



You are What you Play: The Risks of Identity Fusion in Toxic Gamer Cultures

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There has long been concern about the potential negative uses and effects of digital games. While these discussions have historically focused on the role of game content, it is the social environment of games that poses a more immediate concern. Specifically, the normalization of hateful behavior in gamer cultures. While “gamer cultures” originally developed as an identity to unite a group of so-called misfits who spent their time in shared physical, gaming spaces, today gamer cultures have come to be more associated with exclusion more than inclusion. In this piece we explore game cultures through the lens of identity fusion to explore the nature and influence of these identities.

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The term “gamer” was traditionally associated with a range of unsavory adjectives: unattractive, overweight, socially inept, and potentially violent. However, research paints a different and much more diverse picture of what gamers are and what they are not. For example, we know they are not more or less overweight than anyone else who may live a largely sedentary lifestyle. We know gamers do not substantially differ from non-gamers in social skills or in the reported number of friends they have. We know that playing violent video games does not make people more violent on a population level. Yet, recent work around identity fusion suggests that there may be a kernel of truth to the apprehension around “gaming culture” as an identity, rather than a population.

Social identities are a normal part of an individual’s self-concept. They describe our perceived memberships in any particular social group. For example, I (Rachel) identify as a Jungian psychologist, an amateur baker, and an aspiring Witcher. These identities are all separate aspects of how I think of me. Identifying as a member of a group is an everyday thing we all do. Some people can come to identify so strongly with a group that they develop a strong sense of belonging and oneness with it, a phenomenon known as identity fusion [Swann and Buhrmester 2015], i.e., the

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“we are” becomes fused with the “I am.” A classic example is people who served in the US Marine Corps. My father was a Marine, and the Marine motto “once a Marine, always a Marine” held true—there is no separating the part of my father’s individual identity from his identity as a Marine. Identity fusion forms over time through a series of shared experiences, shared norms, and close friendship bonds. Researchers have become interested in identity fusion, because a highly fused individual is more willing to take “costly” or self-sacrificial actions in service of their group, which can explain the behavior of radical extremists.

The factors that contribute to fusion—a deep emotional bond to one’s social group that forms over time through a series of shared experiences, norms, and close friendship bonds—are ones that we see commonly discussed in gaming spaces. What are games if not a series of trust-building exercises where you learn if you can trust your fellow comrade in arms? Knowing this, we were curious to see what role identity fusion plays in the context of gaming—particularly whether or not fusion with the gamer identity may reflect the problematic parts of gaming culture.

While people have come to recognize that “gamers” as a population are diverse and do not fulfill many stereotypical ideas we have of them, “gaming culture” has become more associated with a range of exclusionary attitudes, such as misogyny, racism, and other forms of hateful beliefs and ideologies [DeGrove et al. 2015]. This is so much the case that “toxic gamer cultures” has become a common colloquialism. Many studies have noted that incidences of hate speech, sexual harassment, and other forms of sustained harassment are more the norm than the exception in online gaming spaces [ADL 2022]. We were interested in understanding if fusion exists among gaming culture and, if so, if it is reflective of the toxic nature that has come to be commonly associated with them.

As it turns out, this is what we found [Kowert et al. 2022]: Over three studies, we surveyed gamers ($n = 1,243$) looking at the relationship between identity fusion and a range of anti-social characteristics often associated with toxic behavior online. Specifically, we looked at racism, sexism, and endorsement of white nationalist beliefs—beliefs and policies centered on the ideas of maintaining a white racial and national identity. We also looked at three so-called “dark” personality traits, namely, narcissism (an inflated perception of their own importance), psychopathy (specifically, a lack of empathy), and Machiavellianism (interpersonal manipulation, being deceitful, and lacking morality), again all associated with toxic behavior. Finally, we included a measure of recent aggressive online behavior (e.g., harassing someone online after they asked you to stop) as well as a measure of belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory.

In our initial study ($n = 304$), we asked adult game players (aged 19–77) about how much their identity was fused with gaming culture (adapting established identity fusion questions, e.g., “I make gaming culture strong”). We found that when controlling for gender and age, fusion with gaming culture predicted willingness to fight/die for gaming culture ($B = .26, p < .001$), narcissism ($B = .18, p < .001$), psychopathy ($B = .11, p < .01$), extrinsic racism ($B = .17, p < .001$), benevolent sexism ($B = .14, p = .015$), hostile sexism ($B = .16, p < .001$), white nationalist identity ($B = .20, p < .001$), recent aggressive online behaviors ($B = .14, p < .001$), and belief in QAnon ($B = .10, p = .009$). Importantly, these findings were consistent across all three studies we ran.¹

To avoid confusion: We are not saying that people who play games are extremists, racists, narcissists, or any of that sort. Rather, we found that those people who identify so strongly with “gaming culture” that their identity becomes fused with it are significantly more likely to report

¹In our initial article, we examined the unique gamer identity fusion effects that emerged while controlling for other identity variables (right-wing identity and white nationalist identity) that were also found to predict extreme behavior. The analyses in the current article are examining the predictive value of gamer identity fusion while only controlling for age and gender.

higher scores for these characteristics. Also, our study shows correlation, not causation: We cannot say, based on our data, that identifying as “a gamer” leads to becoming more sexist, racist, white nationalist, or the like. Finally, our findings have not yet been replicated by other research groups. But the fact that we replicated our measurement across three different samples and found the same pattern of results is reason for concern.

In our original paper, we found that these relationships varied somewhat across different gaming contexts. Put plainly, we were more likely to find the “extremist” profiles outlined above for fused *Call of Duty* players than fused *Minecraft* players. This suggests we need to study more whether these patterns carry across contexts. For example, does exposure to certain gaming communities, game content, or both link to antisