, 1975). If such a definitive resolution were possible, the ontological debate might have been conclusively settled by now. Rather than striving solely to represent reality, it is preferable to seek approaches that enhance our ability to act effectively within it (Peirce, 1905). From this perspective, the merit of various epistemological approaches becomes apparent, with the choice depending on the specific type of knowledge being pursued.

My affinity for pragmatism might partially stem from an aversion to certainty. In retreating to virtual worlds, I have been avoiding intellectual challenges that could threaten a fragile self-concept I have felt compelled to protect. In this sense, pragmatism could serve as a defensive position against the fear of being proven wrong. In the presence of intellectual deadlock, pragmatism facilitates action: certainty is not required, just an acknowledgement of what works.

3.3.2 Epistemological Road to Interpretivism

Pragmatism, with its emphasis on what works in practice rather than an absolute quest for truth, has shaped the epistemological approach of this research. It offers a middle ground between the extremes of realism and relativism, acknowledging that while absolute truths may be elusive, some truths are more useful and actionable in specific contexts than others. This perspective aligns with a critical stance toward naïve relativism, which, while tempting in its flexibility, can undermine defences against irrational or harmful ideas if taken to an extreme. Pragmatism allows for a nuanced approach, accepting that while multiple perspectives exist, not all are equally valid or useful in every situation.

Given the complexity of the subject matter—exploring the experiences of long-term gamers feeling stuck between real and virtual worlds—an interpretivist approach emerges as the most suitable framework. Interpretivism aligns with pragmatism in its flexibility and its focus on understanding meaning within specific contexts. This approach does not seek to uncover an objective truth

that can be universally applied; rather, it aims to probe the subjective experiences of individuals, recognising that these experiences are shaped by their interactions with both their internal and external worlds.

The interpretivist stance is particularly relevant for this study, as it allows for an exploration of the nuanced and often abstract concepts such as identity, meaning, and self-expression within the context of gaming. These are not phenomena that can be easily quantified or generalised in the positivist sense. Instead, they require a deep, contextual understanding that considers the unique perspectives of each participant. By focusing on the subjective and constructed nature of reality, interpretivism empowers the researcher to draw out themes that reflect the lived experiences of participants, offering insights that are both contextually relevant and practically valuable.

3.4 Selecting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Following the adoption of pragmatism and an interpretative framework, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) emerges as a qualitative method particularly well-suited to this study. IPA is designed to examine lived experiences within personal and social contexts, prioritising the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). By adopting a curious and collaborative stance, the researcher uses IPA to engage deeply with small, homogeneous samples, typically through interviews, diaries, or focus groups. This method enables the extraction of rich, detailed accounts that reveal the participants' perspectives (Reid et al., 2005). The goal is to

understand the research topic from the inside, viewing the world through the participants' eyes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA places significant emphasis on interpreting these experiences, rather than merely cataloguing them (Willig & Rogers, 2017).

3.4.1 The Role of Interpretation

IPA is fundamentally rooted in phenomenological inquiry—the exploration of lived human experiences within their specific contexts, examined on their own terms (Moran, 2002). This study favoured a Heideggerian approach (2005), which integrates the researcher's experiences in understanding participant perspectives. The interpretative process is deepened by hermeneutic principles, acknowledging that the meaning of experiences often lies beneath the surface and requires a detective-like approach to uncover deeper insights (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This dual layer of interpretation, known as the 'double hermeneutic', involves the researcher making sense of how participants understand their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51).

The Heideggerian approach aligns well with the practical objectives of this study. The concept of 'bracketing' one's experiences to foster objectivity is more in line with positivist methodologies (Dowling, 2004). Instead, leveraging personal experiences can enrich the interpretative depth of the research. While there is a risk that familiarity with the studied phenomenon could lead to surface-level descriptions, potentially limiting deeper insights (Chan et al., 2015), familiarity can also provide valuable perspectives that enhance the

research, balancing the potential threat to objectivity with significant interpretative advantages.

For me, part of healing from long-term addiction involves embracing and communicating past shame. Attempting to divorce myself from my gaming history and disconnect from presuppositions—as Husserl’s (1931) descriptive phenomenology would suggest—seemed implausible and counterproductive to personal growth. Regardless, if I lacked personal gaming experience, I would still hold assumptions about virtual worlds and their inhabitants. Therefore, as Smith et al. (2009) recommend, I chose to embrace my familiarity with the participant material, recognising that prior knowledge can open doors to deeper levels of interpretation (Gyollai, 2020).

3.4.2 Practical Value

The practical value of using IPA in this study is evident in its capacity to generate in-depth, nuanced insights that can be directly applied to therapeutic practices for long-term gamers. IPA’s idiographic approach emphasises the detailed exploration of individual experiences, allowing for a deep understanding of how PG manifests uniquely in each participant. This detailed understanding is invaluable for tailoring interventions that are responsive to the specific needs of individuals, rather than relying on generic treatment models.

While IPA’s idiographic focus might appear to limit broad generalisations, it offers a form of vertical generalisability, where the nuanced understanding of

specific cases can inform broader therapeutic practices and strategies within similar contexts (Smith et al., 2009). This method ensures that the study's findings are firmly grounded in the participants' lived experiences, allowing practitioners to apply these insights to similar cases in clinical settings, thereby enhancing the research's relevance and applicability.

On a personal level, my history with gaming addiction drives my commitment to this research, motivating me to highlight the struggles of others who feel similarly trapped. While this personal connection could challenge IPA's idiographic nature, it also strengthens my dedication to producing meaningful insights. By aligning my journey with IPA's focus on rich, context-specific data, I aim to ensure that this study not only contributes to academic discourse but also holds real-world relevance for those affected by long-term PG.

3.4.3 Ambiguity and Resistance

Smith et al. (2009) highlight IPA's value in examining experiences marked by ambiguity and tension, where linguistic nuances such as word choice, emphasis, hesitation, and repetition reveal deeper meanings beyond the apparent narrative. This approach is particularly apt for studying gamers who feel stuck, as ambivalence and internal conflicts are expected. However, Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that interpreting ambiguity in IPA relies on presuming a connection between participants' speech and their emotional and cognitive states. This connection may be less evident in gamers, who often struggle with regulating, feeling, and articulating their emotions (Bonnaire &

Baptista, 2019). Consequently, the emotional experiences of gamers might remain obscured due to challenges in linguistic expression. To address this, the study's design was adjusted to enhance sensitivity to context, as detailed in section 3.5.1.

3.4.4 IPA vs other Qualitative Methods

Thematic Analysis (TA) is widely used for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data, offering flexibility and applicability across various research contexts (Shi et al., 2019). Inductive TA, in particular, is useful for allowing themes to emerge directly from the data without imposing pre-existing theories. However, its broad focus can limit the depth of interpretative analysis, making it less suited for exploring the complex, lived experiences that this study aims to uncover. In contrast, IPA delves deeper into participants' subjective worlds, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the meanings they ascribe to their experiences.

Grounded Theory (GT) is effective for developing new theories directly from data, providing structured insights into under-explored gaming phenomena (Beranuy et al., 2013). While GT's emphasis on theory generation can be advantageous, it may detract from the rich, detailed exploration of individual narratives that is central to this study. Given the focus on the intricate emotional and psychological states of long-term gamers, IPA's capacity to prioritise personal experiences over theoretical abstraction makes it a more appropriate choice.

Ethnography, known for its immersive exploration of cultural practices (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), could offer comprehensive insights into the collective behaviours within gaming communities. However, the deep immersion required for ethnography presents a significant risk for the researcher, who has a history of gaming addiction. This risk of relapse necessitated the selection of a less immersive methodology, further supporting the choice of IPA.

Embedded within a pragmatic worldview, IPA was chosen for its ability to leverage the researcher's interpretative skills, enabling a detailed exploration of how long-term gamers experience being 'stuck.' IPA's reflexive approach, supported by Pillow's (2003) framework, allows for a balanced exploration of the participants' narratives while managing the influence of the researcher's own experiences. This makes IPA uniquely suited to address the study's goals, offering a nuanced understanding that other methods might not fully capture.

3.5 Embedding Quality into the Design

To ensure high quality in this study, its design was meticulously aligned with Yardley's (2000) guiding principles for qualitative research, providing a robust framework for evaluating the study's credibility and relevance.

3.5.1 Sensitivity to Context

The literature review offers a comprehensive examination of historical assumptions and categories within the broader addiction field, positioning gaming addiction within this context. This background enriches the interpretative aspects of IPA by providing a holistic understanding of the context, thereby enhancing the interpretation of individual experiences within a broader spectrum (Smith et al., 2009).

The social context of my relationship with the participants was carefully managed to foster transparency and maintain a balanced power dynamic. As a fellow gamer, I established a peer-to-peer dynamic that helped alleviate participants' fears of being misunderstood. By openly sharing my own gaming history and using strategic paraphrasing during interviews, I demonstrated an insider's understanding, encouraging participants to express themselves freely in colloquial 'gamer' language. This approach allowed participants to relax progressively, offering authentic insights into their internal worlds. This peer dynamic, combined with my ability to translate gaming experiences into relatable terms, helped address potential deficits in emotional expression often associated with gamer populations.

3.5.2 Coherence and Transparency

The study maintains coherence by aligning its philosophical perspective with the chosen research methodology and analytical approach, creating a unified framework for investigation. Reflexivity was integral to this process, with personal experiences and the impact of the researcher's own addiction journey

openly shared. These reflexive passages, highlighted in grey, acknowledge potential biases and ensure that methodological decisions are transparent. Initial analyses were guided by supervision to ground experiential statements firmly in the data. Participants were also encouraged to use metaphors, which, as Shinebourne and Smith (2010) suggest, can deeply probe individual experiences of addiction. This not only made participants' experiences more accessible to readers but also reinforced the representativeness of emerging themes, reflecting a universally shared experience.

3.5.3 Commitment and Rigour

The researcher's personal history with gaming naturally fulfilled the requirement for prolonged engagement, demonstrating a deep commitment to the topic. The study employed a rigorous analytic procedure—detailed in section 3.7.4—ensuring that the analysis transcended common-sense interpretations of the material, adhering closely to the principles of IPA

3.5.4 Impact and Importance

This study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on an under-researched group of older, long-term gamers. It introduces new conceptualisations of the unique challenges faced by this community and proposes targeted treatment options that enhance current therapeutic approaches. By doing so, it aims to shift clinicians' perspectives on working with clients who suffer from long-term

PG, marking a critical step towards a more comprehensive cultural understanding of this phenomenon.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations adhered to the guidelines and principles outlined in the 'Code of Human Research Ethics' established by The British Psychological Society (2018). As shown in Appendix II, the study received ethical approval—with minor corrections—from the University of East London's committee on 12th August 2022. The committee mandated that for additional data security, interviews must be held on Microsoft Teams and not—as requested—the online audio platform 'Discord' habitually preferred by gamers. As examined in 3.7.1, this decision resulted in negative consequences for both recruitment and sample homogeneity.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2022) observe that the human interaction inherent in qualitative research inevitably influences both participants and researchers, often as a byproduct of increasing insight and knowledge. For this project, several risks to both participants and the researcher were considered. The primary concern was the potential impact on participants. Probing questions in the study could destabilise behavioural dependencies serving as protective shields, guarding them against internal dissonance and deeper distress. Additionally, while the study assessed distress risks related to gaming dependency, it did not directly assess participants' suicidal risk or history. This limitation meant that although some participants disclosed past suicidality

during interviews, these disclosures were not systematically screened for or managed within the study's design.

Recognising the potential for discomfort, several protective measures were implemented to support participants throughout the process. Participants were thoroughly briefed on the research objectives, the nature of the questions, and potential emotional risks, ensuring informed consent. The researcher prioritised participant well-being by establishing rapport and continuously monitoring comfort levels during interviews. Participants retained the right to withdraw consent at any point until the initial analysis phase. Following each interview, a structured debrief was provided, along with contact information for support services related to distress and addiction management. While moments of distress occurred in vivo, these measures helped alleviate discomfort, ensuring that participants remained engaged in ways they later described as beneficial.

The second primary concern was the impact on the researcher, a gamer-in-recovery, who faced vulnerabilities linked to past dependency. Recruitment strategies required re-engagement with inactive gaming networks, exposing the researcher to the threat of relapse under peer pressure. Although this risk was initially considered minimal—largely due to an extended period of abstinence and involvement in ongoing personal therapy—it was ultimately underestimated, as detailed in 3.7.3.

3.7 Research Design Framework

Key stages of the research design are covered, including reflexive commentary and the resulting adaptations.

3.7.1 Sampling and Recruitment

Smith et al. (2009) suggest between four and eight participants for an IPA at doctorate level. Between February and June of 2023, six candidates were recruited and interviewed. IPA is intended to capture nuanced experiences of a shared phenomenon (Willig, 2013), and sample homogeneity increases the potential depth of enquiry (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, purposive sampling was used to ensure participants met all inclusion criteria from Table 2.

Table 2

Inclusion Criteria for the Present Study

Criteria	Description
1	Adult (over 18 years old)
2	Identifying as a 'gamer'
3	Currently playing WOW: Classic
4	Has played MMORPGs for 10 years or more
5	Feels 'stuck': continues to play games despite this activity having a damaging effect on real-life (e.g., relationships, work)

The game WOW: Classic offered a pool of likely candidates. As a re-make of the 'vanilla' version of WOW, it would naturally attract long-term MMORPG players looking to re-experience the original version. WOW itself was released in November 2004 and still remains one of the most popular MMORPG games today (MMO Populations, 2023). Furthermore, the researcher—a previous WOW player—could leverage a former network of gaming contacts, enabling horizontal marketing at scale to eligible communities.

A digital leaflet (Appendix III) was distributed among WOW: Classic communities on the gaming application 'Discord', where gaming guilds organised their gaming events and socialised daily. As the marketing was held in public forums, the researcher posted frequently-asked-questions following the advertisement, offering further detail for interested applicants. Interested applicants were sent participant information sheets and the informed consent via the direct messaging facility on Discord (see Appendix IV). Recruitment snowballed quickly, within days, fifteen potential male applicants expressed interest. Two applicants failed to meet the 10-year inclusion criteria, and seven others appeared discouraged by the reduced anonymity and additional annoyance of using Microsoft Teams, a platform requirement enforced by the Ethics Committee.

The influx of interest in the project led to a feeling of vindication, transforming it from a personal endeavour into a study of potential impact. Drawn as I was to a phenomenon that had plagued my own life, I felt relieved when the focus shifted to 'others,' alleviating an unconscious guilt I had carried. Pleasingly,

openly sharing my personal gaming history appeared to partially encourage applicants to explore their own stories. However, as interest grew, I was burdened with an unexpected sense of responsibility. Increasingly, I adopted the role of a spokesperson for an overlooked and vulnerable group. I became determined to honour the narratives I encountered.

I observed that most applicants acted on impulse but struggled with commitment. Concerns included the hour away from gaming, risking anonymity, and confronting feelings they worked hard to suppress. I grew frustrated when ideal participants, despite having their concerns addressed, refused to use Microsoft Teams. They preferred Discord, which felt safer as a familiar, anonymous, and controlled environment. Many already faced challenges with motivation, and this difficulty proved too much. Several applicants who appeared to struggle the most were lost in this process, leaving their stories untold.

Although I felt angry at the ethical decision to restrict interviews to Microsoft Teams, I now see it may have been partly motivated by protecting me as the researcher. Having struggled with gaming addiction for years, engaging deeply with vulnerable individuals on Discord posed risks. While I still believe this decision altered the sample by replacing more acutely struggling applicants with those coping better, my intense reaction was amplified by my history of isolation in gaming: a part of me still battles an unresolved hurt that nobody came to find me and listen.

3.7.2 The Participants

The six remaining male participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. From initial communication—and supported by the analysis—a qualitative difference emerged. Rufio and Ace felt ‘stuck’ in virtual worlds but able to move IRL, while the remaining four participants considered themselves immobilised. Table 3 summarises the participants—in chronological order of interview—and introduces their self-assessments of feeling ‘stuck’.

Table 3

Participant Demographics, Game Time and Self-assessment of Feeling Stuck

Name	Age	Nationality	Hours Played per Day	Self-assessment of Stuck
Pockets	30	European	All day	Very Stuck
Curly	31	British	All day	Very Stuck
Ace	28	British	All day	Slightly Stuck
Tootles	28	British	All day	Very Stuck
Rufio	28	British	3 hours	Slightly Stuck
Nibs	39	British	All day	Very Stuck

3.7.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection for this study, consistent with the preferences in IPA for capturing rich, personal accounts of lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These interviews offered a flexible framework that allowed participants to explore their

experiences freely while enabling me to probe deeper into salient areas of interest in real-time. As detailed in Appendix V, the interview schedule comprised open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive responses, such as:

- What is it about the experience of playing WOW that makes you stay?
- Can you say which features are the ones you feel most drawn to? And help me understand why you think that is?
- If gaming was no longer in your life, can you describe what your life would be like?

The interview schedule was rigorously analysed in supervision, a critical step in mitigating bias. We examined the rationale behind each section and question, cross-referencing them with my pre-suppositions to ensure alignment with the research aims. While structured questions provided a foundation, I allowed flexibility in follow-up prompts, using intuition informed by personal experience to explore participants' narratives. My familiarity with the content enabled deeper engagement, allowing me to probe areas of defence and ambivalence with sensitivity.

Recognising the limitations of online interviews, such as the potential lack of non-verbal cues (Keen et al., 2022), all interviews were conducted online and audio-only to bypass geographical constraints and maintain the anonymity that mirrors the participants' typical gaming environment. This setting aimed to create a comfortable space conducive to discussing potentially difficult

emotional experiences. However, I remained acutely aware that the virtual setting might reduce the researcher's capacity to offer immediate support if a participant became distressed. To counter this, I established a peer-to-peer dynamic early on, fostering a close and supportive rapport. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, including after the interview and up until the point of analysis. Each interview concluded with a compassionate check-in and a debriefing process (see Appendix VI), which included providing contact information for gaming-relevant support services, such as the 'Healthy Gamer' peer-to-peer network. Notably, no participants chose to withdraw or expressed dissatisfaction with the process.

Three participants—Curly, Nibs, and Tootles—exhibited significant distress during their interviews, which raised concerns about their well-being. For instance, Curly disclosed multiple suicide attempts during adolescence and described invalidating experiences with therapy. His narrative was marked by recurrent thoughts of hopelessness and shame, reflecting the enduring pain that drew him to gaming in the first place. In these moments, as discussed in section 3.7.4, I occasionally refrained from probing further, prioritising his emotional safety over the depth of exploration. At other times, I found myself avoiding lines of inquiry that triggered discomfort within myself, a reflection of my own ongoing recovery journey. Despite these challenges, the protective measures in place proved effective; Curly later described his interview as "the closest I've come to addressing anything in the last 15 years" (1091-1092) and reported a 6–8-week period of abstinence following our interview.

Interviews ranged from 52 to 96 minutes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, with all direct (e.g., real names) and indirect (e.g., avatar and guild names) identifiers anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

At this point, I suffered a relapse into gaming addiction, delaying the analysis by six months. I had believed I was prepared to resist peer pressure but underestimated the emotional pull of being welcomed back into a community. It felt like knocking on an old friend's door after years of silence, only to be met with cries of delight. A space was cleared for me at the table, where I was treated as the guest of honour. Strangers shuffled to make room, while old acquaintances eagerly recounted past exploits, celebrating my return. The stark contrast to my real-world isolation made the sense of belonging overwhelming. Yet, the real danger lay in the interviews themselves. Participants' vivid recounting of dopamine-fuelled experiences and in-game achievements reignited dormant desires, making it increasingly difficult to maintain emotional distance.

After completing the final transcription—coinciding with the end of the academic year and a protective routine—I reinstalled WOW and spent nights on Discord, talking with old friends until sunrise. It felt like coming home. However, with the support of therapy and past recovery experiences, I regained control, extending the study into the write-up year and mitigating the relapse's impact through measures described in section 3.7.4. Ultimately, this experience strengthened my resolve and deepened my understanding of gaming dependency

3.7.4 Data Analysis

IPA must be approached as an interpretative venture, where the depth of analysis hinges on the researcher's confidence and willingness to engage deeply with the data. Without this confidence, the analysis may default to mere description, potentially rendering it indistinguishable from thematic analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Given the researcher's personal history with gaming, it was crucial to prevent presuppositions from leading the analysis, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the data. Reflexivity was employed as an intentional tool to evaluate rigour and transparency throughout the process, guiding the seven stages of analysis outlined below.

Stage 1: Single Case Reading and Re-reading. To re-engage with the data after a six-month hiatus, the transcripts were read and then re-read while simultaneously listening to the interviews. This process reacquainted the researcher with the context and emotional tone of each interview, ensuring that the participant remained the central focus of the analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Given the researcher's gaming background, caution was taken to avoid allowing personal experiences to shape interpretation, as this would dishonour the participants' stories. To mitigate this risk, Goldspink and Engward's (2019) suggestions were followed, looking for 'echoes' or resonances of personal experience in the participants' testimonies. These were recorded in a reflexive journal and explored in supervision, helping to maintain awareness of potential biases and preserve the distinctiveness of the participants' narratives.

I was acutely aware of how my own experiences might 'ring bells' during the analysis. For example, when listening to Nibs' testimony in lines 723-726, I found myself holding my breath, feeling an intense resonance with his description. As I listened, I reflected on how his words helped me understand my own pain. I felt a mixture of compassion and guilt—compassion for his suffering and guilt for learning about myself through his experiences.

At times such as this, to preserve analytical integrity, I embraced these reflections to heighten my sensitivity to times of potential phenomenological contamination, helping to maintain the distinctiveness of participants' voices while acknowledging researcher subjectivity.

Stage 2: Exploratory Notetaking. A single transcript was selected for detailed notetaking, where I categorised notes—in the right-hand column (see Appendix VII)—into descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual types (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive notes summarised explicit meanings, while linguistic notes captured intonation, word choice, and metaphor. Moran (2002), stresses the importance of studying how meaning appears or is obscured (p. 229), and I found that linguistic analysis was crucial for uncovering ambivalence, dissonance, and shame within the participants' narratives. Conceptual notes were made last, building on insights gained from earlier readings, ensuring that interpretations were firmly grounded in the data.

As I navigated this stage, I wrestled with the tension between familiarity and objectivity. My immersion in gaming culture helped me detect nuances in participants' narratives, particularly in linguistic analysis, where I discerned layers of meaning in tone and word choice. However, this familiarity required vigilance to ensure my interpretations weren't projections of my own experiences. When participants described in-game achievements, I felt a strong pull to interpret through the lens of my past, highlighting the delicate balance between insight and bias.

To mitigate this, I regularly paused during notetaking to reflect on whether I was capturing the participant's voice or imposing my own. This led to re-listening with fresh ears and sometimes re-evaluating initial notes. I leaned heavily on my reflexive journal, documenting moments of potential bias and emotional responses. This practice helped maintain a participant-centred perspective while acknowledging my influence on the process

Stage 3: Developing Experiential Statements. Statements were then formulated—positioned in the left-hand column (Appendix VII)—succinctly articulating key transcript features, while ensuring that the depth of exploratory insights was preserved. This stage represented a significant part of the analytic effort, for the researcher must decide which competing aspects to bring to the foreground. Phrases or sentences using verbs were privileged to capture the psychological substance and avoid blunt or closed categories (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

As I engaged in this stage, I found myself naturally drawn to the hermeneutic circle, where my interpretations evolved with each pass between the parts and the whole (Smith et al., 2021, p. 87). For example, with Rufio, only after fully grasping his childhood experiences could I interpret his tendency to express firm opinions, use humour to redirect conversation, and adjust power dynamics as a possible defence against earlier vulnerabilities. This realisation deepened my understanding of his narrative. However, I was also mindful of the risk of my personal history influencing these interpretations. To ensure the integrity of my analysis, I sought guidance in supervision, which proved invaluable in maintaining a balanced approach. This support helped me stay grounded in the data, ensuring that my insights were firmly rooted in the participants' experiences rather than swayed by my own past.

Stage 4: Clustering Experiential Statements. Experiential statements were then printed, cut-out and clustered on a large surface (see Appendix VIII), creating a 'bird's eye view' (Smith et al., 2021, p. 91). A maximum of six clusters were preferred for each participant, with analytical decisions guided by their alignment with the research question. Contradictory statements were often grouped together to capture the nuance and complexity of the phenomena under study.

Stage 5: Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). Each cluster was given a title that expressed the convergence of experiential statements. These PETs were documented in Microsoft Excel (see Appendix IX), with each theme supported by a data trail linking back to specific quotes and statements.

Stage 6: Repeating Stages 1-5 for all Cases. The process was repeated for all participants, balancing the emerging understanding of ‘stuck gamers’ with the idiographic principles of IPA. Particular attention was paid to points of divergence between testimonies, ensuring that each participant's unique experience was honoured.

Stage 7: Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Finally, I searched for patterns across-cases, dividing and clustering all PETs into GETs on a large surface, before capturing them in Microsoft Excel (see Appendix X). I resisted the temptation to focus solely on ‘normal’ converging experiences and instead emphasised divergence (Nizza et al., 2021). This approach created a dynamic pattern, entwining similarity and idiosyncrasy, enabling a systematic comparison of participant experiences without overriding the strength and depth of the individual voices.

This stage required careful attention to ensure my experiences did not overly influence the clustering process. To maintain analytic integrity, I ensured each GET genuinely reflected participants’ voices. I reverse-engineered each draft GET (Appendix XI), revisiting the data to confirm that themes were consistent and grounded in individual narratives. This process verified that the GETs captured the essence of participants’ experiences, ensuring themes remained deeply connected to the data and representative of group diversity. This final step reassured me that, while my insights contributed to the analysis, the participants’ stories remained at the forefront.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This study employs IPA to explore how gamers make sense of feeling 'stuck' between their real and virtual lives. Grounded in a pragmatic approach, an interpretative epistemology was adopted, recognising that the main researcher's own history of gaming dependency could deliver significant analytical insight, provided it did not compromise the integrity of the analysis. Detailed attention to reflexivity highlights the design adaptations implemented to protect against researcher bias, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings presented in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four

Analysis

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents findings from semi-structured interviews with six male participants self-reporting as stuck playing the MMORPG^e, WOW:Classic^e. Four Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and 11 subthemes are offered. To help the reader identify and understand sub-cultural references, a superscript G is used (e.g., grinding^e), with explanations available in the abbreviation section on gaming terminology.

4.2 Introduction to the GETs

The four GETs shown in Figure 4 provide an account of participants' experiences of feeling stuck in an online world of gaming. In "Escape to Neverland," participants seek solace from IRL^e pain by fleeing to a virtual world that offers acceptance and forgetfulness. However, such an exodus comes with its hidden costs as explored in "Fool's Paradise," where initial relief morphs into dependency, and the true opportunity cost of gaming accrues over time. In "Rise from the Ashes, Fall from Grace," the narrative shifts to the allure of virtual redemption. Participants are seduced into healing IRL deficits through in-game acts of reenactment and redemption, inadvertently deepening their emotional wounds and reinforcing their dependencies. The journey concludes with "From a Familiar Hell to an Uncertain Future," which contrasts various strategies

participants employ to navigate the prospect of change—from denial and despair to acceptance and integration of their dual existences.

This exploration not only chronicles the seductive cycle of gaming dependency but also illuminates paths toward resilience and integration, offering insights for those navigating the delicate interplay between virtual escapes and real-life challenges.

Figure 4

Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes

GETs		SUBTHEME 1	SUBTHEME 2	SUBTHEME 3
1	Escape to Neverland	Despicable Me: Damaged, Rejected, and Alone	Secure Base: A Reliable Home where Pain is Forgotten	The Lost Boys: Acceptance among my Band of Brothers
2	Fool's Paradise	The Sword of Damocles: The Looming Cost of Gaming	Master in-Game: Powerful, Revered and in Control	Servant IRL: Weakened, Unknown and Untested
3	Rise from the Ashes, Fall from Grace	Rise of the Phoenix: Soaring on the Wings of Redemption	Descent of the Phoenix: Rubbing Salt in the Wound	
4	From a Familiar Hell to an Uncertain Future	Licence to Game: Dodge, Deny, Despair	Integrate and Overcome: Bridging the Gap between Worlds	

4.3 GET One: Escape to Neverland

Here resides the point of tightest convergence within the analysis: all participants grapple with the stark contrast between their real and virtual lives, leading to a withdrawal to the relative safety of a painless online world. The first subtheme uncovers their battles with IRL inadequacy and conflict, leading to experiences of alienation and the emergence of an 'abnormal' identity. By contrast, the second subtheme explores the analgesic experience of gaming, and offers insight into the participants' ensnaring attachments to this reliable source of comfort and nostalgia. The final subtheme reveals how—after IRL exclusion—gamers flourish in tolerant communities of like-minded brothers-in-arms, empowered by anonymity and vitally nourished by the reduced threat of rejection and conflict.

4.3.1 Despicable Me: Damaged, Rejected and Alone

This subtheme captures participant impressions of feeling compromised, unwanted, misunderstood, and suffering alone. It begins with a shared sense of feeling flawed. As we hear “*I have terrible social skills. Like absolutely awful*” (Curly, 276), “*I’m a very confrontational person*” (Ace, 630-631), or “*I’m a very indoors person due to a disability*” (Tootles, 12), we gain insight into their painful self-assessments of relational and appearance-based difficulties. Pockets provides a deeper look at how these self-perceptions shape his struggles with real-life connection.

Living nightmare...I can be. Oh, no, I, I, I can treat [girlfriend] like, like absolute garbage. And then I'd take my meds and I'm a whole different person. And I hate it... if I don't get my meds and I don't play games then I'm, I'm turning into an asshole. (Pockets, 195-200)

Pockets appears to wrestle with aspects of his behaviour that he finds troubling. His repetition of “I” suggests hesitancy before acknowledging actions he later regrets. “Oh, no” may reflect discomfort or realisation as he speaks. His lower pitch and deadpan tone suggest emotional distancing, possibly to manage the weight of his words. Rather than being controlled by a need to suppress an inherent flaw, his account reflects an internal struggle with behaviours that affect his relationships, contributing to feelings of helplessness in maintaining connections. By contrast, Nibs feels trapped by his flaw “I was ordinary” (167), but his transcript was also accompanied by the bitterness one may feel when being overlooked.

I remember one time when my brother walked into the room, and everybody commented on how good-looking he was. Then I came into the room, and everybody just said “Hi”. (Nibs, 175-180)

The side-by-side fraternal comparison is emphasised by the repetition of the scene. Nibs’ pain is punctuated by a long pause after “Hi”. In choosing not to elaborate, he purposely echoes the original scene: it was the absence of similar praise that stung the most. Thus, a lasting resentment appears to have formed and sings clearly between Nibs’ lines “I felt like I was playing the same game of

chess as everyone else. But my pieces didn't work that well" (187-189). Similarly, all participants felt to some degree as if they were playing a losing game IRL. Most looked to themselves, finding fault with the way they played their cards, while others felt their hands were forced and blamed the dealer.

As their accounts unfold, we see these initial flaws compound considerably when faced with stigma and rejection IRL. Hence, there was a general sense of seeing oneself as an outsider, *"I was a bit of a pariah, like I always was. I was a little grebo⁶ kid, the nerdy kid"* (Curly, 84-86), and marked as different, *"I was severely dyslexic, so to them I was dumb"* (Rufio, 250-251). Three of six participants faced the public torment of bullying. Further burdened with the perception of a social stigma of gaming, *"I'm 30 years old. I think it's embarrassing"* (Pockets, 564), most struggled with a threat of judgement and a self-focus that can emerge under the threat of such scrutiny.

Subsequently, all participants acknowledged a fissure that began to grow between their in-game and IRL worlds, differentiating themselves from 'normal' people. Extracts such as *"You sorta dissociate from actually being around normal, real people"* (Curly, 212-213), and *"your ordinary person, you know your 9:00 to 5:00 person"* (Tootles, 457-458), highlight that participants developed a nonconforming identity, partitioned from 'real' people. Feeding off this belief in their own aberration emerges a profound threat of being misunderstood by non-gamers. Ace illustrates how this danger, exacerbated by cultural linguistic difference, can serve as a deterrent against revealing gaming behaviours, even when seeking professional help.

*If I say "I'm LFM^e for Raszageth Heroic^e - Mystic tier token^e reserved^e"
to a counsellor, they'd think what are you talking about? Right, so how
do I portray my feelings towards the game? (Ace, 1158-1161)*

Ace shares his frustration with seeing four different therapists—some of whom “can’t work out how to turn their webcam on” (1134)—where intimate discussions around gaming have felt impeded by a “massive barrier” (1229). Attempts to explore the world of gaming are seen as pointless, reduced by the cultural mismatch to indecipherable messages, lost in translation. Even in therapy, a significant part of Ace remains alone and unreachable.

Suffering alone was a vivid experience shared by all participants, often felt most acutely at home.

*I still can't talk to them [parents] about things because they don't want to
listen...They'd let me on a school night, sit up till four in the morning.
They didn't care, didn't bat an eyelid. (Curly, 256-263)*

Curly’s words suggest a deep sense of neglect, conveying frustration at his parents’ apparent indifference. His statement “they didn’t care” implies a feeling of emotional abandonment, where his struggles went unnoticed. His reference to being left to stay up all night without intervention may reflect an absence of boundaries that, rather than feeling like freedom, reinforced a sense of being

overlooked. The isolation—of feeling unheard, rejected, and disconnected—became overwhelming.

I think I have six suicide attempts until I was 18...I've tried to hang myself...throw myself off a bridge...I should probably be dead now.
(Curly, 841-849)

For Curly, this was “*not a case of not wanting to be alive*” (867-868), but “*of not wanting to think*” (868). Having lost hope of true connection, he was suffering alone, thinking at “*100 miles an hour*” (864). With no credible way out, only annihilation offered release.

In comparison, Ace locked himself away in his bedroom from “*a very hostile environment growing up*” (127-128). Alternatively, Tootles, Pockets and Nibs, were faced with an uncertainty or unpredictability around reaching out to family, “*I'd rather make an excuse than say I was playing a game*” (Pockets, 560-561), and were thus inclined to secrecy and masquerade.

I would often pretend that I had somewhere to go...and go on a fake event letting my parents think that I'm somewhere among friends, but actually I would go and sit in a random car park. I'd just, just read a book...And then come back and say, “yeah, I had a great time”. (Nibs, 214-221)

Nibs would rather feign a 'normal life', keeping up a pretence that perpetuates his isolation than risk exposing his vulnerability. Upon re-telling this account, Nibs took time to acknowledge both a deep loneliness and the sense of "cringing a little" (228) as he surprised himself with a story that had been long buried: we glimpse here how Nibs is torn between the ache to be truly seen, and the vulnerability he must traverse in the attempt.

In summary, the transcripts reveal a common theme of disconnection. A perceived character deficit IRL leads to rejection. Participants feel alienated and misunderstood, as if belonging to a different world. Lacking validation and safety at home, their pain and shame remain concealed, often festering in the darkness.

4.3.2 Secure Base: A Reliable Home where Pain is Forgotten

From the painful and sometimes wretched experiences IRL, the tale unfolds as participants find relief in-game. A strong attachment forms around this reliable painkiller that melts away IRL troubles.

It's like nothing else is in your world right now, or on your mind. You forget about everything that's going on. You forget about any tensions you have, or stressors at home. (Ace, 891-894)

Representative of a much longer paragraph expanding on the subject, Ace speaks with conviction, articulating a phenomenon that appears to provide total

immersion and relief. His lack of ambivalence highlights the sense of escape he has found in this domain, where gaming offers a consistent and absorbing refuge from real-world distress.

This feeling of relief was unanimously shared, yet participants described a variety of methods in which gaming alleviated their pain.

It helps me suppress [negative thoughts]. Maybe not dealing with them, like I'm not confronting them. I'm, you know, I'm pushing them away and putting them in a box. (Tootles, 223-225)

Tootles' box metaphor exposes an inner world laced with greater tension than we see with Ace. Not dissimilar to a jack-in-the-box, he is engaged in a repetitive process of replacing the devil back inside its container: suppression requires continued pressure to keep the lid closed. Alternatively, many participants experienced in-game relief via constant, mind-numbing distraction. Often, they described WOW like a hedonistic treadmill, for the "*bottomless rabbit hole of levelling^c, just continuous levelling...that hit of gaining more experience^c*" (Nibs, 252-254), transporting them from IRL challenges on a dopamine-fuelled highway. Curly reveals the mesmerising effect of being taken on such a journey.

Yea it's like. Yeah, big numbers, big numbers, big numbers. Right! Yeah! So many big numbers! Ohhhh yeah, this is so cool! Because who

doesn't like big numbers? It's... like, I'm doing cool, I'm doing dead good.

(Curly, 560-564)

The staccato of Curly's sentences, vibrantly imitate the repetitive in-game messaging, where the thrill of "*big numbers*" hooks him into a flow-state of pleasurable feedback, a hypnotic trance that delivers the distraction he craves. Thus, Curly achieves his desire of "*filling the void*" (794); it is his self-confessed remedy for a sense of emptiness that he struggles to address elsewhere.

Moreover, the power of these original experiences of pleasure can be strong enough—leaving such lasting nostalgic imprints—that participants become bewitched into repetitive in-game attempts to recreate them. Ace describes a pivotal moment when he first saw the trailer for WOW; he was watching with his father.

We watched the cinematic together, and I saw the dwarf hunter⁶ come out with his massive bear next to him and I thought. That's what I wanna play! (Ace, 941-944)

In the retelling, Ace is once again transported back, reliving every moment. His excitement and wonder crescendo, peaking at "*massive bear*". For Ace, this is a sacred moment of connection with his father, a moment of purity offsetting a fractured relationship where contact was once broken for eight years. Years later, Ace is still playing WOW, but as the game has evolved, the original class⁶ he played is no longer the same. The purity and pleasure surrounding his

original experience eludes him, and cruelly he must play something else “*despite every ounce of my body wanting to*” (951-952). Ace’s testimony serves as a poignant example of how games offer the participants powerful conduits to meaningful experiences.

Collectively, as gaming evolves into a reliable source of relief and a potential wellspring of nostalgia, it becomes a steadfast sanctuary where players find security. Half the participants felt that gaming was even a necessary refuge from physical harm, “*I’ve nearly been stabbed, I’ve seen people get their face sliced open*” (Curly, 849-850), and “*its...like a safe space, that we went rather than getting physically abused*” (Rufio, 256-258). Unanimously, WOW was labelled a base of security, “*a very big safety net*” (Ace, 133), or “*my comfort zone*” (Pockets, 337). Invoking a psychoanalytic trope, Ace even depicted gaming as “*something I can very easily latch on to, to lose myself*” (135-136). Nibs paints a rich picture of the relationship that captures this shared experience.

It feels that way to me, a small remote part of the world, hidden, safe and inaccessible to others, which I can immerse myself in. Like in Rivendell^e, I can stay there in hiding. (Nibs, 120-123)

Nibs makes a literary metaphor of the ‘Last Homely House’, a Tolkienian haven and rest for weary travellers. For him, as for the others, gaming represents the safe harbour, offering comfort and renewal when venturing to and from the perilous lands inhabited by ‘normal’ people. The game offers “*solace*” (Nibs,

112), and provides the “*homely feeling*” (Curly, 123); it is IRL where their dangers can be found. The intensity of this contrast between their worlds can be felt so profoundly by a few participants that “*sometimes I just want to hop on [play WOW] and do absolutely nothing. Stand AFK⁶ somewhere*” (Pockets, 588-589). Simply being present in the game with his character loaded on-screen, is enough for Pockets to find relief.

In summary, the unfolding analysis reveals that each participant—regardless of how their distress manifests IRL—finds respite and shelter in-game. Experienced as a warm, reliable and loving embrace, their attachment to this pain-free place of safety grows.

4.3.3 The Lost Boys: Acceptance among my Band of Brothers

Of all the convergent experiences shared by participants, it is the joyful sense of belonging within an online community that indexes above all others: lost to the real world, all find a place where authentic connection can flourish in a land without pain.

One of the most powerful advantages of online connection that struck many of the participants, was the perennial access to community at the touch of a button.

You can sit down in your living room and suddenly open a window into, you know 30-40 people on the other side of the fucking world. (Rufio, 586-589)

With enthusiasm, Rufio shows here the value he places on the sense of control that distinguishes in-game connection: this is his community-on-speed-dial, always there when required. This ease-of-access helps with frequency of contact and plays a pivotal role over time in helping a gamer like Tootles, who is “*shy and quiet around people until I get to know them*” (246-247). In mockery of his social anxieties IRL, Tootles’ capacity for connection blossoms in-game, reporting enduring friendships where “*I’ve spoken to them almost every day for 10 years*” (488-489), a telling contrast with IRL where human-to-human contact is restricted to an occasional fretful hospital appointment.

Alongside perpetual access, participants highlighted the significance of a shared culture, that also helped form the bedrock of in-game camaraderie.

Everyone I played with was toxic^c. They’d all been banned^c, they’d all been muted^c from games like...we were horrible to each other but. Everyone took it as a joke. (Curly, 153-155).

In this extract, we see how Curly illustrates his sense of belonging to a family of “*toxic*” gamers, united in their degeneracy: tearing each other down has become a standardised, comprehensible ruleset that knits the fabric of his in-game community. While cultural expression both overlapped and varied

between friendship groups, each participant presented how “*similar humour and back stories*” (Nibs, 345), fostered groups that played “*till wee hours of the morning...laughing and joking and teasing each other*” (Rufio, 385-387).

Aside from this sense of playful companionship, participants also experienced extreme reductions in pressure when socialising in-game. In particular, online anonymity offered many a significant relief from the IRL threat of judgement.

It feels easier to make friends on a blank canvas...I'm just like everyone else. And not, not the guy with a messed-up ankle who walks with a limp, and you know, looks funny. (Tootles, 249-253)

In this extract, Tootles offers a window into his intense feeling of reassurance found in audio-only environments that side-step his appearance-based concerns. His metaphorical “*blank canvas*” illustrates how it is the redistribution of social equity that provides such relief, effectively levelling the playing field or putting everyone “*in the same boat*” (Curly, 171). In a similar vein, Curly paints a vivid picture of the social ease with which he handles in-game rejection.

It is what it is. You just talk. You just ignore them and talk to someone else. So, it doesn't matter how off the wall you are, how creepy, how weird, how crazy, how obnoxious, how, image-shy you are. Because...It's not real life. (Curly, 189-193)

Online anonymity allows Curly to brush off the sting of rejection: they are not rejecting him personally, just an artificial version. Thus, the social impotence he reports IRL is offset by the social fluency and power he experiences in-game. Free from the incapacitating effect of self-monitoring and focus, and with an ability to manage rejection— *“just ignore them”* —he is able to find and manage in-game connections.

Likewise, Ace also finds social freedom online, but one that originates from a reduced threat of conflict. IRL, Ace lives with the mistrusting impression that *“if you look into who people are too much, then you won't ever be able to sort of have a relationship with anybody”* (Ace, 589-591). For Ace, IRL conversations can feel like sitting on a powder-keg, each interaction marked by a smouldering capacity for reaction and counter-reaction. The IRL threat has reached the intensity where even if *“it's negative or neutral, you don't even want that that reaction full stop”* (668-689). In-game however, he is blissfully absolved of this tension.

You can leave the call and you know that nothing's ever gonna come of that comment ever again. It's done. You've got it off your chest. (Ace, 671-673)

In-game, there can be smoke without fire: tensions are easily remedied, both by the anonymity of *“speaking into a dark room”* (600-601) and the ability to make a quick exit.

Pockets' account shows us that even someone with a self-reported "*short fuse*" (179), and a tendency to "*put people off before they know me*" (433), has managed to fit in and find acceptance in-game. With a short, but mirthless laugh he describes himself as "*the Autist^e of the Server^e...as some people call me*" (169-170). His grim delivery clashes with his laughter indicating dissonance. Coupled with his later lament, "*I'm not annoying, I think I'm funny sometimes*" (400-401), it is evident that Pockets is grappling with an in-game label that does not fully align with his self-concept. While feeling socially restricted IRL, he accepts the label others have placed on him yet remains authentic in his self-expression. In return for community, he is willing to bear the label of "*Autist*", finding belonging even if slightly misunderstood.

In summary, in the company of like-minded brothers-in-arms, participants flourish socially in relative anonymity in-game, finding varied measures of freedom from the social discomforts that torment them IRL.

4.3.4 GET One: Summary

GET one explores three subthemes illustrating why participants turn to gaming as a refuge. The game world offers a community where participants escape IRL pressures of inadequacy and conflict. Each struggles privately with appearance-based shame or relational challenges, leading to isolation from friends and family. Feeling disconnected and 'abnormal', gaming emerges not just as a retreat but as a credible solution. It provides an anonymous space free

from judgement, where tolerance and conflict resolution help them form enduring connections.

4.4 GET Two: Fool's Paradise

In GET one, the analysis unveils an exodus to the shores of Neverland, an in-game utopia that shields participants from IRL distress. GET two's narratives converge on the theme that this paradise becomes increasingly difficult to enjoy over time. The long-term consequences loom like a sword of Damocles, foreshadowing impending doom IRL. Seduced by the siren's call of in-game power, status, and control, many participants helplessly observe their own IRL decline, resulting in diminished self-belief and self-respect. Thus, when they eventually exit their in-game haven, they re-enter IRL as cautious outsiders, facing a life that is even less predictable and secure than before.

4.4.1 The Sword of Damocles: The Looming Cost of Gaming

This theme covers how participants' search for in-game relief, can slide into an all-consuming pattern of dependency. However, over time, participants begin to notice the insidious IRL costs of their blissful coping strategy. Much like Damocles, it becomes difficult to savour the feast with a sword hanging precariously overhead.

All but one participant preferred to shut out IRL, in favour of a gaming monopoly. Tootles shares his daily routine: *"You know, wake up and then. Almost*

immediately, just jump online...probably 12 hours a day” (14-16), giving a glimpse into his 16-year WOW career. Most submit to a one-sided, binary existence, captured by the motto “escape from real life, fuck the rest” (Pockets, 147-148). Curly explains how it feels to live under the oppression of this all-or-nothing regime.

My days were literally just school. Come home, eat, play games, sleep. I wouldn't make time for anything else. Like it felt like more of a priority than eating at one point. (Curly, 27-30)

This phenomenon, known in-game as ‘no-lifing’, may offer Curly a means to simplify the management of an overwhelming life. There are no in-betweens, for relief can be found in not having to think about the grey areas. Likewise Ace, as a result of “*cramming in as much time as I can*” has amassed 2,400 in-game days (circa 6.6 years) playing WOW. Throughout all but Rufio’s transcript we are invited to feel this sense of being consumed online: a willing surrender to a hostile takeover that simplifies an overwhelming problem.

As dependency grows, all participants report varying degrees of regret: the price of their admission to paradise. Ace describes the idea that “*there are definitely other things that I could be doing with my time that are probably more beneficial*” (44-46) and Rufio is “*sure I could do more*” (810). Each reports a vague threat that without gaming the grass might be greener. This threat grows over time, and as the cost accrues, the participants suffer from its compounding effect. Pockets knows for example that “*if you get distracted, you sacrifice*

something else" (216-217) and Nibs describes how he "loses 6-7 hours a day" (22) to gaming. The words "sacrifice" and "loses" implicitly infer this mounting daily cost. The experience is one of a looming cloud, menacing and promising heavy rain. It is always there, even covertly waiting in the wings: the sword that will inevitably fall.

Four participants struggle intensely with the mounting cost and can begin to torment themselves with self-recrimination.

*I've done it to myself, you know, like I've, I've chosen to stay indoors.
And I've missed the opportunity to have experiences. (Tootles, 433-435)*

Placing himself on trial, Tootles punishes himself for his crime. He contends with a daily reprise of self-criticism that attempts to address a deeper sadness: He has missed out, but his attempts to prosecute his own surrender only serve to compound the pain he is hiding from. Across the transcripts, we often witness how the size of the IRL debt becomes too daunting a prospect to manage. As captured by Curly, "you lose grasp of reality, and I don't want to find that out" (893-894). Nibs was 39 years-old, and experienced deep anguish over the IRL damage caused by "lost" time. He became "comfortable in the dark" (288), for at night he had found a brief respite.

*Every daylight moment was more negatively charged with the potential.
When the night came, people went to bed, people switched off, they*

became unproductive. And as they recharged, the actions I was taking felt less wrong...I could relax. (Nibs, 300-305)

The threat of falling behind has accumulated to the point of such potency that each unproductive moment triggers in Nibs a baseline charge of anxiety; he retreats further into the darkness. This phenomenon is shared across many participants, who dreaded the thought of tomorrow.

I go to bed and think about this stuff every night.... So, I...try and stay up all night and just. Tire myself out...so I forget it. (Tootles, 159-162)

Like Tootles, many are caught in ongoing self-recrimination, a trial that binds them in discrete but shared attempts to avoid a personal debt they greatly fear can never be repaid. As such, exhausting themselves into a temporary but mind-numbing oblivion has become a credible daily solution.

The avoidance is made more understandable when Nibs' testimony reveals *"The more I think about the real world. The less of a bolthole the gaming world becomes"* (Nibs, 904-905). He shows the destabilising fallout from facing his pain. Conscious appreciation of the opportunity cost suffered IRL has only served to make a mockery of his attempts to escape in-game. On unsteady ground, Nibs remains caught between worlds, unwilling to venture onward or retreat further. He is stranded there, tormented and grief-stricken by the ghost of his potential, or *"what I could have been before, before. Before I fucked up my life"* (321-322).

Collectively, the cost of enduring dependency is experienced as a sword of Damocles, sometimes blunt and vague, at other times sharp and acute. Some know of no other way, but to “*roll on, roll on, roll on*” (Curly, 41-42), finding comfort in becoming absorbed in a repetitive pattern of behaviour: they wake up, game and “*rinse, repeat*” (Tootles, 24-25). The shared experience is largely one of a circular pattern of avoidance, a fear that feeds itself. The mounting debt IRL is avoided in-game, which compounds the original cost: If they look too closely, paradise begins to lose its charm.

4.4.2 Master in-Game: Powerful, Revered and in Control

Despite many participants facing the severe IRL consequences of gaming dependency, the promise of in-game power, status, and control remained a tempting lure, enticing them away once again from IRL.

Perhaps more than any other attraction, it was in-game agency—the feeling of being in the driving seat of their in-game lives—that held the greatest appeal. Commonly, participants would revel in the freedom to choose their own path in-game, “*it's my world. I can do whatever I want. I can be whoever I want to be*” (Pockets, 148-149). For some, the power to self-determine held particular appeal.

You have your own character and...every single character is unique to one another. No one's the same...You can build it up. Essentially how you want! (Tootles, 36-38)

Tootles has experienced IRL the disempowering sense of being forced indoors by a disability following a car accident. In contrast, in-game character customisation not only bypasses his IRL threat of judgement, but additionally offers him a revitalising sense of agency. He has found a powerful platform to distinguish himself from others, individuating in a manner that finally places him in control of his own self-development.

Participants also shared how the feeling of power in-game is greatly increased by a clear understanding of the cultural determinants that impact in-game social status and value. In-game performance-analysis (via World of Logs⁶) allowed group decision-makers “*to index one player against another*” (Nibs, 70-71), a process that formed the bedrock of a meritocratic system. While participants disagreed on the accuracy of such value-estimates, sometimes preferring more holistic calculations that include whether “*you’re good for the group, personality-wise*” (Tootles, 311), all participants were clear on the in-game criteria for social mobility.

All mouths are waiting to be fed, right? So, who did they [loot council⁶] choose to give the loot to? Well...guilds⁶ prioritise loot⁶ based on performance. And for me, that means doing the most damage⁶. (Nibs, 387-400)

Nibs fully understands the role he is to play in-game. He knows why he is included in the team, and what is expected of him. As such, he understands the necessary steps to take if he wishes to increase his social value. Similarly, we hear from Curly that *“as long as you were still performing, you knew you was going to be the first one to get stuff [loot⁶]”* (539-540). Here, and throughout the transcripts, we witness an empowering sense of being able to control against inequity. The rules of the game are clear and widely disseminated. Regardless of their current status, the participants become powerful protectors of their in-game rights, for the system-transparency helps players notice unfair treatment.

As the path of advancement is clear and equitable enough, participants can show remarkable in-game discipline and commitment.

I have a goal. I want this pet. I want this piece of gear and I'm basically not stopping until I have it. (Pockets, 212-213)

Guided by an easy-to-follow sequence of linear progression, Pockets has somewhere to aim. In mockery of the negative stereotypes of a 'lazy gamer' he shows exceptional levels of determination in-game. Similar accounts of commitment are prevalent throughout the analysis.

We'd get up, they'd release something new, we would be up there. Ready to go within the hour of it being released. Everyone was ready.

We'd just go. And we'd hammer our heads against the wall (Curly, 378-381)

Curly's use of metaphor conveys the image of a 25-man raid-group⁶ throwing themselves repeatedly—often without progress—at the newly released in-game content; a punishing process that can require endless hours of group-sacrifice and stamina. Far from lacking in motivation, participants widely reveal an intense devotion to in-game pursuits of achievement and recognition.

The fruits of their labour—often the accumulation of valuable in-game items—offer the promise of in-game praise and respect.

It's very visible when you're walking around in-game. Who has the best items, similar to people walking around in the streets and having, I don't know, Gucci handbags or Versace clothes. (Nibs, 420-423)

Nibs describes living in a virtual world where player-to-player status-comparisons are transparent. Those with rare items can bask in relative glory, while those with less prestigious gear are keenly aware of their inferiority. It mirrors the IRL scenario of walking down a busy street with everyone's annual salary displayed in flashing lights above their head.

By contrast, other participants earn their in-game status by taking up positions that are crucial to their raiding teams. Rufio shares his experience of playing the role of a tank⁶.

Yeah, if you fuck it, then the raid wipes... it's very final when it comes to me. You know, and it's every raid^e. You know, there's every, every pull^e. (Rufio, 475-478)

Rufio acts as a lynchpin, the vital centrepiece: if he dies in-game, everyone does. Not only does this elevate his status automatically, but we also witness how this position aids his internal assessment of self-esteem. In his tone, we hear a fierce pride in his willingness to adopt the mantle of responsibility and reliably perform under pressure.

Alternatively, participants like Ace gain status by becoming influencers—praised experts that receive community recognition. Ace describes the exhilarating experience of being sought after in-game for his expertise, as players eagerly ask questions in hopes of replicating his achievements. He recounts being approached with questions like, *“What did you use where? How did you time your cooldowns^e? What trinkets^e were you running?”* (1457-1458) and *“Can you please help me and give me some insight and info on, you know, how I can play like you?”* (1459-1460). In his voice, there is a sense of deep contentment, reminiscent of an actor receiving recognition from their peers. Avid students eagerly absorb his every word as he meticulously explains his actions *“frame by frame”* (1481), providing detailed analyses of his in-game strategies. Occasionally, he also shares his accomplishments on YouTube, offering valued templates for others aiming to replicate his success.

Across all transcripts, while diverging in approach, each participant finds agency, power and status in-game. In WOW they are the masters of their universe, capable of reinventing themselves and rising from obscurity to prominence: they have shown themselves in-game that when all things are equal, they can become someone worthy of respect.

4.4.3 Servant IRL: Weakened, Unknown and Untested.

This subtheme contrasts the in-game experience of feeling in control and valued, with the IRL repercussions. As participants retreat into gaming, they often report IRL a diminishing sense of power, self-belief, and self-respect.

Contributing to one's own decline appears to be one of the most disempowering experiences shared by the participants. Rather than seeing themselves as innocent bystanders, participants would describe a process of "*scamming myself*" (Pockets, 68) fixating on the choices that led to their own downfall.

I'd sit and play games until like four in the morning. Sleep for two hours, go to work. I had a child. Nothing changed. It got worse. (Curly, 37-39)

Curly's tone carries a self-reproachful intensity that peaks at "*nothing changed*"—even fatherhood did not break the cycle. His clipped sentence structure reflects a deliberate, punishing rhythm, mirroring the weight of his self-judgement. In the context of his struggles with suicidality, his words expose a

profound despair, as if each phrase reinforces his sense of entrapment in a pattern he could not escape.

Similarly, a base layer of perceived weakness was often experienced when participants neglected their IRL responsibilities like “*daily chores, your girlfriend needing attention, walking the dog*” (Pockets, 52-53). This often appeared to provoke an additional layer of powerlessness.

I also use it. I use it. As an escape from real life, you know like. Like I, I, know I, I, do. It's basically become. All I know. You know. It's all I've done. (Tootles, 523-525)

Tootles' words are spoken softly and appear slowed by the weight of helplessness. They evoke a sadness that, given his usual neglect of dynamic voice variety, indicates a deep melancholy. He pauses after “*all I've done*”, for this phrase emphasises his experience: a profoundly disheartening sense of being overpowered and too weak to fight back.

Tootles' helplessness is arguably the fallout from the “*domino effect*” (138) of avoidance. Unwilling to test himself IRL, he can no longer see beyond the walls of his self-imposed isolation.

For so long I've not spoken to people in real life. I've just been me online that I don't. I don't know what I'd be like with people in real life now....I'd

be almost quiet. Reluctant to just be me. I'd be a shell of myself. (Tootles, 497-502)

Tootles speaks with uncertainty about his ability to re-engage with the real world, which now feels unfamiliar and distant. He describes himself as a “*shell*” of his former self, suggesting a sense of disconnection from his authentic identity. In-game, he may feel a sense of control, yet IRL, he remains hesitant, as though knocked off course by forces beyond his control. The reality of his past injury IRL adds weight to this metaphor—both physically and psychologically, he is navigating a long and uncertain process of getting back on his feet. In his own words, he is “*the guy with the messed-up ankle*” (251), a label that reflects both the literal impact of his accident and his ongoing struggle to reclaim movement—both in life and within himself.

Tootles experience is supplemented by other participants who viewed gaming as a form of self-harm.

There's no matter which way you look at it, anyone that is like dedicating a lot of their life to video games socially stunts themselves in some form. (Curly, 898-900)

Curly feels unequivocally “*stunted*”, believing the natural process of social maturation has been prematurely interrupted by gaming dependency. Thus, if he would return to IRL, it would be in a weakened state, marked indelibly by arrested development. Likewise, we hear how Rufio feels “*like it's difficult to find*

social interactions with women in this day and age for someone like me" (895-897). Once again, we gain insight into how self-belief can deteriorate in the face of abilities that remain untested. Rufio, relatively disconnected from women by virtue of a reliance on male-dominated interests, has begun to lose confidence. The phrase "*someone like me*" captures his internalised state of weakened self-belief, an outcome of a growing doubt that was left unchecked.

As participants witness their weakened state IRL, they can struggle with the idea that "*I've put this game as my main priority for years now. Holy shit. Oh Yikes*" (Pockets, 93-94). Faced with the experience of self-imposed limitation, four of the participants demonstrate a painful loss of self-respect.

I don't look after myself, right. I don't. Eat well. I don't know. My sleep schedule is terrible. I, I, mean, my house is a complete mess. Very limited clothes and I don't hardly wash, them or myself. Diet is really bad and it's, it's quite obvious to me that I'm not. Doing well with my life. (Nibs, 769-773)

In Nibs' testimony we hear a man standing in dismay amid the strewn wreckage of his life. Looking around, he is picking out the evidence of failure, unable to salvage anything from the debris, from a life that once was intact. Painfully, many of the participants share this feeling. Surrounded by the inexcusable state of their lives, and the negative impacts they incur on others, many can sink into a well of shame. Curly, who originally paints himself as "*the nerdy kid*" (17), later revises his assessment to "*A nerd is someone who is smart. If I was smart,*

I wouldn't have done it" (Curly, 1046-1047). In his redefinition, even a nerd retains some redeeming qualities—ones he no longer sees in himself. His words suggest a profound sense of self-disillusionment, as though he no longer belongs even among those with whom he once identified.

Across the transcripts we see how the controlled ascent to status and in-game respect is inversely reflected by the helpless descent to IRL limitations and perceived weaknesses.

4.4.4 GET Two: Summary

This cluster of subthemes begins with the slide from in-game relief into dependency and absorption. Seemingly a pain-free paradise, the opportunity cost accrues silently. Despite the looming dread, the in-game bounties offer delicious temptation. In-game, participants become powerful agents, publishing themselves as they wish, in control of their own rising stardom. By contrast, IRL they can wither, untested, uncertain and afraid. If the loss of self-respect is left unchecked, some may painfully descend into shame. As the in-game haven starts to unravel, participants may double down, hiding and papering over the cracks. However, the limitations of time cannot be escaped: the piper must be paid.

4.5 GET Three: Rise from the Ashes, Fall from Grace

The third GET reveals how participants are compelled to heal their IRL deficiencies through semi-conscious drives in-game to re-create and redeem early childhood wounds. Avatar expression, in-game role-selection, comparative performance and social rewards offer in-game strength in place of IRL vulnerability. Like the mythical phoenix, their in-game journey represents a cycle of transformation: they are reborn online into new identities, seeking redemption, only to eventually descend back into the ashes of their original wounds. Ultimately, they can become the architects of their own demise, perpetuating a cycle of dependence and renewal.

4.5.1 Rise of the Phoenix: Soaring on the Wings of Redemption

Nursing developmental wounds—such as paternal abandonment, or childhood neglect (introduced in 4.3.1)—all participants appear seduced into in-game reenactments. In re-inventing themselves online—a process facilitated by avatar expression and role-play—they have found an opportunity to repeat repressed material with the hope of a different outcome.

Rufio dares to explore the pain he attempts to reenact and transform in-game.

I've never been someone that is. Is listened to in real, in real life, really, I feel, I feel like. It's something that I've never experienced. (Rufio, 170-172)

Rufio's hesitation in exposing his wound is emphasised by the cautious tone and vocal repetition, revealing the courage required to disclose this vulnerability. Badly bullied at school for dyslexia, he finds initial safety in-game but still bears the scars. Yet Rufio also finds the opportunity for reenactment, drawn to the in-game leadership roles of both guild-master^e and raid-leader^e: positions where his word is final.

It's almost like. It's almost like I have a desire to be listened to...And this is, this is what's, you know, giving me that. What's the word? Food, I guess, or nourishment for that obsession, maybe. (Rufio, 178-181)

Rufio tentatively explores this experience, laughing nervously at the end of his realisation as one might attempt to brush off an uncomfortable truth. In-game, he can be reborn as a reliable and charismatic leader, capable of earning credibility and respect that eludes him IRL. In this way, when he is followed by large groups of players that heed his word, he is redeemed, for he cannot find ways to dismiss the validation he is receiving.

You don't have to raid^e with me at all...You could say we don't. We don't like you leading us anymore. We're gonna[sic] go somewhere else. And then you just go! Like there's no. There's nothing stopping anyone! (Rufio, 697-701)

His pacing increases as he races gleefully to the conclusion that this in-game validation is perfectly pure: it cannot be doubted. Players who could leave the

group at any time, have instead chosen to play under his leadership. The feedback resonates like a soothing lullaby, comforting the boy who felt he was never heard.

His re-enactment is reinforced by his choice to assume the role of tank^e: the protector out front capable of withstanding damage that would instantly kill other players.

I would much rather wear chonky^e fucking armour and covered in a big shield and sword rather than a wizard's robe and a little wand. (Rufio, 493-495)

Rufio is drawn to the tank^e class-fantasy for its capacity to mitigate, absorb, and resist with strength. His contemptuous view of the weak “wizard” projects against his own IRL feelings of defencelessness. Perhaps his in-game choices reflect a deeper fantasy of standing strong in defiance of his bullies, transforming the weakness that still haunts him.

By comparison, Ace may carry a deep father wound: a mark sustained from a volatile, unreliable relationship where they once lost contact for eight years. Connected by a shared love of playing videogames “*I watched him play every day*” (90-91), their relationship was threatened by conflict, and likely neglect. He describes himself as “*confrontational*” (31) and mistrusting of others, defensive behaviours serving to protect against rejection and harm. For Ace,

proving oneself in-game, might also offer a deeper opportunity for reenactment, to prove himself to his father.

If you are a capable, competent player, it's very interesting and fun to be able to disprove theories about certain specs⁶ and classes⁶. (Ace, 292-294)

By disrupting the in-game paradigm, Ace asserts that ignoring him would be a mistake. Arguably, outplaying others as an underdog in-game, resonates on the same emotional frequency as his earlier IRL experience of being neglected or overlooked. In-game, he has the opportunity to correct this.

Bear⁶ has been the bottom-of-the-barrel tank every patch⁶. It's always been the tank⁶ that people call lacklustre not good enough...They end up taking a worse player just because that player is able to play or willing to play a spec that is currently meta⁶. (Ace, 262-272)

This time however, when Ace triumphs in-game, he deposes the threat of “*not good enough*”, proving that he was never the problem. Arguably, these in-game actions help heal a wounded boy, sitting alone in his bedroom without his father. His in-game accomplishments soothe a deeper pain, silently conveying, "You were wrong to leave me."

Similar in part, Nibs nurses a childhood wound of neglect. Vigilant to the experiences of being overlooked for his plain appearance, he hid his pain which

festered in its secrecy. As such, Nibs is seduced by literary fantasies of power-fuelled redemption.

I've always felt really drawn to characters with a dark side in books... I really liked the character Raistlin⁶... he was driven by power, the need to accumulate power and prove others wrong. (Nibs, 566-573)

Listening to Nibs' transcript conveys the feeling of not being picked to dance. Overlooked like "*Raistlin*⁶", he sits on the edge of the dancefloor nursing his pain, fantasising about proving everyone wrong. In-game, he finds his opportunity.

They were called the Warglaives of Azzinoth⁶. They were legendary items⁶ that dropped very rarely...and they transfer significant status and power to the people that own them. (Nibs, 471-474)

Nibs has found in-game the opportunity to heal his IRL deficit, to finally turn heads and be noticed. His transcript describes a "*deep desire to obtain these things*" (480-481) which required a six-month "*campaign on behalf of yourself*" (485), in an attempt to ingratiate himself with his loot-council⁶. From obscurity and disconnection IRL he seeks redemption in the arc of becoming the legendary hero in-game: the chosen one.

Facilitating this pursuit of online redemption, Nibs selects to play a rogue⁶, an in-game role that appears to offer greater access to parts of himself that he suppresses IRL.

I think that in-game. I can be much more I would say aggressive. Unempathetic, perhaps? Cold. Selfish. Definitely. Maybe just more self-focused? (Nibs, 363-365)

Drawn to playing rogue⁶ in-game, Nibs relishes the class-fantasy of “backstabbing and then and then going back in the shadows and being invisible once more” (566-567). From the safety of roleplay, he experiences a sense of feeling unlocked and revitalised, a more powerful, unrestricted version of his non-digital self. This is an experience often shared by participants, who act in-game in a way that “I don't feel like I could be...in real life” (Tootles, 513).

For Curly and Tootles, ever conscious of the IRL threat of being sidelined for social or appearance-based deficits, we hear the heady relief in becoming irreplaceable and central components of a team.

Why be yourself when you can be a bear, cat, bird, tree, moonkin⁶ or leopard? All in one. You can change depending on what is needed. Want me to be DPS⁶? Heal⁶? Tank⁶? No problem, I can do that! (Curly, 360-363)

Choosing the versatile Druid⁶ class, Curly plays a shapeshifting role in-game that enables him to fit into a group where required, a social metamorphosis that eludes him IRL. Playing a supporting in-game role he enables other players. Vitally, it means that “*anyone would be lucky to have me in their group*” (459-460). Likewise, Tootles who increases his value through “*topping the metres*” (274), contributes significant DPS⁶ for the raid-group, cementing his place.

You feel like you're needed, right? Like you've got, a space, a spot in that group...You're valued. You know you're not essentially a waste of space. You're not dragging them down. (Tootles, 287-290)

Both have found ways to redeem their IRL wound of exclusion. In-game, their versatility and performance exert a centripetal pressure on their position within a raid-group⁶. Moving towards its hearts centre, they become vitally connected and irreplaceable.

Collectively, we gain insight into the complex processes of reenactment and redemption that aim to heal participants' IRL wounds. In-game avatars and roleplay work together to rebirth gamers into new identities, aiding this transformation.

4.5.2 Descent of the Phoenix: Rubbing Salt in the Wound

Following their redemptive experiences, this subtheme explores how participants inevitably face a phoenix-like descent. While in-game strength

initially uplifts them, they struggle to maintain altitude. Eventually, underlying vulnerabilities resurface, dragging them back down to earth. This recurrence deepens their original wounds, underscoring the cyclical interplay between healing and harm in their quest for renewal.

The descent starts as transcripts show the significant challenges participants face in maintaining access to revitalising in-game redemption sources. This struggle frequently leads to a well-known in-game phenomenon simply called “drama”, where “*people get very offended*” (Curly, 490), where “*often people’s egos are upset*” (Nibs, 82). All participants were fluent in the nuanced conflicts surrounding the system of in-game loot⁶. Loot⁶ is a primary source of in-game power, granting significant comparative advantages in performance, status, and group value. The scarcity of loot⁶ further influences these dynamics, as rarer items bestowing unique benefits become highly sought after. Thus, a chaos can emerge from contested in-game loot⁶ decisions.

If people thought that they deserved it[loot⁶] more they’d argue. They’d get irate, they’d get angry, or if they didn’t do it in front of everyone, you’d get direct-messages⁶ blowing up with all this that, this, that. (Curly, 502-505)

With a sigh, Curly describes the potential aftermath of in-game loot⁶ distribution. Here we see in his long-suffering, frustrated tone, and the abstract “*this, that*”, how in-game loot-drama was widespread and tolerated with difficulty. Each

participant, on their own transformative journeys, encountered challenges in navigating loot decisions that threatened their ability to access redemption.

*There was a trinket⁶ for Guardian⁶ druid called Cache of Acquired Treasures, which was a massive, massive amount of your DPS⁶, I never got a mythic⁶ one ...and despite that still managed to get a good log⁶.
(Ace, 347-355)*

Ace, driven—in part—by a desire to prove others wrong, has the course of this trajectory threatened by the absence of a key item. Thus, when reviewing his performance "log," he points out his item-disadvantage—a gap that should, in theory, boost his standing relative to others. Likewise, at least four of the participants expressed discomfort around in-game item-discrepancy as "it's hard when you see people walking around with the best gear and they got like, bad logs" (Tootles, 316-317). In Nibs' testimony we clearly witness the crux of this phenomenon.

They intentionally sit themselves there, pretending to AFK⁶, just fucking sat there! And the thing is, they probably don't deserve the attention, like you look up their logs and they are dogshit! Absolute shitters⁶! They only have a few purple parses⁶, and they get lucky on the loot⁶ drop! (Nibs, 437-442)

Rather than simply expressing frustration, Nibs' words reveal a deeper struggle with recognition and fairness in the game world. His reaction suggests a familiar

emotional wound being reawakened, as he once again finds himself on the outside looking in. The intensity of his response points to a narcissistic injury, as he wrestles with feelings of injustice and exclusion. He jealously guards the status and attention he believes should be earned, viewing others' success as both unearned and personally diminishing. As their glory threatens to overshadow his own, he attempts to reclaim control, denouncing them as “*dogshit*” and attributing their achievements to luck rather than merit. If he can challenge their legitimacy, he may temporarily restore his own sense of order.

Likewise, we see across the transcripts, that in-game envy can lead to further resentment if left unchecked.

It stings. You just feel frustrated cause there's so much you coulda[sic] done with it[loot⁶]. And they won't. They won't put it[loot⁶] to best use. I mean. I would manage to do well with not much gear⁶. With gear⁶. Yea I could have slapped⁶. (Tootles, 326-330)

Nibs and Tootles both endure the frustration of being overlooked in-game, particularly when loot⁶ is distributed unfairly. As their relative chances for recognition diminish, they face in-game, the IRL threat of being ignored. Imagining better use of their in-game skills or possessing greater abilities offers some relief. However, their reactions differ: Nibs harbours intense resentment, while Tootles, more resigned, mutters, “*It is what it is, I guess*” (330).

This struggle to maintain access to redemptive experiences may mark the beginning of the descent, but other in-game dynamics greatly accelerated this downward trajectory. The analysis highlights a key drawback of comparative success: each new in-game challenge escalates the stakes, forcing participants to perpetually validate their worth.

Over recent years, it's become more of a "oh, thank God! I'm, I'm happy that I don't have to progress this boss anymore", as opposed to. "Wow, I'm really happy about this, all of our time, investment has paid off". It sort of becomes relief as opposed to happiness. (Ace, 203-208)

Over time, Ace reveals how the pressure to perform diminishes enjoyment. As a raid-leader^e, not only does he bear the weight of his own need to silence doubters, but also the additional burden of fulfilling his raid-group^e members' unconscious drives. He is trapped in a stressful cycle of expectation and validation: he is only as good as his last game.

By comparison, at least three participants faced the harsh reality that their self-esteem, artificially boosted in-game, was as precarious as a "house of cards" (Nibs, 605): liable to collapse under close scrutiny. In shocked tones, Nibs recalls the aftermath of explaining to his therapist how his in-game quest for the legendary "Warglaives of Azzinoth^e" (471-472) was worthwhile.

I just remember the look on his face. It was one of...bemusement I think I saw. But it hit me hard because I realised the emptiness of my pursuit.

I realised that I just spent a year of my life...driven to acquire these digital items...his bemusement...with which he looked at me. Showed the emptiness, the ridiculousness of my attempt. (Nibs, 492-500)

For the first time, he dares to disclose his deep-seated drive to assert himself through in-game superiority. Yet, this admission lays bare his own facade. His pride swells, only to break against the therapist's indifference, engulfing him in a surge of crushing emptiness. Nibs is painfully confronting that *"it's a fucking game, right? It's pixels. It's digital. It's not real"* (465-466). Likewise, Curly confronts the feeling of stupidity from *"putting in so much of your free time...just to get a different colour lighting on your screen"* (434-435). In these moments of self-reckoning, their perceptions of in-game achievement collapse under external scrutiny. Both participants now suffer the diminishing aftermath of seeing through their own illusions: once the lie has been exposed, it can no longer be forgotten.

By contrast, Rufio has found joy online in the redeeming experience of finally feeling heard. Following positive in-game feedback that he cannot discount, Rufio cautiously attempts to integrate this new information, revisiting his old wounds. With forced laughter, he claims *"strangely, I'm kind of someone that people listen to"* (109-110), and re-asserts tentatively that *"my judgement of people seems to be important to other people"* (442-443). Here, Rufio is stretching new muscles, experimenting in the art of preening himself. His tone stops short of vanity; instead, it reflects a cautious self-promotion, as he puffs

himself up while simultaneously remaining alert to criticism. Skating on this thin, untested ice, Rufio is the only participant to find online anonymity threatening.

I find that quite difficult not being able to read people, people's faces and stuff. You can do it slightly with listening to their voice and how they say something or what they say. (Rufio, 410-413)

Rufio finds it challenging to trust expressions hidden in the digital shadows, as he cannot see the faces that might reveal the sincerity—or deceit—behind the words. His search for affirming feedback is not just about validation but about exposure—anxiously scanning for signs that others see him as he sees himself. Each moment of recognition is laced with apprehension: is his newfound status real, or is it only a matter of time before someone confirms the inadequacy he fears within himself?

Viewed through this lens, many of the word-choices and inter-personal strategies employed in Rufio's interview take on new meaning. Forty-nine uses of the word "*ultimately*", and then 20 uses of the word "*essentially*" suggest an effort to be taken seriously: a manufactured authority through the use of dogmatic language. Also, his many playful attempts at manipulating the interpersonal frame, "*I'll do it for free...you don't have to pay me now*" (797-798) hint at a deeper sensitivity to passive and contextual power-dynamics. Thus, it is understandable when he cautiously predicts that "*I run a guild fairly successfully at the moment. It will probably not be successful. I'm sure at some point*" (69-71). Elevated to the position of guild leader, he valiantly leads from

the front. Yet, much like Achilles, a single precise strike to the ankle could bring this hero to his knees.

Collectively, we see a pattern of in-game renewal that both replenishes and weakens. Participants are left spinning, compounding the original wounds they are determined to heal.

4.5.3 GET Three: Summary

The exploration of these subthemes underlines the intricate dynamics between virtual achievements and real-world vulnerabilities. Participants gravitate towards in-game leadership roles and social validation as a means to address unmet needs from their real lives, such as the desire to be heard or to feel significant. These virtual experiences provide temporary relief and a semblance of healing, as participants receive feedback that seems to mend their long-standing emotional wounds. However, this healing is precarious and often illusory. The artificial nature of in-game validation reveals its limitations, as it cannot fully substitute for genuine IRL interactions and resolutions. Consequently, like the mythical phoenix, participants rise brilliantly within the virtual world, only to inevitably face the reality of their unchanged circumstances, descending back into the familiar ashes of their unresolved past.

4.6 GET Four: From a Familiar Hell to an Uncertain Future

The final GET explores the wide-ranging experiences of facing change. While the prevalent tendency is to cling to the “devil they know”, a few participants show a resilience to despair, and willingly look to the future. Rather than convincing themselves of the futility of change, undermining their own agency to side-step emotional discomfort, they foster qualities of self-compassion and self-belief. This theme highlights the benefits of blending online and offline lives, making the transition into real-world interactions less intimidating for those dependent on the virtual one.

4.6.1 Licence to Game: Dodge, Deny, Despair.

This subtheme reveals the sophisticated defence mechanisms participants use to manage the challenging prospect of change. Caught in the dissonance from actions that both alleviated and created distress, “*It makes me feel better to a certain extent, but...then I absolutely hate it*” (Pockets, 576-577), participants adopt a trio of strategies—avoidance, denial, and despair—to reduce their discomfort.

Nibs discloses an account, demonstrating why avoidance was often selected as a primary defence.

I can have really long episodes of I guess it's depression... when I don't have a good game to play...where I just get really sad, and I don't want to get out of bed and...I'm...faced with, what's waiting for me on the other side. (Nibs, 862-869)

Nibs' metaphor underscores the stark separation between his two worlds. A short period without distraction exposes him to a desolate, bleak reality. Too daunting a place to visit, participants are inclined to dodge harsh truths through outright avoidance. Flat refusals such as *"I'm not addressing anything. I'll address it in another year"* (Curly, 1074), or *"fortunately, or unfortunately, I don't want to look at it"* (Rufio, 296) become acceptable strategies. Postponing confrontation seems forgivable when faced with such overwhelming dread.

The dread participants feel is partly rooted in what they must relinquish to gain a more permanent foothold IRL. The move would involve giving up the in-game structures that provide meaning, status, and a sense of accomplishment—key elements used to redeem IRL deficiencies. Thus, participants are prone to focus on past investments at the expense of exploring future benefits. Ace captures this reluctance, *"You don't want to lose your progress. Otherwise, you feel like the years you've put into the game are wasted"* (153-155). Rationalising their gaming as necessary to avoid pointless losses *"Otherwise, that means I would have been collecting stuff for absolutely no reason"* (Pockets, 238-239), they can avoid confronting alternative realities. Their choice becomes understandable given the pain associated with abandoning their virtual rewards.

For some, embracing IRL also means exposing their shame and breaking free from the chains of secrecy. In such cases, we often see more creative, covert attempts to disengage.

I don't want the people that care about me to see what it's like for me. Because it'll upset them. I don't want to hurt them. I don't want to be that person, that hurts my family in that way. (Nibs, 686-689)

Nibs has hidden his gaming for 20 years, isolated and suffering, unable to discuss it with his family for "we didn't speak like that" (197). Acknowledging the truth means exposing a tapestry of lies woven over two decades. In his testimony, he devises a way to avoid this deeper pain by justifying his silence as protecting his family. By casting himself as a guardian, he sidesteps the daunting task of revealing the truth.

Denial is also generously applied in wide-ranging attempts to minimise and dismiss the cost of gaming, thereby weakening the stressful vibrations of dissonance.

I think I could have been a mediocre YouTuber if I really wanted to... And I can't do that now...It's too late...So now it's basically just my free time being wasted on this? (Pockets, 108-114)

Pockets begins to speak faster, his pitch rising as if posing a question he fears to answer. This change in delivery suggests that although part of him recognises his own defences, a dominant part deflects attention from the deceit, thus enhancing the likelihood of evading confrontation. While acknowledging

and grieving the loss might resolve this dissonance, he opts instead to deny the repercussions.

By contrast, many of the participants preferred to deny their ability to change.

It almost feels like I can. I know I need. I know I need to do certain Things, but I'll just. I won't, I'll, I'll just put it to one side. (Tootles, 382-384)

Tootles cautiously approaches the steps required for change but soon retreats, using denial—*"I won't"*—to firmly close the door. This denial relieves him from the obligation of trying, as he sees failure as inevitable and effort as futile. In this way, denial reinforces itself. Thoughts such as, *"I don't really have that ability to do that at the moment"* (Rufio, 914), serve as a rationale to avoid change. This avoidance then strengthens the cycle of self-diagnosis, perpetuating the status quo. Conversely, acknowledging the ability to change without sufficient self-compassion plunges Nibs into a cycle of self-reproach: *"You failed. You screwed it up. You went wrong. You had so much to give and yet, you gave nothing"* (Nibs, 726-768). Thus, denial often appears safer, as embracing the potential for change without managing the emotional fallout can lead to a distressing cycle of perceived failures.

Thus, without change, participants often feel increasingly powerless. Failed attempts to alter their course lead to despair as a means to extract some hope from their predicaments. When Nibs declares, *"no, I think that's it; game over*

really” (Nibs, 738), he finds solace in acknowledging defeat, accepting the inevitability as a form of peace. This acceptance of hopelessness, as seen in his lament, “*Yeah, well, that's, that's my life. Just one, long, meaningless pursuit*” (519-520), grants him a semblance of control and relief from self-criticism. Similarly to Nibs, Tootles learns that if defeat is an acquired taste, then familiarity with it may lessen its bitterness.

It's depressing...But I've known...I've suffered with it for so long, I know it is social anxiety and the depression with it. Like I don't. I don't know. I don't really feel that much saying it, out loud. I've, I've known it for so long. (Tootles, 426-429)

Tootles demonstrates in his delivery how well-acquainted he is with the process of numbing himself against deeper pain. As his tone takes on an emotionless and dissociated quality, we observe a psychological withdrawal—a retreat into detachment that allows him to endure his circumstances. In this reconciliation, he resigns himself to his confinement, adapting to a reality that has become increasingly difficult to challenge.

Collectively, Participants employ wide-ranging defences to minimise internal dissonance, deliberately disconnecting from their power and self-belief: they make peace with “the devil they know” to sidestep the pain of change.

4.6.2 Integrate and Overcome: Bridging the Gap between Worlds

By contrast, this subtheme examines the experiences of participants who reported less game-related suffering. Here we see a pattern of shame-resilience, self-compassion, and a commitment to a vision beyond gaming.

One of the most distinguishing features was the ability to constructively defend against shame, allowing participants to develop authenticity and grow from their experiences. While all participants acknowledged the social stigma associated with a gaming identity, only a few demonstrated resilience against its impact.

Hey, my name is [IRL name]. I'm 26-years-old, currently living in [City Name] in the North-East in the UK. (Ace, 6-7).

Ace seeks immediate transparency in his interview. His confidence strikes a noticeable discord against the anonymity of those preferring to go by the name of their in-game avatar. Nibs ventures an explanation.

I just don't think I want to be associated with gaming. I don't want to be. Again, even though I know I am, I don't really want to have that. Title. I don't want people to think of me in that way. (Nibs, 655-658)

Nibs wears a cloak of secrecy: a mantle of shame. It is worn to protect its wearer against judgment and rejection, but the bearer is also compounding the existing humiliation. Conflicted, torn between fear of judgement and self-acceptance, Nibs remains stuck between worlds, unable to bridge the divide: he must

partition his identities. By contrast, gamers reporting less suffering appear cautious of this approach.

I'm not really hiding behind a veil as it were...I think creating a person or an avatar in a game and living vicariously through that...can be problematic. (Rufio, 617-624)

Rufio emphasises the importance of maintaining a unified identity across gaming and IRL contexts. The danger is perceived as living indirectly through gaming, substituting the virtual self for the real one. Thus, Rufio explains how he “*smudged the two together*” (38-39), merging the gamer part with a larger whole. This approach protects against shame development and enables some participants to authentically flourish through gaming experiences. Ace's declaration, “*you'll never meet a more passionate, enthusiastic person about World of Warcraft. Ever!*” (692-693), illustrates a rare level of freedom. Unlike Ace, the self-expansion of many participants is limited by the aspects of themselves they choose to alienate.

Another distinguishable feature of resilience to gaming-related suffering, was a participant's ability to maintain a vision for their IRL future. Nibs reveals the alarming prospect of returning to IRL when blind to these opportunities.

I guess I would have nothing to do. I don't really know how I would, what I would do...all I can think of is, is I'd just be existing. And my existence doesn't fill me with excitement. (Nibs, 535-538)

Nibs reveals the unsettling experience of being disconnected from a sense of self. When paired with another account where he describes his life as “*staring at a rectangular light bulb in front of you...like having extreme blinkers on in life*” (694-695), we gain a clear picture of the problem. His words suggest a narrowing of perspective, where gaming fixation constricts his awareness of possibilities beyond the virtual world. In contrast, Ace sees his life as more than just gaming, actively exploring “*how I can transition [gaming] into a real-life scenario*” (1520). Unlike Nibs, he envisions merging his virtual and real worlds, thereby mitigating the risk of placing all his eggs in one basket. Ace’s approach fosters an IRL vision and showcases his resilience against dependency, as evidenced by his strategy for coping with the scenario of losing access to WOW.

I wouldn't be annoyed that...I'd lost my account^e. I'd be grateful that I'd met the people that I'd met, and I'd be grateful that I'd accumulated the skills that I've learned. (Ace, 707-710)

Although Ace has spent 17 of his 26 years playing WOW, his extensive game time doesn't necessarily indicate dependency. For Ace, gaming serves as a stepping stone, a transitional phase rather than a permanent state. He remains forward-looking, viewing IRL not as a source of dread but as a land of considered opportunity.

Participants who reported a healthier relationship with gaming also showed an ability to regulate a balance between time spent in the virtual and real worlds.

This balancing act was precarious, as failures could lead to debilitating losses of self-belief, exemplified by Nibs' admission, "*I haven't got what it takes*" (794). However, Rufio sheds light on the qualities that may help manage the equilibrium.

I'm not perfect, but I think. I think that I try, and I think, that's the main, that's the main thing. I think trying and, and, ultimately doing as best you can. (Rufio, 814-816)

Rufio tentatively reflects on his self-discipline, and as his thoughts coalesce, we observe a live moment of growth and reinforcement. His self-compassion serves as a buffer against his internal critic, leading him to accept that being 'good enough' is a viable alternative to perfection. His rules regarding in-game -IRL balance are flexible—not rigid—allowing them to withstand challenges without breaking. In this process, Rufio demonstrates the inherent power of witnessing oneself set a course of action and progressing through each step sustainably.

Even the participants that struggled most, gripped in a dependency that felt outside of their control, had not lost sight of this phenomenon.

Just being able to take the dog for a walk, the little things. Then you know it opens up so many more, avenues, you know, more corridors, more doors. (Tootles, 579-581)

Tootles maintains a faint hope: a chain of positive growth awaits, each step unlocking the next, provided he can initiate the first move. Thus, in the presence of repeated victory, participants can develop a sense of mastery over their future.

You can look at it as a 'what if', but that hasn't happened and so now all I can really do is look forward into the future and say, you know, "if you do want to find out 'what if' go and do it now". (Ace, 750-753)

Ace, the youngest participant, may not have faced the same IRL costs of long-term gaming as others. However, his robust self-belief acts as a buoyancy aid, preventing him from sinking into potential regret and worse, despair. With a strong sense of agency IRL, Ace finds it easier to break free from negative comparison. He understands that he has the power to shape his future in any direction he chooses.

This subtheme explores the benefits of merging virtual and real-life worlds highlighting its effect on shame resilience, authenticity and self-compassion. This integration can help create a virtuous cycle of positive reinforcement, accessible beyond a barrier of pain that many hesitate to confront.

4.6.3 GET Four: Summary

The final GET reveals the dual aspects of participant experiences of change. It identifies the defence mechanisms that many use to reduce the painful realities

of change, seeking refuge in maintaining the status quo. Conversely, it highlights the positive traits—such as resilience, authenticity, and self-compassion—exhibited by gamers like Ace and Rufio, who have managed to bridge their virtual and real-world selves more effectively. These insights underline the main barriers to personal growth faced by gamers and illuminate protective qualities that could be cultivated in therapy to mitigate gaming-related suffering and empower individuals to tackle real-life challenges.

4.7 Analysis Summary

The analysis of the four GETs reveals that the participants' experiences of feeling stuck, reflect an entrenched symbiosis between the real and virtual world. This relationship differs individually, ranging from mutually beneficial to one that becomes increasingly imbalanced and detrimental over time.

The first GET probes into how gamers seek refuge in virtual worlds as a respite from IRL inadequacies and conflict. It illustrates how online platforms serve as a haven where individuals, grappling with appearance-based shame and relational difficulties, find a community that negates their image concerns and fosters conflict resolution. This virtual escape offers a credible solution to their isolation, enabling connections that are absent in their offline lives.

The second GET explores the in-game progression from initial relief to dependency. Initially, this virtual realm seems like a pain-free paradise, but gradually, hidden costs accrue over time. This segment underscores the sharp

contrast between the participants' empowered online personas and their eroding presence IRL. If left unchecked, this is characterized by a loss of self-respect and a gradual descent into layered shame.

The third GET explores how participants are drawn to virtual roles that promise social validation and leadership, attempting to compensate for unmet IRL needs. The temporary virtual achievements provide an illusion of healing, addressing deep-seated emotional wounds through in-game feedback. However, this semblance of recovery is often fleeting, as the artificial validation falls short of genuine IRL interaction, leading participants to repeatedly cycle between rise and fall.

The final GET outlines the dual response strategies participants employ towards change. It details how defence mechanisms such as denial and avoidance are used to sidestep the discomfort of transformation and maintain the status quo. In contrast, it also highlights the resilience, authenticity, and self-compassion of those who have successfully integrated their virtual and real-world identities. This integration not only reduces gaming-related suffering but also emphasises the protective qualities that can be developed to effectively tackle IRL challenges.

The analysis exposes the threads of dependency that can tightly weave between a player and their game, serving as valuable insights to those seeking to unravel the complexity of the entanglement.

Chapter Five

Discussion

5.1 Overview

This chapter synthesises the findings from the analysis, relating them to the body of research reviewed in Chapter Two. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis used in this study is inherently inductive, guiding the research into “new and unanticipated territory” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 119). Consequently, the Discussion also introduces new research beyond the initial literature review, offering fresh insights into long-term problematic gaming.

Given the limited research on the experiences and complexities of long-standing gaming dependency, the initial review underscored the importance of addressing the central research question: among online gamers, what are the meanings and underlying constructs of feeling ‘stuck’ between their real and virtual lives? Semi-structured interviews with six male participants, identifying as long-term gamers and reporting a sense of being ‘stuck’ while playing the MMORPG ‘WOW: Classic,’ provided the data for this exploration.

The findings of this study amplify recurrent themes from existing gaming and addiction literature, highlighting how at-risk gamers, isolated and struggling with inadequate familial support (Sela et al., 2020), escape into online worlds (Melodia et al., 2020) to reduce self-discrepancy (Courtois et al., 2011) and

meet unfulfilled psychological needs (Allen & Anderson, 2018). However, the current study exposes novel insights into the experiences of long-term gamers and recommends fresh approaches for therapeutic intervention. The results emphasise the antagonistic friction between a gamer's dual existences, and how this dimensional polarity fuels reliance on virtual worlds. Breaching new ground, the results highlight the destructive role of grief-avoidance in immobilising long-term gamers, and it illustrates the cyclical patterns of unconscious trauma reenactments that further entrench players in virtual worlds.

Additionally, the discussion critiques the research process, including an evaluation of reflexivity, which acknowledges and assesses the researcher's influence on the study. Most importantly, the findings support the view that gaming dependency should not be seen as a character flaw or a failure of will, but as a credible response to human suffering (Maté, 2008). This study advocates for a departure from manualised CBT approaches when working with long-term online gamers, recommending a shift towards formulation-driven interventions that explore the unique interplay between gamer and game, aiming to bridge the gap between virtual and real-world identities.

5.2 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Addiction Literature

This section reconceptualises the emerging themes from Chapter Four into a cohesive framework that enhances understanding of long-term gaming. The Group Experiential Themes are reorganised into three interrelated constructs:

Antagonistic Polarity of Parallel Existences, Stuck in Neverland, which captures the immobilising effects of compounding opportunity costs, and Regenerating Shame, reflecting the cyclical nature of trauma re-enactments within gaming. This structure enables a more integrated discussion of how these dynamics manifest in clinical settings and inform therapeutic approaches. Table 4 maps the Group Experiential Themes onto these constructs, providing a visual representation of their relationship.

Table 4

Mapping Group Experiential Themes onto Three Interrelated Constructs

Themes	Sub-Themes	Interrelated Constructs
Escape to Neverland	Despicable Me	Antagonistic Polarity, Stuck in Neverland, Regenerating Shame
	Secure Base	Antagonistic Polarity
	The Lost Boys	Antagonistic Polarity
Fool's Paradise	The Sword of Damocles	Stuck in Neverland
	Master IG	Antagonistic Polarity
	Servant IRL	Antagonistic Polarity
Rise from the Ashes, Fall from Grace	Rise of the Phoenix	Regenerating Shame
	Descent of the Phoenix	Regenerating Shame
From a Familiar Hell to an Uncertain Future	Licence to Game	Antagonistic Polarity, Stuck in Neverland, Regenerating Shame
	Integrate & Overcome	Antagonistic Polarity, Stuck in Neverland, Regenerating Shame

5.2.1 The Antagonistic Polarity of Parallel Existences

The antagonistic polarity between real and virtual worlds represents a critical axis of the reconceptualised framework. Chapter Two thoroughly examines the risk factors that culminate in distressing real-world experiences (Rho et al., 2018), which gamers often escape by retreating into virtual worlds (Melodia et al., 2020), and adopting virtual identities (Jin, 2012). This study highlights the tension between these parallel existences, where the mastery, connection, autonomy, authenticity, and pain-relief provided by virtual worlds are starkly contrasted with the disconnection, disempowerment, and dissatisfaction felt in the real world.

The first two sections—"Worlds Apart" and "Divided Identities"—explore the disparities between real and virtual existences, showing how these contrasting experiences create a split within the individual. The third section, "Stuck in Antagonistic Friction," synthesises these disparities to demonstrate how the ongoing tension between these two worlds exacerbates the feeling of being stuck, contributing to a cycle of dependency. This conceptualisation offers a deeper understanding of how the friction between these parallel existences can anchor long-term gamers, preventing them from fully engaging with their real lives.

Worlds Apart. Current findings suggest that gaming dependency is driven by the attempt to cope with the unbearable. Virtual worlds provide a

reliable relief from miserable, isolated and shameful real-world existences. This study supports the compassionate view of addiction (Maté, 2008), framing online gaming dependency as a credible solution to pain. Strong attachments to WOW were formed—a game frequently described as a ‘comfort blanket’ a ‘safe haven’ or ‘solace’—where simply logging in could offer instant relief. Persistent virtual worlds become a dependable source of emotional stability, akin to a ‘constant object’ (Hartmann, 1952), or a ‘secure base’ (Bowlby, 1988). In stark contrast, participants experienced real-world instability marked by personal distress, emotional neglect, and relational conflict.

The literature links maladaptive gaming behaviours to gamers whose basic psychological needs are frustrated IRL but fulfilled in-game (Remedios et al., 2023). Likewise, participants in this study described a striking polarity between worlds, where relatedness, autonomy, and competence were readily attainable in-game yet elusive IRL. For many, the structured and goal-oriented nature of gaming provided clear pathways to success, which stood in opposition to the often vague and unstructured challenges of real life. Virtual achievements were concrete, measurable, and within reach, while comparable successes in the real world seemed unformulated, distant, and difficult to navigate.

Anonymous, audio-only environments further reduced conflict in-game, effectively sidestepping social and appearance-based deficits, aligning with contemporary literature that highlights the formation of strong supportive bonds within gaming communities (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019), facilitated by the ease and frequency of social interaction (Bacchini et al., 2017). In these virtual

spaces, participants found themselves in the driving seat of their virtual lives, where autonomy unlocked a powerful connection to in-game enthusiasm and discipline—a stark contrast to their struggles with motivation and achievement IRL.

Divided Identities. Echoing the gap between real and virtual worlds, the study highlights the parallel formation of dual and divergent identities. The literature shows that identities such as ‘gamer’ are shaped within networks of like-minded peers (Weller, 2007), influencing self-concept and perceptions of others (Currie et al., 2007). In this study, participants’ narratives reflected prior findings (Kokkini et al., 2022), when they invoked identity constructions, such as ‘no-lifer’, branding themselves as ‘abnormal’ and likely to be greatly misunderstood by ‘your average 9-5 person’. Isolated from ‘normal’ mainstream society and inhabiting parallel—often nocturnal realities—participants viewed themselves as cautious outsiders, deviants, fearing judgement if their behaviours were disclosed.

The study also supports research showing that online anonymity encourages greater authenticity among gamers (Marino et al., 2020). With reduced fear of judgement, disinhibited participants experimented with new identities, often describing the sense of power from accessing negative parts of the self; parts denied them IRL (Hu et al., 2017). Online, in control of their social trajectories, participants reduced self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987), achieving a status and social value that lessened the gap between their actual and idealised real-world selves (Courtois et al., 2011). Collectively, the results indicate that long-term

online gamers experience a polarising split between identities, where the power and renown afforded the 'gamer' are offset by the impotence and obscurity of the 'player'.

Stuck in Antagonistic Friction. In treating long-term gaming dependency, the polarity between a gamer's parallel existences offers clinicians a crucial framework for exploration. The conflicting realities emerge as both a consequence of dependent behaviours and a roadmap for disentanglement and integration. Understanding the friction between dual existences and how gamers oscillate between them is vital.

First, when the virtual world becomes a reliable source of emotional stability, gamers gradually stop practicing self-regulation IRL, becoming stuck in a cycle of outsourcing emotional coping. Many participants showed acute aversion to confronting internal distress offline, relying on the numbing effect of digital immersion. According to Maté (2012), this process is a credible response to the unbearable, leading to a 'disconnection from self'. Over time, gamers can become reliant on an external locus of control, stemming from a chronic disconnection from their internal emotions. These findings align with the view of addiction as a disorder of self-regulation (Khantzian, 1997). Gamers' internal ability to regulate emotions is substituted by the external virtual world, which reliably reduces emotional distress. Stuck gamers may desire more engagement in the physical world but are often impaired by inadequate emotional skills, partially resulting from long-term disconnection from the self.

Second, the sustained disconnection from real-world emotions can be framed as the suppression of authenticity (Maté, 2012). Participants learned that survival IRL required repressing undesirable parts of themselves. In contrast, online communities offered enduring friendships and a greater degree of self-expression, allowing participants to maintain their authenticity without sacrificing belonging. This experience of community—of feeling understood and accepted—directly contrasts with the judgment and stigma expected IRL. Consequently, gamers can embrace parts of themselves that they would otherwise conceal, dividing their identity between realms and requiring the status quo to remain whole.

From an Object Relations perspective, online worlds could be considered 'transitional objects' (Winnicott, 1951) for gamers, facilitating authenticity in the process of individuation and 'psychological birth' (Mahler, 1975). In Object Relations theory, transitional objects are typically comforting items that aid in the transition from dependence to independence (Winnicott, 1971). Rather than a typical comforting prop like a blanket, the digital realm serves as a space where gamers can explore and regulate their development of 'becoming me' (Klein, 1959). Stuck gamers may be caught in a dislocated expression of self, flourishing authentically in virtual conditions but regressing to child-like helplessness upon returning to real-life. They must stay stuck to stay whole.

Third, gamers struggle to detach from virtual worlds that fulfil basic needs often frustrated IRL (Allen & Anderson, 2018). Brené Brown (2015) argues that Western societies favouring materialism and individualism breed cultures of

scarcity, implicitly teaching us that we are “never enough” (p. 16). Mimicking IRL, WOW also offered a materialistic culture, but with a significant difference. The rules to the in-game meritocratic systems that guarded the scarce resources were known, transparent and tangible. Consequently, participants felt like masters of their universe, with clear, attainable paths to accomplishment and social value. Furthermore, games offer safe spaces for rejection and failure, ensuring that if at first you don’t succeed, you will eventually. In-game quest-givers guide gamers in incremental progressive steps. A gamer facing seemingly insurmountable odds IRL, knows that at least the virtual world is designed to be beaten. The present study complements existing literature on need-satisfaction (Mills et al., 2018), adding that long-term stuck gamers become highly sensitive to the differences in need-satisfaction between worlds. An over-reliance on the virtual world exacerbates difficulties in meeting real-world needs, contributing to a self-reinforcing loop of dependency.

Fourth, structural differences between worlds enable players to become powerful agents of self-determination in-game, allowing long-term gamers to vicariously reduce self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). Re-designing themselves through customisable avatars in virtual worlds, players can compensate for IRL inadequacies, achieving higher levels of self-actualisation online (Maslow, 1943). The antagonistic polarity between the actual, struggling real-world self, and the flourishing virtual ideal self, contributes to the dependency of the gamer: the greater the disparity, the greater the need for the complementary support.

However, this user-avatar relationship can fast become imbalanced. Participants often described the dynamic as a hostile takeover, where the user ends up dedicating all their time to the avatar (or collection of avatars), bestowing upon them the affection they withhold from themselves. This process can be seen as a self-tightening codependent relationship, where both the gamer and the avatar achieve validation at the expense of enabling the other's dysfunction (Oakley et al., 2011). Over time, stuck gamers can suffer from a chronic lack of self-care IRL, bearing witness to their own self-destruction, and feeling trapped by a declining helplessness they cannot escape. Stuck, they cling more tightly to their online worlds and avatar-based achievements, uncomfortable with disrupting a reliable conduit to validation and self-esteem.

Lastly, when participants become absorbed in the vibrancy and opportunities of their virtual world, they lose sight of their future IRL, which gradually pales and atrophies. Deleuze et al. (2019), found that prolonged escape into virtual worlds lead to a preference for virtual stimuli. This study builds on this phenomenon, describing the preference as a defence mechanism to avoid confronting real-world pain. In a vicious circle, future-oriented thinking requires stuck gamers to confront unhealed pain, increasing their pressure to escape into virtual worlds. Furthermore, participants frequently described how the past was often glamourised, leading to further disconnection from their future. Driven by nostalgia, they attempt to recreate powerful memories of in-game pleasure and connection, akin to pouring through a virtual photo album. These findings add to addiction literature, showing how focusing on future time dimensions can serve as a protective factor against gaming (Lukavska, 2012), internet and

social media dependencies (Przepiorka & Blachnio, 2016). However, in this study, nostalgic pursuits may be seen as an unhelpful form of comparison that idealises the past, turning participants away from the future that real life offers.

Collectively, the unresolved polarities of parallel existences present online gamers with a no-win scenario. Stuck gamers are caught in a double bind, trapped between conflicting realities, where involvement in one negates the potential of the other. What starts as a credible solution to pain evolves into an antagonistic relationship fraught with trade-offs, compromises, and sacrifices. Without understanding this complex dynamic, therapists' risk having disengaged or disillusioned clients, unable to address the deep-seated conflicts that keep gamers tethered between their existences. As a result, these clients may further entrench themselves as the polarity between their realities widens over time.

5.2.2 Stuck in Neverland: Immobilised by Impending Doom

The attempt to escape from pain, is what creates more pain. (Maté, 2008, p. 112)

This study focuses on non-adolescent problem gamers, offering fresh insights into the long-term impacts of online gaming dependency. These gamers, often unable to reconcile their dual existences, increasingly turn to virtual worlds as a refuge. However, the inevitable passage of time introduces a growing opportunity cost—a life potentially left unfulfilled. As time slips away, gamers

returning to the real world can feel like mere spectators in the ruins of their abandoned futures, grappling with mounting dread and internal conflict. This blend of anxiety and sadness propels a self-perpetuating cycle, where retreating into gaming exacerbates these challenges. Time, unyielding, strips away the illusion of refuge in virtual worlds, leaving gamers immobilised by the looming threat of an unaddressed reality.

Peter Pan (Barrie, 1991) provides a fitting allegory for these findings, portraying long-term dependent gamers as modern-day Lost Boys. They flee the real world's demands for the perpetual youth and power offered by Neverland, a virtual playground free from adult responsibilities. Yet, when they return to the real world, the illusion shatters—the world has moved on, leaving them unsure of their place. Sylvia Plath's (2008) "The Bell Jar" vividly captures this dilemma.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked...I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (p. 217)

To sustainably return to the real-world, stuck gamers may need to relinquish the pluripotentiality of their imagined identities and confront the limiting reality of maturity and individuation. They must also accept and grieve for the losses

incurred. This study underscores how failure to reconcile these conflicting identities can leave gamers perpetually trapped in their virtual Neverlands.

The longer they remain, the more uncomfortable their stay becomes. Rejecting real life intensifies cognitive dissonance, as they are further divorced from their authenticity and power IRL. This disconnection heightens self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) and exacerbates unmet needs (Allen & Anderson, 2018). Unable to bridge the gap between their virtual and real selves, participants often resort to strategies like martyrdom and ambivalence, justifying their gaming as the lesser of two evils or a necessary salve. These findings align with addiction literature, which highlights the crucial role of resolving ambivalence in recovery (Shaffer & Simoneau, 2001), and extends these concepts to long-term gaming dependency.

Additional strategies, such as embracing victimhood and despair, reflect participant attempts to regain control amidst the chaos of their lives. These findings resonate with contemporary grief research (Poxon, 2023), which identifies how patterns of thinking and coping can entrench individuals in pain and loss, and mirrors the unresolved grief emphasised in wider addiction studies (Denny & Lee, 1984). Without targeted interventions to process the losses from prolonged gaming, individuals may remain stuck in their familiar hells, avoiding the dissonance and loss required to journey into an uncertain future.

5.2.3 Regenerating Shame: Unresolved Trauma Reenactments

Freud (1920) introduced the concept of the “compulsion to repeat” as an explanation for the individual’s tendency to replicate painful past experiences. Psychoanalytic literature continues to explore this concept, often framing it as an unconscious expression of trauma (Levy, 1998), where one is drawn to the familiar (Weiss, 2021), unintentionally linking the past and the present (Van de Vijver et al., 2017). This repetition is thought to be an attempt at mastery, a struggle for redemption and wholeness (Bowins, 2010). Similarly, the present study highlights how the compulsive desire to repeat trauma manifests in virtual environments. The agency and freedom offered by role-playing avatars in fantasy realms provide gamers with an arena to reenact past traumas. However, like the cyclical rise and fall of the mythical phoenix, these efforts can trap gamers in a cycle of failed attempts to heal developmental trauma, unwittingly regenerating the shame that drives their need to repeat these patterns.

Rufio, a participant in this study, exemplifies this pattern. Having been bullied for dyslexia, he developed a core belief in his own perceived lack of intelligence, which led him to believe that others would not value his contributions. This aligns with existing literature on developmental trauma, such as bullying or parental neglect, which plays a pivotal role in pathological shame (Schimmenti, 2012). These early experiences often result in maladaptive changes to the internal working model (Bowlby, 1973), leading to distorted self-perceptions and negative expectations of interpersonal relationships. Reborn online, Rufio felt compelled to assume leadership roles, seemingly driven by a desire to

master his unconscious trauma. He gravitated towards in-game leadership, role-playing as the essential 'tank' in an advancing vanguard, where his social value depended on his strength and command abilities. However, despite receiving positive in-game feedback, the validation was incomplete and fell short of true healing. His need for external validation made him increasingly vigilant to the quality of in-game feedback, scanning for signs of insincerity, which led to suspicion and conflict. This aligns with Bradshaw's (2005), observation that regenerative shame and addiction often interact (p. 37): experiences intended to liberate individuals from shame can deepen it, creating a cycle of meta-shame that further entraps them in attempts to resolve these feelings.

This redemption cycle underscores significant concepts for long-term online gaming. Firstly, repeated failed attempts to gain mastery can exacerbate original shame, promote helplessness, and weaken ego-strength, leading to compensatory behaviours such as external vigilance and projection. Participants in this study often described a sense of imminent collapse, akin to living in a house of cards—a phenomenon linked to substance abuse (Dodes, 1990). Moreover, gamers caught in repetitive reenactment loops may develop a form of limerence toward their avatars, similar to the infatuation seen in love addiction (Fisher et al., 2016), using intense online fantasies of redemption to escape their real lives. This drive to reenact trauma can also deepen user-avatar identification, which has been identified as a significant predictor of gaming disorder (T. Brown et al., 2024). The present study provides qualitative support for the role that trauma reenactments play in the relationship between

childhood trauma and addictions (Costanzo et al., 2023). Enhancing stuck gamers' ability to integrate painful past experiences into their identities may be crucial. This integration fosters a unified self-concept, aiming to halt the unconscious repetition of trauma that keeps them bound to virtual worlds.

5.3 Summary of Findings

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of long-term online gaming among adults, an under-researched demographic. It examines how gamers seeking to disentangle themselves from virtual worlds may need to navigate the antagonistic friction between parallel existences, overcome the immobilising effects of compounded dread, and explore and unravel their unconscious compulsions to reenact trauma.

Firstly, the polarising experiences of parallel existences illustrate how virtual worlds offer gamers relief from real-world distress while simultaneously fostering dependency. This antagonistic friction underscores the contrast between the virtual world's mastery, connection, and autonomy and the real world's disconnection and disempowerment. This dichotomy causes gamers to oscillate between these parallel worlds, preventing full engagement with either and presenting a novel therapeutic focus on reconciling fragmented identities.

Secondly, prolonged immersion in gaming can lead to a sense of immobilisation driven by impending dread. As gamers retreat further into virtual worlds, they encounter a growing opportunity cost—a life unfulfilled in reality—fuelled by a

mixture of anxiety and sadness over accrued losses. This self-perpetuating cycle exacerbates their detachment from reality, hindering their ability to envision or invest in their future. This paralysis is metaphorically captured through the allegory of Peter Pan, where gamers, akin to the Lost Boys, remain stuck in Neverland, disconnected from the adult responsibilities and progress of the real world.

Thirdly, virtual environments may facilitate trauma reenactments, where gamers unconsciously recreate past traumas in an attempt to achieve mastery. This process contributes to the feeling of being stuck, as virtual worlds offer a pseudo-solution that ultimately fails to heal developmental wounds, perpetuating a cycle of shame and disconnection. This reenactment complicates gamers' ability to integrate painful past experiences into a cohesive self-concept, highlighting a crucial therapeutic focus on breaking the cycle and fostering genuine healing and integration.

Collectively, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how these three factors—antagonistic parallel existences, immobilisation by impending dread, and trauma reenactments—contribute to the sense of being stuck in virtual worlds. The findings offer new insights into the psychological mechanisms underpinning long-term gaming dependency, underscoring the need for therapeutic approaches that address the polarity between gamers' virtual and real-world existences. Such approaches should aim to help gamers integrate fragmented identities, accept incurred losses, reconcile past trauma, and embrace the realities of adult life.

5.4 Clinical Implications

Literature suggests that combining pharmacotherapy with CBT or multi-level counselling is most effective for Gaming Disorder (Chang et al., 2022). However, the quality of studies into treatment efficacy is compromised by cultural insensitivities and non-standardised measurement (Zajac et al., 2017). Furthermore, the overwhelming focus on younger demographics leaves a gap in understanding how these interventions apply to long-term sufferers. This study interviewed six long-term adult gamers (mean age 31, SD=4.1), four of whom had therapy where gaming behaviours were rarely addressed in-session. This section aims to encourage clinicians to engage more deeply with digital realms in their work with clients, equipping them with strategies to manage the prolonged impacts of gaming.

Clinicians that adopt a compassionate approach may recognise long-term gaming as a coping mechanism for underlying pain. Drawing on Gabor Mate's insights (2008), the focus can then shift from questioning the addiction to understanding the pain driving it. Clinicians are encouraged to explore the specific nuances of gaming behaviour, such as player motivations and the rewards involved. For a client base prone to a fear of stigma and misunderstanding, validating gaming as a credible solution to pain can bridge the gap between therapist and client, fostering open dialogue. To strengthen the therapeutic alliance, therapists can mimic client language (Borelli et al., 2019) and use gaming metaphors, such as "level-up" for skill development and

"quests" for therapeutic tasks. While this could be a useful approach, its impact on therapeutic outcomes remains unverified. Future research should explore whether incorporating gaming language supports therapy and how it influences the practitioner-client dynamic.

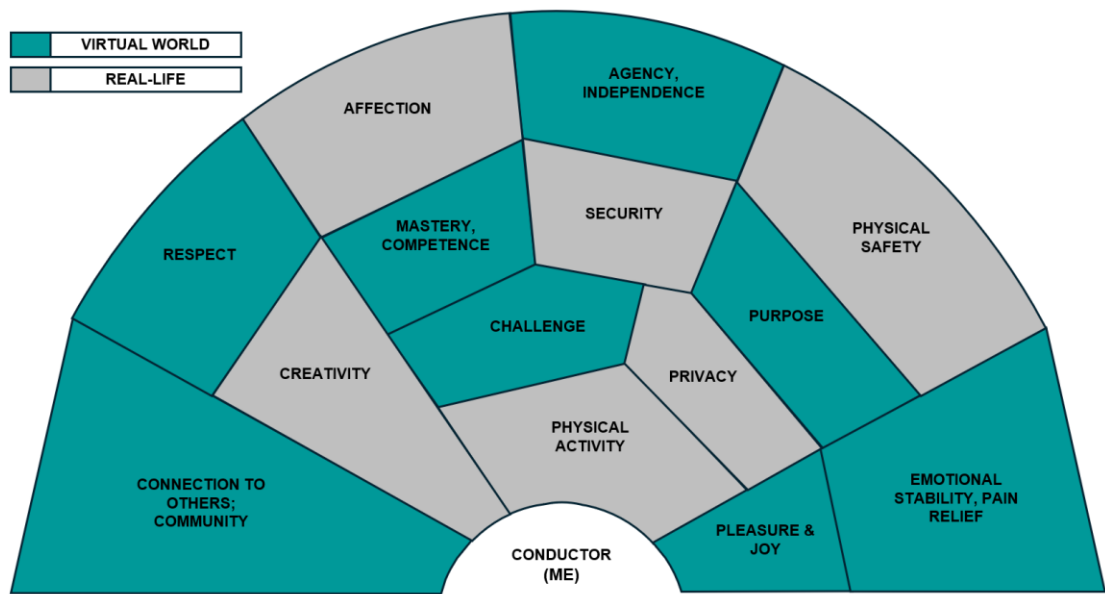
The investigation of the client experience should include the concept of need-frustration. This involves examining factors that draw clients to virtual worlds and comparing these with their real-world experiences to identify areas of highest polarity. Prioritising interventions by addressing the greatest discrepancies allows the therapeutic focus to target essential skills for real-world need fulfilment. For instance, if a gamer relies heavily on the virtual world for a sense of mastery and competence, it signals a need to cultivate these feelings IRL.

Clients may benefit from understanding their needs as dislocated between worlds, and metaphors are optimal tools for expressing these complex ideas (Törneke, 2017). Metaphors have been shown to aid understanding of addiction experiences, offering insights into individuals' lived experiences (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). For example, in Chapter Four, Tootles described himself as "*a shell of myself*" (502), when discussing real-life experiences, capturing his sense of emptiness and disconnection outside the virtual world. This illustrates how metaphors can help conceptualise the frustration between virtual and real-world needs, potentially informing therapeutic approaches.

Figures 5 and 6 offer an example of how an orchestral metaphor might help therapists explore client experiences of the antagonistic tension and polarity between their worlds. Future research is needed to determine the extent to which such metaphors enhance therapeutic interventions.

Figure 5

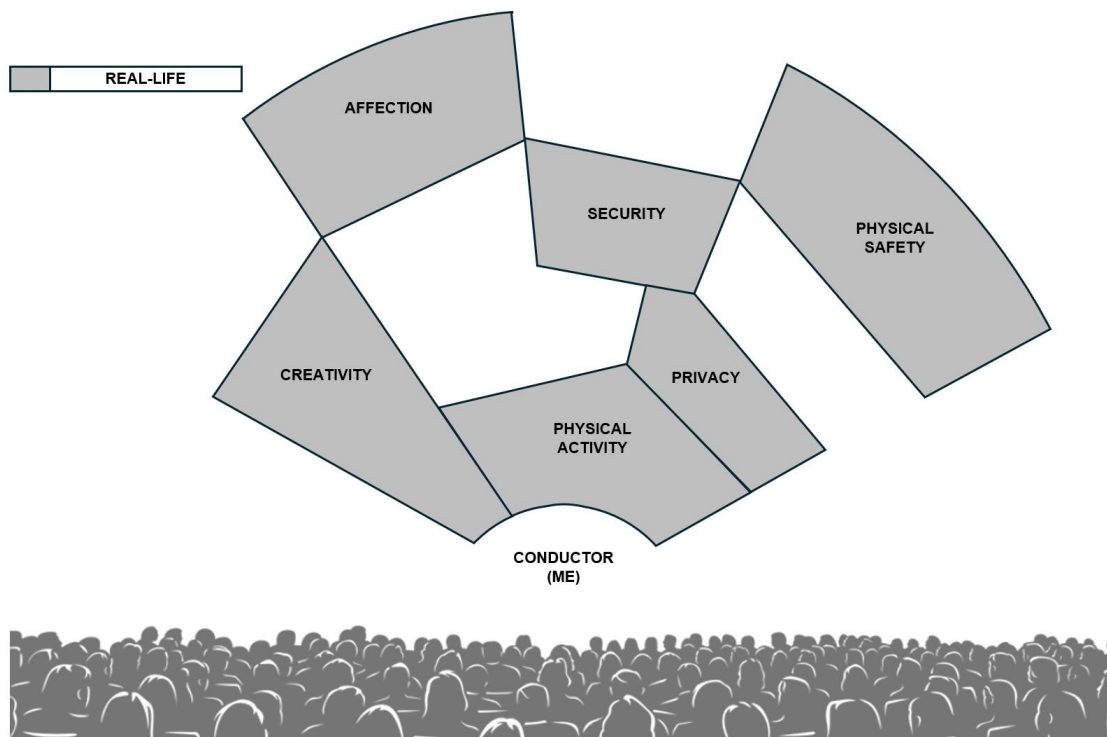
Orchestral Metaphor for Identifying Virtual and Real-World Need-fulfilment



Note: Needs are represented by orchestral sections (e.g., ‘string’ or ‘woodwind’). The client is positioned as conductor.

Figure 6

Orchestral Metaphor for Discussion of Real-World Need-frustration

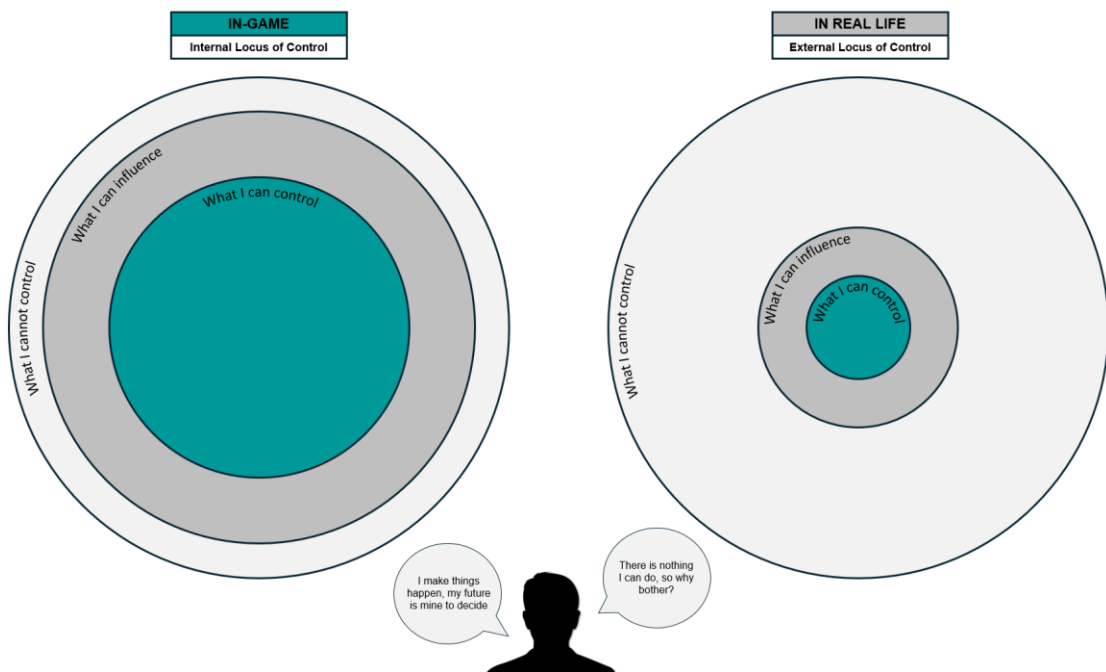


Note: IRL, the orchestra is incomplete (unfulfilled needs). This metaphor can be reframed to a client interest (e.g., a palette with missing colours, a garden needing cultivation, or a chef producing a tasty meal).

As unmet needs are targeted, clinicians might leverage the parallel realities of online gamers to counter resistance with evidence of strength. This principle of positive-psychology is often embraced when addiction is accepted as part of the path that reveals one's potential (Schilling, 2023). For example, when looking at agency, gamers divorced from their autonomy IRL, might exhibit a powerful control online. Figure 7 offers a tool for therapists to compare client-strengths across realms.

Figure 7

A Therapist Tool for Exploring Client Agency Between Worlds



Note: Completed in-session.

The client's identified virtual strengths offer a template for change, a shift from the antagonistic friction that reinforces dependency. For example, the online discipline and motivation to slay dragons, reveals how clients might act if they found an equivalent real-world goal of sufficient merit: the polarity proves the concept.

Framing the 'stickiness' of client experience as the product of disparity between worlds may also be effective in addressing identity issues. Parts of the gamer's identity that are repressed IRL may be allowed to flourish online. This suggests a therapeutic focus on integrating the dual aspects of a gamer's identity, exploring strategies to reconcile their online and offline selves. Techniques promoting greater self-acceptance and authenticity in real-world interactions could decrease the overreliance on virtual worlds for identity validation.

Current findings highlight the immobilising effect of the compounded real-life cost of persistent gaming. Gamers from this study employed wide-ranging strategies of resistance—such as denial, despair, and justification—to eliminate the feeling of rising dread and increased dissonance between gaming behaviours and their investment cost. Chiou and Wan (2007) demonstrated that players who acknowledged the higher cost of gaming were less willing to engage in attitude-discrepant behaviour. Extending this to long-term gaming involves helping clients accept the loss of potential and grieve for the life that could have been. Treatment of gaming addiction may therefore be complicated by a form of mourning (Chambers & Wallingford, 2017), where a process of grieving is required for attachment remodelling to occur.

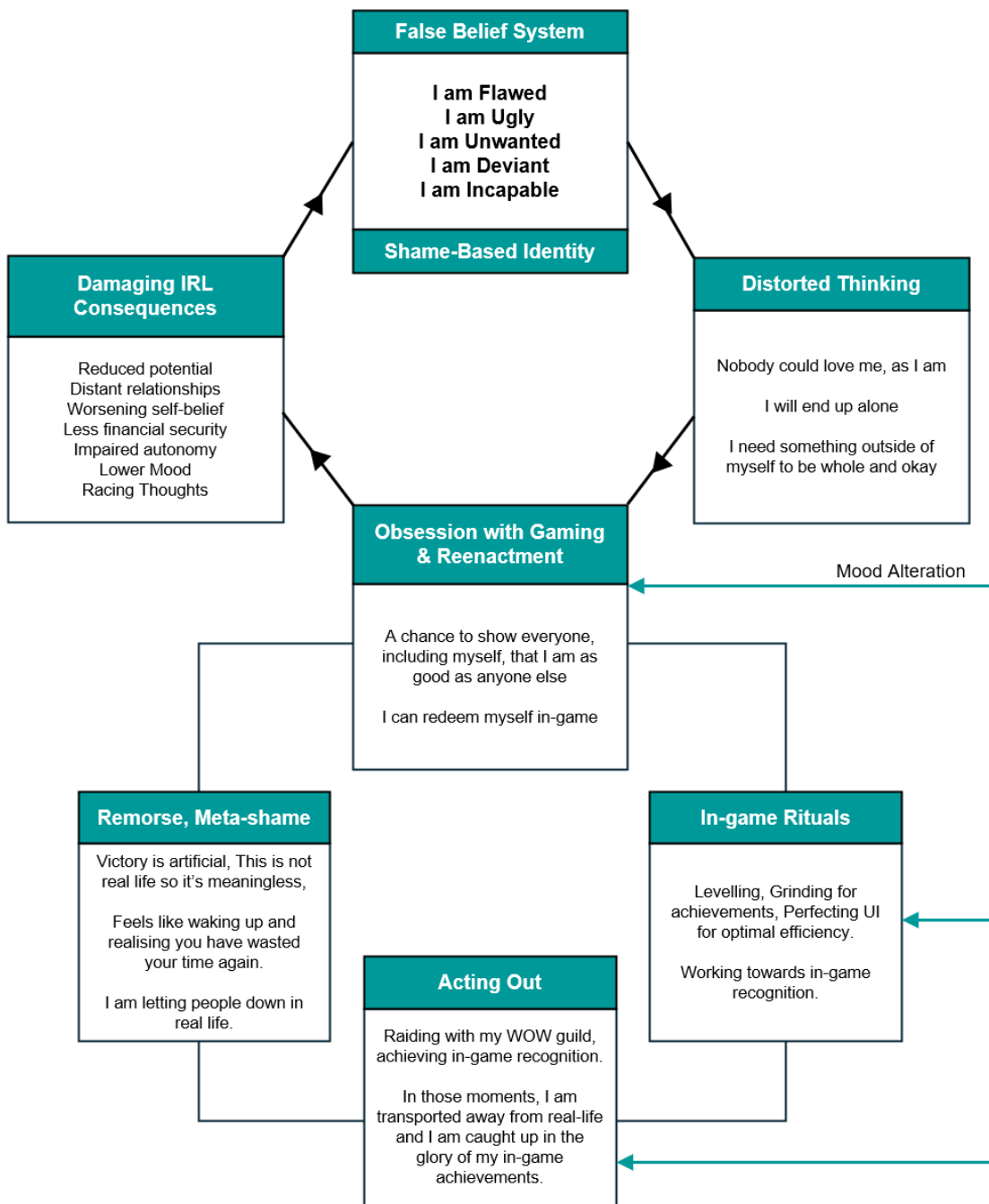
To facilitate this process, therapists can act as a stepping stone, offering a secure foothold for clients transitioning between virtual and real worlds. This journey requires clients to express vulnerabilities, face accrued pain, take accountability, and brave a real world where they might feel untested and lacking. Accepting the investment cost of gaming is a significant hurdle, as it may mask the unresolved anxieties and pain that initially prompted their escape. Given the association between low perceived behavioural control and addiction (Haynes & Ayliffe, 1991), promoting personal responsibility and value-oriented action can help clients shift from avoiding pain to pursuing a self-determined future. During this journey, resistance may recur. Gamers might face Zeno's paradox, where the infinite steps toward progress make the first step seem pointless. Here, clinicians can take on the in-game role of 'quest-

giver', helping clients develop skills to break down overwhelming tasks into consistent, manageable actions over time. A useful metaphor is that of a rope, the strength of which relies on individual entwined strands. IRL, clients can learn to place one strand, then another, slowly building the rope strength to tether them to the physical realm. The clinician's ability to identify and pivot toward emerging resistance will be key in helping clients stay accountable and empowered in their recovery.

Lastly, the cyclical reenactments of trauma within gaming contexts demonstrate how virtual worlds serve as both stages for revisiting past traumas and arenas for potential healing. In attempting to gain mastery over past wounds, clients often fall short of the healing they crave, leading to compounded meta-shame that perpetuates the cycle (Bradshaw, 2005). Therapists looking to disrupt this regenerating shame must help clients verbalise their unconscious drives to repeat these patterns (Levy, 1998). Through a strong therapeutic alliance, therapists should gently point to destructive patterns and encourage client-led exploration. Figure 8 presents a hypothetical formulation of regenerative shame, illustrating how trauma reenactment in gaming could contribute to cycles of self-perpetuating distress.

Figure 8

The Compulsive/Addictive Cycle Fuelled by and Regenerating Shame



Note: Adapted from Bradshaw (2005, p. 37).

Client-led exploration is expected to naturally uncover the underlying pain driving this cycle. Wolf (1988) articulates that this therapeutic process strengthens the client's self by allowing them to re-experience archaic trauma and its effects in a stabilising alliance, facilitating self-enhancing integration and

restructuring (p. 201). Ultimately, successful therapy helps clients unpack the trauma fuelling their destructive cycle, redirecting energy from online reenactment toward real-life.

Collectively, these treatment suggestions are grounded in the emerging themes from this study and are designed to complement existing NHS and CBT-informed approaches for disordered adolescent gaming (Torres-Rodríguez et al., 2018). While current guidelines emphasise behavioural change and cognitive restructuring, the novel interventions proposed here build on these foundations by offering targeted strategies for long-term gamers immersed in virtual worlds. By addressing the deeper emotional and existential conflicts that tether these individuals to their digital environments, this approach provides a more holistic and nuanced pathway to recovery.

5.5 Critiquing the Research

A critical appraisal of this study is essential to contextualise its contributions and acknowledge its limitations. This section evaluates the research quality, sample homogeneity, methodological choices, and potential biases, offering insights into areas for improvement and considerations for future research.

5.5.1 Evaluating Quality

Adhering to Nizza et al.'s (2021) criteria for quality IPA, the research constructed a compelling narrative that provided a rigorous experiential

account. The analysis demonstrated an intimate reading of participant words, ensuring interpretations were grounded in the data. Attention was paid to both convergence and divergence among participant experiences, enriching the depth of analysis. However, the inherent subjectivity of IPA means interpretations are influenced by the researcher's perspectives, requiring reflexivity to mitigate potential biases.

5.5.2 Sensitivity to Context and Methodological Constraints

Yardley's (2000) benchmarks for qualitative research emphasise sensitivity to context, commitment, rigour, transparency, and impact. The study demonstrated strong sensitivity to context through an equitable peer-to-peer dynamic, fostering a comfortable environment for participants. This approach facilitated deeper exploration of lived experiences and ensured authentic representation of participant voices. However, using Microsoft Teams for interviews, a platform less familiar to gamers, may have introduced discomfort and inhibited openness. For example, one participant, Tootles, appeared tentative, possibly due to the unfamiliar and less anonymous setting. This constraint might have deterred potential participants wary of compromising virtual identities, skewing the sample towards those more comfortable bridging their online and offline personas.

5.5.3 Sample Homogeneity and Diversity

The study aimed for a homogeneous sample to ensure depth in exploring shared experiences. While participants shared long-term gaming engagement, variations existed in their degree of 'stuckness.' Two participants were only mildly entangled in gaming compared to others deeply immersed. This diversity, while potentially diluting homogeneity, provided valuable contrasts, highlighting a continuum of gaming dependency. However, this variation necessitates caution when considering impact and transferability, as those less 'stuck' may not fully represent the struggles of more entrenched gamers.

Additionally, not screening for suicidality may have influenced participant engagement. Those experiencing high distress may have self-selected out or responded differently to questioning, impacting the diversity of perspectives captured. Without formal assessment, it remains unclear how suicidality shaped gaming behaviours or participation.

5.5.4 Genre-Specific Focus

The research focused on MMORPG players, allowing in-depth exploration of identity formation and attachment within these virtual environments. However, this specificity raises questions about applicability to gamers in other genres. Games with less community focus—such as *Path of Exile*—may foster different engagement patterns.

5.5.5 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's dual role as an insider introduced unique insights but also potential biases. While this positionality enriched understanding of participant experiences, it risked projecting personal narratives onto the data. Reflexive practices—detailed in Chapter Three and evaluated in Section 5.7—and regular supervision were used to navigate this tension. However, complete detachment is challenging, and some interpretations may inadvertently reflect the researcher's experiences. This highlights the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, particularly when the researcher shares close affiliations with the participant group.

Collectively, while the study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of long-term adult gamers, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Methodological choices, sample diversity, genre specificity, and researcher positionality influenced the research process and outcomes. Recognising these critiques does not diminish the study's contributions but situates its findings within a nuanced context, guiding future research to build upon and address these considerations.

5.6 Future Research

Future research might focus on addressing several critical areas to better understand and support adult gamers struggling with long-term gaming attachments. One key area is exploring strategies to encourage non-help-seeking gamers, particularly those deeply embedded in virtual worlds, to come forward for support. The growing issue of gamers silently retreating into these

environments underscores the need for targeted interventions. Men, in particular, may struggle to seek therapy due to societal expectations around masculinity (Englar-Carlson, 2006), even before the stigma associated with gaming is addressed. Research should investigate ways to reduce these barriers and promote help-seeking behaviours.

Additionally, there is a need to encourage clinicians to initiate conversations about gaming. Many are unfamiliar with the role digital escapism plays in adults' lives. Gamers need not meet disordered gaming criteria for their habits to be problematic, as these behaviours may still contribute to therapy-relevant issues. Future research should examine how clinicians address gaming concerns and identify barriers to these discussions.

Further research should also examine mental health vulnerabilities among long-term gamers, including suicidality. This study did not assess suicidal risk or history, highlighting a limitation. Future studies should address this gap to ensure appropriate safeguarding.

Finally, studies should broaden their scope to explore diverse gaming genres. Examining how attachment differs across gaming types will provide deeper insight into the varied impacts of long-term gaming.

5.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a cornerstone of qualitative research, particularly in IPA, where the researcher's role is inherently interpretative. It entails a critical self-examination of how one's background, assumptions, and experiences influence the research process and outcomes (Finlay, 2002). Given the inherently personal nature of reflexivity, this section is written in the first person to transparently acknowledge my role in shaping the study. This approach aligns with IPA's recognition that interpretations are co-constructed by the researcher and participant (Smith et al., 2009). Given my gaming history, reflexivity was not merely an add-on: it was an ethical and methodological imperative, ensuring the credibility and authenticity of the study.

Consequently—as detailed in Chapter Three—a commitment to reflexive awareness informed design adaptations deployed in the present study. The process helped me navigate the complexities of moving between being an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in the research context (Berger, 2015). This duality required careful reflexive engagement to balance my insider knowledge with the need for analytical objectivity. Overall, my deep immersion and recovery from the gaming world, and a further relapse-recovery prior to the analysis, brought a unique perspective to the study.

5.7.1 Evaluating Reflexive Depth and Impact

Pillow's (2003) reflexive framework provides a valuable lens for evaluating reflexive engagement. Pillow outlines four key approaches: recognising the limits of knowing, acknowledging researcher partiality, understanding the

socially constructed nature of research, and embracing discomfort. These elements are crucial for understanding how my deep personal connection to the research topic influenced both the process and outcomes of this study.

Reflexivity as Recognition of the Limits of Knowing. One of Pillow's core principles is recognising that complete objectivity and full understanding are unattainable in qualitative research. This was particularly salient in my study, where my history as a recovered gamer inherently shaped the research. While my insider perspective offered unique insights, it also imposed limits on my ability to fully detach from the subject matter. I was acutely aware that my interpretations were shaped by my past, necessitating ongoing efforts to acknowledge the limits of my knowing.

This tension was particularly evident during analysis. At times, I projected my own recovery journey onto participants, assuming their paths would mirror my own. If left unchecked, this could have skewed the analysis, overemphasising certain themes while neglecting others. Recognising these limits allowed me to consciously step back and re-evaluate my interpretations, striving to remain open to participants' diverse experiences. However, this also underscored the tension in my role—while my background fostered deep connection, it also risked blurring the lines between my experiences and theirs.

Reflexivity as Recognition of Partiality. Pillow's second approach emphasises researcher partiality and the influence of positionality. My dual role as both an insider and outsider in the gaming world created a complex dynamic

requiring careful navigation. On one hand, my deep engagement with the gaming community provided a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences, enabling me to ask more relevant and insightful questions. On the other, this engagement risked compromising objectivity, making detachment challenging.

The parallel process between my own recovery journey and participants' experiences further highlighted this tension. As I engaged with their stories, I often reflected on my own struggles and triumphs, which enriched the analysis but also posed risks of bias. This bi-directional influence meant that the research was as much about my personal growth as understanding participants' lived experiences. Acknowledging my partiality helped mitigate these risks but required a continuous balancing act—leveraging insider knowledge while remaining critically aware of its limitations.

Reflexivity as Embracing Discomfort. Pillow's framework also stresses embracing discomfort in the reflexive process. This arises when confronting complexities and contradictions, particularly when the researcher is deeply embedded in the subject matter. In my study, this discomfort was constant, manifesting in the tension between my role as a researcher and my identity as a recovered gamer.

This was especially pronounced when considering the risk of relapse. The decision to avoid conducting an ethnography was a necessary measure to protect my recovery. The same gaming networks that facilitated my

understanding of the community also posed a risk, as they remained potential conduits back into virtual worlds. Even now, I recognise that I have not fully severed ties with old gaming contacts, maintaining an umbilical cord that I am perhaps still not ready to cut. This awareness brought discomfort but was crucial for maintaining both research integrity and personal well-being. Embracing this discomfort forced me to confront the ethical and emotional challenges of being both a researcher and a parallel participant in recovery. Ultimately, this reflexive discomfort contributed to a more transparent research process, where the complexities of my positionality were acknowledged rather than suppressed.

Reflexivity as Recognition of the Socially Constructed Nature of Research. Finally, Pillow highlights the socially constructed nature of research, where knowledge is co-created between researcher and participants, shaped by broader societal contexts. In this study, my shared history with participants facilitated deep mutual understanding and an equitable power dynamic. The stigma surrounding gaming and addiction played a significant role in shaping both my recovery journey and participants' experiences, influencing how research questions were framed and data interpreted.

This awareness further complicated analysis. My understanding of gaming dependency was shaped by societal discourses that often pathologise such behaviours, which could have biased my interpretations. To counteract this, I engaged in continuous reflexive practice, questioning how societal influences shaped my analysis and actively seeking out participants' voices to guide

interpretation. This process not only enriched the analysis but also underscored the importance of reflexivity in navigating the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader social contexts.

5.7.2 Reflexive Conclusion

Applying Pillow's (2003) reflexive framework reveals the depth and complexity of reflexivity in this study. Recognising the limits of knowing, acknowledging partiality, embracing discomfort, and understanding the socially constructed nature of research were all integral to navigating the challenges posed by my dual role as a researcher and a recovering gamer. While my engagement with the research topic provided unique insights, it also brought tensions that required careful management. Reflexivity not only enhanced the study's credibility and authenticity but also contributed to my personal growth, underscoring its transformative potential in qualitative research.

5.7.3 Reintegration

As I bring this thesis to a close, I find myself reflecting on the dual journey it represents—one of academic inquiry and another, more personal, path of recovery. While this work is grounded in the experiences of others, it has inevitably intersected with my own history in ways I could not have anticipated. The courage and honesty of the participants have touched me deeply, providing unexpected moments of strength, especially during challenging periods of my own. Their willingness to share their stories was not just a contribution to

research; it was a reminder of the shared human experiences of struggle, resilience, and the search for meaning.

One of the most poignant moments in my recovery occurred in October 2022—a time when I began to sense the possibility of true healing. I recorded this moment in my journal, and it has since become a touchstone for me, something I revisit to remind myself of the progress I've made. I share it here not as a personal revelation but as a reflection of the transformative power that this research—and the process of recovery itself—can hold.

I have just sat down and eaten my dinner which I cooked myself. I used fresh ingredients and followed a recipe. I ate from a clean plate. I sat in the sun and felt no compulsion to do anything but just sit and be. I found myself bursting into the weirdest tears throughout the entire process—from cleaning the kitchen to finishing my plate. I experienced a deep pain that welled out of me and spilled over. A catharsis that melted grief into a sobbing grin. I cannot describe it, beyond feeling as if I was meeting myself after a long absence. And I was crying because I had missed me for so long. They were tears of reunion. (Journal, Oct 2022)

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Appendices


Appendix I: National Centre for Gaming Disorders Statistics



**CNWL
IMPROVEMENT
ACADEMY**

Pioneering the treatment of Gaming Disorders in the UK

M. Da Silva Youngs, T. Piper, R. McDonald, H. Tomy, B. Lockwood, H. Bowden-Jones from the National Centre of Gaming Disorders Team based in Earl's court, London.



Central and North West London
NHS Foundation Trust

Introduction

Gaming disorder (GD) was recognised in the addictions field by the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems in 2018 (11th ed.; ICD-11; World Health Organisation, 2018). The National Centre for Gaming Disorders (NCGD) is the first NHS clinic to accept referrals from adults and young people who are struggling with the characteristics of GD in England which include:

- Impaired control over gaming
- Increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities
- Continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences.

2 years on, the NCGD has seen an influx of referrals totalling 583 to date including people who game and family referrals.

Our team is a collaboration of Clinical and Counselling Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Assistant Psychologists, Administrators, Family Therapists, Drama therapist and Research volunteers.


Aims

- To build a balance between gaming and other activities- abstinence is not necessarily the goal
- To support parents with setting safer limits and creating healthy boundaries
- To support other professionals to manage their clients by sharing knowledge
- To facilitate safe communication between parents and gamers
- To implement psychoeducation as a preventative measure and spread awareness of gaming disorder
- To research and learn from our current methods and evaluate our interventions

Methods

We support a systemic approach to treatment.

Initial assessments carried out by clinicians at the clinic and offered treatment in the form of cognitive behavioural therapy for people who game and a distinct family support pathway for family members.



The clinic actively participates in research with academics and clinicians visiting from a range of universities in the UK and internationally.

Peer support group after discharge as monthly support for parents

Results

Who is accessing our service (Oct 2019-June 2021)?

Age Range: Gamers aged 13-18 at the time of referral represented almost 70% of the sample, followed by 19-25 year olds (21%), over 25 (9%) and under 13 (3%) (See Figure 1D).

Location: Close to half of all gamers referred live in London (45%), followed by the South East (19%), East of England (10%), South West (5%), Yorkshire and Humber (5%), North West (5%), Wales (4%), West Midlands (3%), East Midlands (2%), North East (2%) (See Figure 1C).

Gender: 90% of individuals accessing this service identified as male at the time of referral. The remaining 10% consisted of individuals identifying as female (8%), trans (1%) or other (1%) (See Figure 1A).

Ethnicity: Over 70% of gamers referred to the clinic identify as White, followed by Asian or Asian British (9%), Mixed (9%), Black or Black British (5%) and other ethnicities (2%) (See Figure 1B).

The main games played: Fortnite, Minecraft and Call of Duty

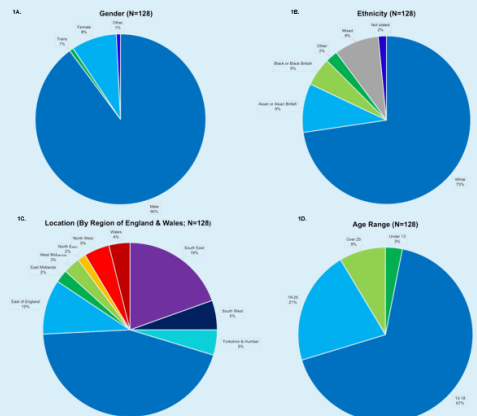


Figure 1. Who is accessing the service? A. The breakdown by gender. B. The breakdown by ethnicity. C. The breakdown by location. D. The breakdown by age range at the time of referral.

"What is it like to work for our team?"

"Unique"

"Being part of a new generation of services and development process"

"The combination of learning, innovation and big expertise"

"Pioneering"


"Lots of opportunities"

"They helped me understand what was behind not only my son's behaviour, but also mine...it warningly felt as if this was wisdom elders would have offered parents in a village"

"The most helpful thing was that we felt heard. We have struggled for so long trying to get some form of potential resolution with our son's gaming and knowing that you are there to unlock some of the problems gives us hope."

"The materials were very useful too and I am enjoying the new opportunities brought into my life by them."

"They listened, understood and gave strategies"



Quotes collected from our team away day

Feedback from service users

Lessons Learnt

- There is a high demand for the service – we are continuing to receive a large amount of referrals since opening in 2019. Emerging need for the service in Scotland and Wales too.
- Not everyone who enjoys playing games or who spends a long time playing games has a gaming disorder, only a minority of the gaming population find that it impacts on other areas of their life.
- There are many positives to gaming and as a clinic and we don't advocate for complete abstinence as you might in other behavioural addictions.
- The prevalence of gaming disorder in the UK continues to be under researched, therefore we are unable to determine whether our findings are representative of the true population of individuals with gaming disorder.
- The people who accessed our clinic from October 2019 – June 2021 were mostly White British people from London. We are working on improving access to our clinic by completing outreach work in schools, museums and local councils.

References

Icons and infographics on this poster were provided by [Slidesgo](#), [Flaticon](#), and [Freepik](#)

Appendix II: Notice of Ethics Review Decision

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER



University of
East London

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

For research involving human participants

BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

Reviewer: Please complete sections in **blue** | **Student:** Please complete/read sections in **orange**

Details

Reviewer:	Professor Mark McDermott
Supervisor:	Dr. Lucy Poxon; 2nd – Dr. Sharon Cahill
Student:	Pip Williams
Course:	Prof Doc Counselling
Title of proposed study:	Torn between worlds: A qualitative analysis of how gamers make sense of feeling stuck between their virtual and real lives

Checklist

(Optional)

	YES	NO	N/A
Concerns regarding study aims (e.g., ethically/morally questionable, unsuitable topic area for level of study, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Detailed account of participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concerns regarding participants/target sample	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Detailed account of recruitment strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concerns regarding recruitment strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All relevant study materials attached (e.g., freely available questionnaires, interview schedules, tests, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study materials (e.g., questionnaires, tests, etc.) are appropriate for target sample	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clear and detailed outline of data collection	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

Data collection appropriate for target sample	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If deception being used, rationale provided, and appropriate steps followed to communicate study aims at a later point	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If data collection is not anonymous, appropriate steps taken at later stages to ensure participant anonymity (e.g., data analysis, dissemination, etc.) – anonymisation, pseudonymisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concerns regarding data storage (e.g., location, type of data, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concerns regarding data sharing (e.g., who will have access and how)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concerns regarding data retention (e.g., unspecified length of time, unclear why data will be retained/who will have access/where stored)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If required, General Risk Assessment form attached	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any physical/psychological risks/burdens to participants have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any physical/psychological risks to the researcher have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If required, Country-Specific Risk Assessment form attached	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If required, a DBS or equivalent certificate number/information provided	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If required, permissions from recruiting organisations attached (e.g., school, charity organisation, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All relevant information included in the participant information sheet (PIS)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information in the PIS is study specific	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Language used in the PIS is appropriate for the target audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All issues specific to the study are covered in the consent form	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Language used in the consent form is appropriate for the target audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All necessary information included in the participant debrief sheet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Language used in the debrief sheet is appropriate for the target audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study advertisement included	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Content of study advertisement is appropriate (e.g., researcher’s personal contact details are not shared, appropriate language/visual material used, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Decision options	
APPROVED	Ethics approval for the above-named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice), to the date it is submitted for assessment.
APPROVED - BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES	In this circumstance, the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box at the end of this form once all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to the supervisor. The supervisor will then forward the student’s confirmation to the school for its records.

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

	<p>Minor amendments guidance: typically involve clarifying/amending information presented to participants (e.g., in the PIS, instructions), further detailing of how data will be securely handled/stored, and/or ensuring consistency in information presented across materials.</p>
<p>NOT APPROVED - MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED</p>	<p>In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.</p> <p>Major amendments guidance: typically insufficient information has been provided, insufficient consideration given to several key aspects, there are serious concerns regarding any aspect of the project, and/or serious concerns in the candidate's ability to ethically, safely and sensitively execute the study.</p>

Decision on the above-named proposed research study

<p>Please indicate the decision:</p>	<p>APPROVED - MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES</p>
--------------------------------------	--

Minor amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

I am not sure about the use of the Discord app in terms of assuring standards of data security that meet with the University's requirements; for example, our Qualtrics data collection platform for numeric data is compliant with international criteria. As other example, the University has required all staff to use MSTeams and not Zoom, it having taken the view that Zoom is not as secure as MSTeams. It is entirely possible to record interviews on MSTeams. I suggest you contact Ionel Ursu i.ursu@uel.ac.uk re this to check out the necessity to use MSTeams and whether Discord reaches standards of data handling that are acceptable to UEL. Richard Bottoms R.Bottoms@uel.ac.uk, Head of PGR Services, may also have an informed view on this. This must be done I think in conjunction with the first supervisor before any data collection ensues.

While I write and though not an amendment, hopefully the applicant is aware of the voluminous literature on the psychology of digital addictions and gaming as led by Professor Mark Griffiths, Nottingham Trent University - <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/staff-profiles/social-sciences/mark-griffiths> Professor Griffiths has given talks at UEL on a number of occasions, two of which were recorded and can be accessed via the Psychology Technicians team as led by Kevin Head.

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

Major amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

--

Assessment of risk to researcher

Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
	If no, please request resubmission with an <u>adequate risk assessment</u> .	
If the proposed research could expose the <u>researcher</u> to any kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard, please rate the degree of risk:		
HIGH	Please do not approve a high-risk application. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not be approved on this basis. If unsure, please refer to the Chair of Ethics.	<input type="checkbox"/>
MEDIUM	Approve but include appropriate recommendations in the below box.	<input type="checkbox"/>
LOW	Approve and if necessary, include any recommendations in the below box.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Reviewer recommendations in relation to risk (if any):	Please insert any recommendations	

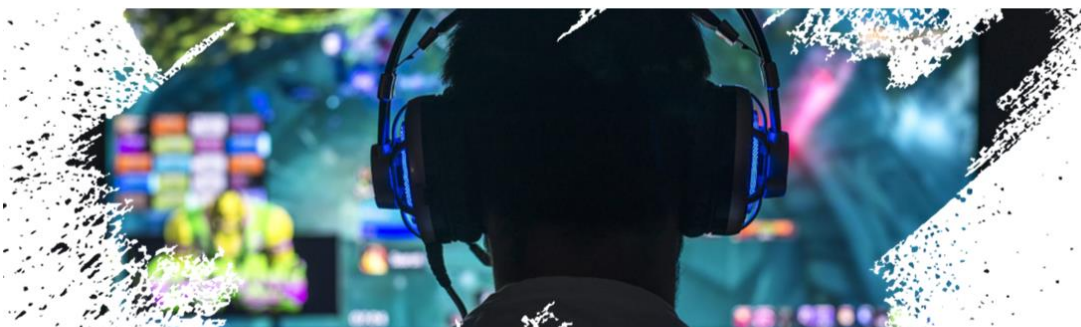
NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

Reviewer's signature	
Reviewer:	M.R.McDermott
Date:	12/08/2022
<i>This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Ethics Committee</i>	
RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE	
<p>For the researcher and participants involved in the above-named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.</p> <p>For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard.</p>	

Confirmation of minor amendments (Student to complete)	
I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data	
Student name: (Typed name to act as signature)	Pip Williams
Student number:	2067293
Date:	23/09/2022
<i>Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed if minor amendments to your ethics application are required</i>	

Appendix III: Recruitment Advert

CAN YOU HELP US ANSWER THIS QUESTION?



How do gamers make sense of being stuck between the real world and the virtual one?



We are looking for gamers to interview



WHY SHOULD I BOTHER?

Your experience will contribute to a wider understanding of gaming behaviours and help inform counsellors how they might better help gamers re-connect to their real world lives and relationships.



HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

Interviews should take between 30mins & 90 minutes depending on the length of your answers. Audio-only interviews are held on MSFT Teams



WOULD I QUALIFY TO PARTICIPATE?

Are you over the age of 18?

Do you consider yourself to be the following?

- A gamer
- A current WOW or MMORPG player
- Stuck – meaning that you play games even though you believe that this activity is having a damaging effect on your real life (e.g., social life, work)



HOW DO I SIGN UP?

Add me on Discord (501ace#9994) and send me a quick message, or email me: U2067293@UEL.ac.uk



HOW WILL YOU USE MY DATA?

All information both direct (e.g., IRL name) or indirect (e.g., Guild, Character Name etc.) will be anonymised. Direct quotes from the interviews will be published as evidence of themes that emerge across all participant experiences.



Appendix IV: Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

'A gamer's experience of feeling stuck between their real and virtual lives.'

Contact person: IRL - Pip Williams (In-Game: Sty)

Email: U2067293@uel.ac.uk

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?

My name is Pip Williams. I am a recovering gaming addict with a 20-year history of playing online video games (MMORPGS in particular). I am also a postgraduate student attending the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a professional doctorate in Counselling Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that I invite you to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?

I am conducting research into understanding how gamers make sense of feeling stuck in the experience of playing video games, while knowing that it is also causing negative consequences to their real lives. Your experience will be used to help clinicians understand and better help gamers that are attempting to address problems in their lives.

Why have I been invited to take part?

To address the study aims, I am inviting current adult WOW players to take part in my research. If you identify as a 'gamer' and you would also agree with the self-statement 'I feel stuck' – that is, 'I continue to play video games, despite knowing that it isn't helping my real life', then you are eligible to take part in the study.

It is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part, you will be invited to participate in an interview with me. Prior to the interview you will be sent a consent form which outlines the agreement between us and covers key issues such as copyright and how we intend to store and manage your data.

Following your approval, we will proceed with an interview. The method of using an interview is designed to support you in telling us your story and the experiences you have related to gaming, and to feeling stuck. As such, you can expect the following procedure:

- The interview will be held on the Microsoft Teams application via a private call.
- The interview will be audio only.
- I have prepared some main questions to ask you. By preparing some questions I can ensure we have enough structure to cover some important areas, but also have freedom to explore your answers in depth.
- The interviews will be relaxed and informal, and will include questions similar to: "How does gaming affect your real life?" and, "How would you describe your in-game character?"
- The interview is likely to last between 30 minutes and 90 minutes depending on the length of your answers.

There are no right or wrong answers, this is about exploring your experience.

Can I change my mind?

Yes, you can change your mind at any time until 3 weeks after the interview has been completed. You can withdraw without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. If you withdraw within the above time frame, your data will not be used as part of the research.

If the request to withdraw is made after the 3-week cut off point, the data analysis will have already begun, and withdrawal will not be possible.

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

It is important to be aware that we may be covering material that might affect how you feel. We will be covering issues relating to how you feel about yourself, both in real life and in game, and exploring your sense of being stuck.

We absolutely intend to conduct the interview sensitively and with caution, and you can rest assured that your interviewer has been a gamer himself for many years and will not judge or invalidate your experience in any way. We are on your side.

Nevertheless, depending on your experience of gaming and how you feel about yourself, such material could bring you psychological distress. For example, you may feel low in mood and energy after the interview. You might also expect to entertain some negative thoughts and thinking styles for a period of time. It is also possible that you may experience feelings of hopelessness.

Please remember your right to pause, suspend or withdraw from the interview throughout the process. We will also check in with you during the interview to enquire about how you are responding to the process. Lastly, we will provide you with an information sheet after the interview takes place with some links to useful resources for gaming related problems.

How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?

The security of the information you provide is maintained by the following procedures:

- Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym, as will other indirect references to your person, such as your character/guild/server's name.
- Any identifiable in-game achievements will be omitted or replaced if they might lead indirectly to your identification.
- The recorded raw audio files and anonymised transcript data will be securely transferred to the University of East London's data repository (<https://repository.uel.ac.uk/>). There it will be password protected.
- Raw data will not be shared with anyone.
- Only the anonymised transcript data will be shared with my supervisor Dr Lucy Poxon (whose details are below).
- In accordance with standard University of East London's Data Management Policy, the data will be kept for a period of three years before deletion.

- Data shared for examination, publication, press, social media etc, will be restricted to selections of the anonymised transcripts – with no means to identify your person both in real life or in game.

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the ‘public task’ condition contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as ‘special category data’ in the GDPR), it does so because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information about how the University processes personal data please see www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/data-protection

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL’s online Repository <https://repository.uel.ac.uk/>. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally in real life or in game.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Dr Lucy Poxon for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

Who has reviewed the research?

My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee’s evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Pip Williams – U2067293@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted,
please contact my research supervisor Dr Lucy Poxon, School of Psychology,
University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: l.poxon@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University
of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

Participant Consent Form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

'A gamer's experience of feeling stuck between their real and virtual lives'

Contact person: Pip Williams; Email: U2067293@uel.ac.uk

	Please tick
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw up until 3 weeks after the interview, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used.	
I understand that the audio from the interview will be recorded	
I understand that my personal information and data, including audio recordings (in raw and transcript form) from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, to which I give my permission.	
It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed.	
I understand that short, anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will not personally identify me.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

Appendix V: Interview Schedule

Good prompts

- Could you say a little more about that? (useful if they seem to have finished but you think there could be more and to clarify)
- Can you describe that in more detail? (helpful to get them to be more specific rather than vague and general and to clarify)
- How did that feel at that moment? (to delve a bit deeper and clarify)
- Can you give me an example? (helpful to get them to be more specific rather than vague and general)

Intro:

- What would you like me to call you? Can I use your real name or would you prefer to be called by an in-game one?

A few general questions about gaming:

- Could you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself, and then describing your average gaming week?
 - How long, which games? Roles?
 - What kind of things do you get up to? Could you do into a little more detail?
 - How has this developed over time?

How did this come about?

- **I'd like to explore how this all came to be**
- What do you think might have contributed to gaming becoming so important to you?
 - Can you talk me through the stages of how it became a big part of your life?
 - Can you describe any early experiences that might have influenced this?
 - Can you talk us through particular time in your life when gaming became more significant?
 - Can you tell me a bit more about x
 - What did you feel like at the time?
 - Metaphor?

What does playing the game offer you?

- What is it about the experience of playing WOW that makes you stay?
 - Can you think of a metaphor?
- Can you say which features are the ones you feel most drawn to? And help me understand why you think that is?

- Could you tell me more about your role? Your character?
- Are you good at the game? Is that important to you?
- Why do you think people are drawn to certain roles in a game like this?
- If gaming was no longer in your life, can you describe what your life would be like?
 - Is there anything you would have to face, that you don't have to now?
 - How does that feel, in the body?

Comparisons between the real world, and in game:

- How would you compare what gaming offers you, with what real life offers you?
 - Is there a difference between who you are in the game, and who you are in real life? E.g., Personality? Achievements? Self-esteem? Successes? Status?
 - Would gamers and non-gamers describe you differently? Are your relationships different online than in game? Different versions of yourself?
- How do you feel in game, versus how do you feel in the real world?

Being Stuck:

- How does gaming negatively affect your real life?
- Have you tried quitting? If so, why has it not worked?
 - Seeking help? If so, why has it not worked?
- How does it feel, to be stuck playing video games when a part of you considers it to be a problem in your life?
 - What effect do you think this might be having on the way you see yourself?
- Is there anything that you would like to add here? Have we missed anything important?

Finish with something nice

Appendix VI: Debrief Form



PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

A gamer's experience of feeling stuck between their real and virtual lives

Thank you for participating in my research study on understanding how a gamer makes sense of being stuck between the real and virtual worlds. This document offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

How will my data be managed?

The University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. More detailed information is available in the Participant Information Sheet, which you received when you agreed to take part in the research.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository <https://repository.uel.ac.uk/>. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your real life and in-game identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally in real life or in-game.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Dr Lucy Poxon for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

What if I been adversely affected by taking part?

It is not anticipated that you will have been adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise distress or harm of

any kind. Nevertheless, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may have been challenging, distressing or uncomfortable in some way. If you have been affected in any of those ways, you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support:

- <https://www.healthygamer.gg/> - low coast coaching network tailored for gamers (both group and individual sessions are available).
- <https://www.olganon.org/home> - Online community and resources (including zoom meetings) for gamers to share experiences, strength and hope to support each other in recovering from problems relating to gaming experiences.
- <https://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/national-centre-gaming-disorders> - NHS service in the UK for gamers experiencing difficulties.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Pip Williams – U2067293@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor Dr Lucy Poxon, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: l.poxon@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking part in my study

Appendix VII: Example Transcript

<p>R11: Spinning around: Pulled back in via friendships.</p>	<p>388 399 400 401 402 403</p>	<p>me spinning around because I like. I like that experience. And and I I always have. That's literally why I started playing the game. It's kind of like playing games in general. Essentially, it all boils down to that. Enjoying of the social interactions so. Yeah, I think that's the answer.</p>	<p><u>Teasing one another:</u> Social freedom and ease <u>Spinning around:</u> <i>Revolving between gaming and not-gaming. Keeps him on the hook? In place, not progressing?</i></p>
<p>R11: Guild survival rests on my ability to read people.</p>	<p>404 405 406</p>	<p>I: Do you find it easy to interact in online worlds? S: I don't think so. I think it's difficult. I'm an excellent reader of people. I know that sounds maybe something you've never experienced, but like I could, it's something that I'm particularly good at is just reading people. I do it in my job and you. So, when you try and convince someone that what you've done is good, you know. Even though it might not be is, it's about. And I find that quite difficult not being able to read people. People's faces and stuff. You can do it slightly with listening to their voice and how they say something or what they say. But it's harder, so I, I find it difficult. To start eventually to start initially once you. You get know to know someone. It's a little it's a lot easier.</p>	<p><i>Learned to read people to avoid rejection? (bullied as a child). Playful flippancy again?</i></p>
<p>R11: Mocking: Divertive tactic to counter threat of challenge.</p>	<p>407 408 409 410</p>	<p>particularly good at is just reading people. I do it in my job and you. So, when you try and convince someone that what you've done is good, you know. Even though it might not be is, it's about. And I find that quite difficult not being able to read people. People's faces and stuff. You can do it slightly with listening to their voice and how they say something or what they say. But it's harder, so I, I find it difficult. To start eventually to start initially once you. You get know to know someone. It's a little it's a lot easier.</p>	<p>Online interaction is problematic. Harder to read people online without their facial expressions on display. <i>Relied on this IRL?</i></p>
<p>R11: Increased vulnerability IG, with fewer social clues to read people.</p>	<p>411 412 413 414 415</p>	<p>I: And is that something that's reading people? Is it something that's important online in what you do?</p>	<p><i>Threatened initially by online anonymity masking his ability to read people (keeps him safe), but once that barrier has been overcome, he can relax?</i></p>
<p>R11: Social gatekeeper: Reading applicants right to foster community.</p>	<p>416 417 418 419 420 421 422 423 424 425</p>	<p>S: Yeah, big time. Yeah, especially when you're. Especially when you you're kind of almost the gatekeeper of the community in a way. And it's important that you can know someone and. Read read them in a way that you like. You know that that you think they'll fit into the community. It's it's it's an important, role to play when it comes to. Being that gatekeeper essentially. That's ultimately what I am right? It's whether or not you know recruit someone into the Guild and go. Are you good enough to play in this this guild? Are you a nice enough person to stay in this Guild you know? And ultimately do I think that you'll fit in this community, and it sounds very presumptuous, but. Ultimately, that's my role as the leader of it, which is kind of weird. That's my GM role, so I have two roles. That's the thing. It's like a dual thing. In game in this in this Guild, you know. I essentially, run the raids. Sure, people listen to me and talk to me and. And I tell them to stand on the right side or stand on the left side. Blah blah blah. But. That's only for like 9 hours of the of the week. You know, maximum. You're looking at like. I'm talking about. You know other. You know, socially</p>	<p><u>I am the gatekeeper</u> – responsibility, duty, community manager. Suspicion of intent and harder to read people online. Suggestive of past interpersonal conflict?</p>
<p>R11: Protector of the realm.</p>	<p>426 427 428 429 430 431 432 433 434 435 436</p>	<p>to play in this this guild? Are you a nice enough person to stay in this Guild you know? And ultimately do I think that you'll fit in this community, and it sounds very presumptuous, but. Ultimately, that's my role as the leader of it, which is kind of weird. That's my GM role, so I have two roles. That's the thing. It's like a dual thing. In game in this in this Guild, you know. I essentially, run the raids. Sure, people listen to me and talk to me and. And I tell them to stand on the right side or stand on the left side. Blah blah blah. But. That's only for like 9 hours of the of the week. You know, maximum. You're looking at like. I'm talking about. You know other. You know, socially</p>	<p>Lots of emphasis on what I am. My role, my place, the leader. Building authority. <u>Its x3: uncertainty around assertiveness?</u> <u>It sounds very presumptuous.</u> Me being the leader is kind of weird. <u>Strangely I get to decide that</u> – Some discomfort in that role? <u>Doesn't fit with IRL self-concept.</u> <u>Fragile?</u> <u>Repeating essentially</u> – <u>Take me seriously?</u> <u>Assert credibility? Making up for dyslexia?</u> Two roles – raid leader, social gatekeeper. I lead and people follow, I also caretake and build a community. <u>I know it sounds weird + strangely: Multiple repetitions of this phrase – making this harder</u></p>

Appendix VIII: Images of Clustering Process



Appendix IX: Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

PET	Sub-Themes	#	Experiential Statements	#	Quote	
Master of my universe:	The lynchpin	R3	Most valued player: If I die, we all die	475	Yeah, if you fuck it, then the raid wipes... it's very final when it comes to me. You know, and it's every raid. You know, there's €	
		R3	I am essential: I produce, direct and star in the raid	93	essentially I decide who comes ultimately and then I decide on the comps that you bring. And then I will build assignments f	
		R12	Social reward for playing the reliable centrepiece	454	it's more the status symbol that comes with being the tank. You know you're. One of or, if not one of two only tanks in that raid	
	Place your trust in me!	R4	Trust me please: Anti-dictatorship practices promotes fairness	144	I do detach myself from that [deciding loot] in some some sense of the word. I think it's important because. It means that the	
		R11	Social gatekeeper: Reading applicants right to foster community	420	it's important that you can know someone and. Read read them in a way that you like. You know that that you think they'll fit in	
		R18	Entrusted by a community to lead them	686	Ultimately, it's more of a contract of trust rather than of power over one another	
	Controlling my social worth	Drawn to control, afraid of power	R11	Increased vulnerability IG, with fewer social clues to read people	410	I find that quite difficult not being able to read people. People's faces and stuff. You can do it slightly with listening to their voi
			R19	Not drawn to power per se, but rather the opportunity to be valued	744	maybe I do like to say that I'm in charge of everything, but really I'm not. You know, really I I leave those things to other people
			R19	Control over personal interest, vs threat of social disapproval	726	ultimately it looks after your own interests which which is what most people do, and you have the most say about those inter
			R19	Social pressure and uncertainty around key decision-making	734	someone may not like someone and you might have to decide whether to try and calm that situation down or socially manip
Achilles Heel:	Open Wound	R20	Stress of leadership forces delegation to preserve sanity	746	And that's [delegation], I think, an important aspect of like maintaining your sanity when it comes to like. Having power becau	
		R3	Hard to integrate positive feedback with negative self-image	109	Strangely, I'm kind of someone that people listen to [laughing] and we just sort of it sort of works. I dunno.	
		R5	Nothing special about me: Is there?	162	the fact that people listen to me is more for their own laziness than anything else. If I'm honest. That's my opinion [laughing].	
	House of cards	R5	Nobody hears me IRL. Do I matter?	170	I've never been someone that is. Is listened to in real, in real life, really I feel, I feel like. It's something that I've never experien	
		R5	Respect is nourishment for my soul	178	It's almost like. It's almost like I have a desire to be listened to, but really. And this is this is. What's you know giving me that.	
		R2	Doomed to fail: My leadership is headed for disaster	69	I run a guild fairly successfully at the moment [cautious tone] it will probably not be successful. I'm sure at some point	
	Vulnerable to disrespect	Respect my authority!	R12	Promoted to the point of incompetence: Demands > my ability	437	I know it sounds weird, but that's kind of my my role of protecting the community from people that are undesirable or won't fit
			R12	Skating on thin ice: Tentatively re-asserting role	442	You know my judgement of people seems to be important to other people
			R2	Resistant to questioning: Playing with the frame	48	[mockingly] So you get one thing and then you get the other thing and then you press it into the other thing and then it like sm
			R6	Just world: Respect is not earned; it is a basic right	193	[when asked about how it feels to be listened to] It's hard to describe right because it's a state of which should happen. In m
Don't judge me, unless its good	R21	Passive powerplay: My time is valuable	797	Oh I'll do it for free don't worry, I'll do it for free and it's fine. You don't have to pay me now [laughing]		
	N/A	"Ultimately and essentially": I seek credibility and respect.	N/A	49 uses of the word ultimately, 20 uses of the word essentially. Asserting authority via dogmatic language choices		
	R11	Mocking: Divertive tactic to counter threat of challenge	405	I'm an excellent reader of people. I know that sounds maybe something you've never experienced [playfully mocking]		
The great escape:	Alone, compromised and powerless IRL	R12	Belittling position directly after feeling exposed by pride	445	I'm loosely protecting a community of nerds or manchildren, right?	
		R20	Mockery to belittle predicted judgements	766	I'm sure parents go oh it doesn't sound it's not the same [mocking a nagging tone, mimicking], but it's the same thought pro	
		R7	Dumb and different: Ridiculed for dyslexia and choral singing	249	at school I was quite I was bullied quite a lot..I was very severely dyslexic, so to them I was dumb. And also I sang in like loe	
		R17	Resilient to the challenge IG, less tested IRL	667	I have pressure and responsibility. In the game. And I kind of have that in real life, but not anywhere near as severe	
	Not a care in the (virtual) world	R18	Powerful IG, insignificant IRL	674	I feel like that that role that I play in the Guild it would never come up in those sorts of friendships because it's not approj	
		R24	Still reeling from past painful disconnection	898	I think for me, I really struggled. So I went on to nights to do nights for 2 1/2 years and not not went not willingly. I didn't know	
		R7	A safe space: Communal shelter from threat of violence	256	it's kind of almost like a safe space. That we went rather than being physically abused	
	Safe to play without pain	Brothers in arms: Finding my people	R8	A simpler time: Gaming rooted in childhood innocence	270	There's no real substance to the adventures or anything like that. It's just sort of silliness. Playing outside vibes, you know
			R15	It's just a dance: Confidence in resolving complex problems IG	556	ultimately, it's that kind of dance that you do live with everyone involved trying to solve this collective puzzle
			R7	Gaming as the glue that forms the bond of connection	236	I guess. It became important. When it was kind of like a way to spend time with my brother.
R10			Sense of belonging nourished by familiarity and comfort	384	you're part of a friendship group that enjoys each other's company. We all you know. We'll chat till wee hours of the morning,	
Unbreakable: The class fantasy	Finding my people	R15	Community on speed-dial: Cheap, immediate access to connection	586	you can sit down in your living room and suddenly open a window into, you know 30-40 people on the other side of the fuckr	
		R17	In it together: Shared victories offer greater rewards	649	It's the want of the community and and experience and achievements and and those accomplishments together as a as	
		R22	Gaming creates shared memories: Lasting connection through story	860	It's like reliving those moments with your friends or you know them. Killing that killing that boss, you know. Killing that boss fi	
Revolving Door:	Look what I've done	R13	Strong, impenetrable tank > defenceless, weak wizard	493	I would much rather wear chunky fucking armour and covered in. Big Shield and sword rather than a wizard's robe and a littl	
		R14	Drawn to the image of mitigating incoming damage, not strength	519	There's no desire to be stronger [IRL], you know, I already am. I don't really want to be any stronger [laughing]	
		R14	Chonky: Use of language to indulge deeper in fantasy	527	I think that's being covered covered in armour and. Being big, chonky fucking. I don't know, just covered in armour and shield	
	The purest validation	Opportunity cost of gaming	R13	No room for error: I thrive under pressure	476	The tank roll always has that pressure and I guess it's. It's fun to be pressured in that way
			R11	Guild survival rests on my ability to read people	418	I'm an excellent reader of people [line 404] and then [when asked if being a good reader of people is important] Especially w
			R20	The guild reflects me: It is my creation, my baby	754	It's like having a child, right? Ultimately, you're powerful over them, right? You can decide when they eat and when they sleep
			R18	IRL feedback is contaminated by extraneous factors	706	And the issue you have there is your getting paid. So you have your bills to pay...ultimately, if you stop raiding with me. You kr
	It's in the post: Opportunity cost of gaming	Feelings? No thank you	R18	You chose me! IG, I can trust the respect I receive	697	You don't have to raid with me at all. You don't have to raid with me as a group either. You could say we don't. We don't like y
			R9	Gaming may threaten existential needs	343	[when asked about the cons of gaming] I'm unfortunate because I don't have. Anyone at the moment special in my life that I c
			R21	Gaming distracts me from adhering to discipline	802	I think he gets in the way of exercise. For me personally, I'm quite. Naturally, quite a lazy person feel, and I spend a lot of time
R21			I could do more: How can I integrate gaming into my self-concept?	809	So I do stuff, you know. But it's just like I'm sure I could do more, and ultimately that that I would.	
Spinning in ambivalence	Caught in the middle	R23	Facing limitations: I chose gaming over finding a life partner	898	I think finding intimate relationships is difficult when you're gaming. And I and I don't really know why I don't know if it's becau	
		R24	Uncertainty over ability to find and form lasting connections with women	895	I feel like it's difficult to find. Social interactions with women in this day and age for a for me, basically someone who has no	
		R9	Pulling back from the edge: Hesitant to explore depth	344	It's a bit, maybe a bit in depth [laughs]. For me, I don't know. Like I just, you know, I mean it's like. That becomes into the you	
		R10	What comes after silence? Let's not find out.	375	Just filling the silence. I can fill it with as more stuff as you want, but it will be, just random shit [laughs]	
Spinning around: Pulled back in via friendships	Caught in the middle	R24	Switching to levity avoids depth and feeling	890	maybe I'm just a ugly fuck. And then it's just something that I can't get away from [laughing] anyway. I'm just so unappealing I	
		R24	Glimpse at the pain: Safer to glance, briefly from a distance	898	There is a very low percentage of women who are interested in what I do [sadness] You know, maybe I should just enjoy. Ma	
		R8	Ignorance is bliss: It's better to hide	296	Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't want to look at it, but I don't have as many responsibilities as others, so I can just go to w	
		R9	Gaming dissonance: Wrestling with ambivalence	331	[upon being pushed a little] Thing is I think both. I think I'm fortunate, but I'm also unfortunate. Does that make any sense?	
		R11	Spinning around: Pulled back in via friendships	387	[re social connection] it's very much that which keeps me spinning around because I like. I like that experience. And and I I a	
R25	Maybe later: Undermining concepts to kick the can down the road	812	And I think that at the moment, I don't really have. I don't really have that ability to do that at the moment. So it's, but it's a w			

Appendix X: Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET Label	GET Description	Code	Code	Code	Code	Code	Code
Escape to Neverland: Safe haven from the pain of the real world.	Secure base: A reliable home where pain is forgotten Safe harbour / The last homely house / Solace: Where pain is forgotten, the antidote	Painkiller:		N4	Slipping from reality: The comforting biproduct of imagination	138	I remember being engrossed in the pages and the stories and the characters. And feeling that I had s
		N4	Immersion therapy: Diving into fantasy to avoid social anxiety	142	I remember times when. Kids of my age might be outside playing football or socialising. And I would		
		N7	Early experience of sinking time into immersive RPGS as means of coping	245	Ultima Underworld, which was my first game that required proper time investment. Which is my first g		
		Forgetting distressing thoughts / feelings / get lost in it					
		A4	Slipping away: Letting go of all IRL emotion and thought	136	I don't have to. You know, think about any of my feelings and emotions and I can put. Stuff behind me		
		A23	Lost in another world: Instant removal of problems	891	It's like nothing else is in your world right now, or on your mind. You forget about everything that's goin		
		T6	Waiting in the wings: Loneliness is always there	207	Then it comes. Then it's on top of my mind, you know. If I have got a game I'm interested in then it bu		
		P5	What happens IRL stays IRL: I can ignore it then IG	159	Depression. Anxiety. My mom being kinda messed up in the head with her psychotic ex boyfriends. Yc		
		N22	Neverland: Where real pain does not exist, only adventure	826	I just don't have many of the concerns and. Bad feelings that I have in the world, so it's just free of pair		
		Pain suppression: Little bit more aware than forget, you know they are there					
		T6	Pain suppression: Must keep gaming to keep the thoughts away	223	It helps me suppress them. Maybe not dealing with them as such like I'm not confronting them. I'm, y		
		IG activities to distract					
		Chatting					
		C27	Keep chatting to keep away the pain	1079	what better way to ignore than to sit up until 4am, talking shit with 10 strangers that you've never met t		
		P8	Lost in conversation: Letting the subject take us where it will	294	Like Ash like. Just hop on Discord know him for almost three years. You can talk about anything. We		
		Flow state					
		P6	Tunnel vision: Chasing a narrow, deep focus to ignore IRL stress	210	I'm also getting distracted from my PTSD and my temper. Especially if I'm going into an old dungeon		
		C14	IG dopamine highway: Reward by numbers	560	It's like [animatedly] Yeah, big numbers, big numbers, big numbers. Right. Yeah So many big numbe		
		C8	Mindless, repetitive distraction of circular IG behaviours	321	You were literally just sat there. Not doing a lot. Just running around in a circle and just talking to peop		
		N7	Hedonic treadmill: Never ending pursuit of IG levels to gain status	252	a bottomless rabbit hole of levelling, just continuous levelling. Just keep getting that hit of gaining mo		
		Just being in game offers relief, transport into another world, filling time					
		P15	At ease: Just standing, doing nothing IG offers the distraction I need	588	Sometimes I just want to hop on and do absolutely nothing. Stand AFK somewhere. If I can't do that, I		
		C20	Remedy to a barren life	794	If I can't sit and play video games till 4:00 in the morning to distract from, like, the reality? You need so		
		Seeing it as therapeutic, not surprising considering the benefits					
		P6	Gaming is my therapy	186	Let's say you you can kind of treat a game like therapy		
		Secure base:					
		Safe zone: From pain of thoughts / feelings / distress / conflict					
		A4	Comfort blanket: Cocooned from IRL issues	133	It's a very big safety net for me. It's been a blanket over all of my issues, my whole life		
		A23	A transitional object: Gaming as a safety blanket	897	it's like a safety blanket, right		
		P9	Secure base: Irreplaceable zone of safety	337	I spent so much time on it back in the day when I tried to escape reality and. It's basically been my my		
		N3	Solace: A place to hide, to soothe from the pains of the world	110	I think I've thought long and hard about this. I think gaming offers me a place to hide. It's a refuge of st		
		N4	The last homely house: Safe harbour prior to the dangerous journey	118	I used to listen to the BBC radio adaptation on tape when I was little, and the image of the cosy home		
		C4	Gaming feels like home	122	the safer option was the gaming. It had more of like a homely feeling		
		Refuge from physical harm IRL					
		C21	Gaming saves me from IRL dangers	848	I should probably be dead now. Like I've nearly been stabbed, I've seen people get their face sliced of		
		A14	Get out of jail free: Escape from a life of crime	550	I used to see them in school and now they're. All getting arrested for for. Drugs and gang violence		
		R7	A safe space: Communal shelter from threat of violence	256	it's kind of almost like a safe space. That we went rather than being physically abused		
		Reliable, got to place:					
		N4	Old faithful: Always there when I need it	125	it's The place that I can turn to. The place that I can go when life has become too much, I can retreat b		
		C7	Gaming as a safe, refuge from IRL	268	...made it easier to. Use gaming as a safe place. And I think it was always like a go to as I've got older		
		Attachment grows / Latch on to...					
		P9	It's my baby: Strong attachment to account and IG characters	320	That's my baby [with joy]. To make it short. It's my baby. I love my account. My character basically it's. It		
		P9	A lot to lose: Securely defending access to gaming account	328	I am super protective over it. The only person who's allowed to log on my account is my girlfriend. I've		
		A4	Slipping away: Letting go of all IRL emotion and thought	135	Something I can very easily latch on to, to lose myself		
		Eulogy: Raising past pleasure up, putting it on a pedestal					
A24	Bewitched by his first experience of seeing WOW (cinematic)	941	We watched the cinematic together, and I saw the dwarf hunter come out with his massive bear [won				
Attempts to recapture the moment / feeling / depth of escape							
N9	Halcyon days: IG attempts to recapture the serenity of the past	328	So, weirdly speaking, in my late 30s, I'm revisiting. Once again, the time I spent when I was in my earl				
N9	Escaping by emulating previous escapes	331	many of my in-game choices that I've used this time around reflect and mirror the ones that are made				
A26	More than recollection: IG you can recreate the past	1017	I think people will always try and relive something again. If that experience the first time was exciting a				
A26	Better the devil you know: Old pleasure sources are reliable	1024	I'm the complete opposite (to my sister who likes new sources of pleasure), where if I enjoy someth				
A26	Bittersweet: Clutching at an elusive reconnection	1033	When I think back to 5, 10, 15 years ago doing certain things in the game you try and play it now to ha				
Pain, regret at the elusive connection that cannot be regained							
C9	Striving to re-create the original depth of escape	328	I didn't enjoy a lot of the expansion they brought out, so I ended up playing private servers for a long ti				
A24	Pain as class-changes severed attachment to original IG character	950	The class changed so heavily that I now don't unfortunately play as my main character, despite every				
A27	Unsettling: Reconnecting to original IG character	4048	It's not a good thing to go back to the original character. I think I should have appreciated certain moments in that game				

Appendix XI: Reverse-engineering the GETs

Pt	Most painful wounds from IRL	Redemption Arc	Compounding Effect
Curly	Always the outsider, the nerd, the socially awkward kid who never felt like he fitted in, alone and isolated.	He could make himself deeply valuable IG by playing a druid, a class that nobody wanted to play, but one that made him considerably valuable to the group. Also attempted to excel in that role to prove his value	Sees the ridiculousness of it all, knows he is trying to make up for how he feels IRL, all this just adds to his despair and dependency and resignation when he confronts it.
Ace	Trouble at home, volatile, believes he is a difficult person to get on with, and conflict is inevitable. Appears to harbour the need to prove himself as the 'underdog'	Becomes one of the best tanks and raid leaders in the world, achieves multiple world firsts, proves others wrong by making it work with the hardest tank class	Draining to keep up the achievements, FOMO, comes at the cost of friendship, always looking to succeed as worth is conditional on position in the latest tier of content.
Rufio	Bullied for dyslexia, self-belief of being stupid and uncharismatic, fear that	Drawn to leadership roles establishes himself to be the lynchpin in the group is in complete control	Vigilant to disrespect, thinks that his ability to lead is confined to IG, this is like his achilles heel, brittle self-esteem
Tootles	Broken IRL, disabled by a car accident, feels very weak and hates his appearance, terrified of social judgement, agorophobic	Play strong warriors IG, makes himself very valuable to the groups through IG excellence and performance. Gets annoyed when others get the opportunities that he craves. Likes the IG feeling of power.	High value IG just mocks the lack of value he has IRL. He feels repaired IG but this contributes to how broken he feels IRL.
Pockets	Incredible hulk needing gaming to keep him sane and not angry, he is intolerable IRL, describing himself as someone that would always annoy someone. Nurses feelings that he could of done a lot better if he tried.	Chasing insane IG achievements, has history of top ranking IG experience marking him out as superior to that of others, capable of much more. His IG accomplishments show that his life has not been worthless.	Very high levels of FOMO, has put much of his self-worth into his IG achievements and knows that if the game ends he would be left with nothing. Very aware his current self esteem is conditional. VERY protective over account.
Nibs	Dealt a bad hand, feels terrible about himself, and hates what he has become. Deeply ashamed.	Seeks to be the best in his class IG, spends six months building a team and community around the chance to get the warglaives, focussing on the huge recognition he will get. Attaches his self-worth to IG performance	Becomes aware of how artificial this is, when his therapist looks bemused. He realises that even if he does accomplish this hard task, it is like papering over the cracks in his life, he sees it will not repair him. He is crushed.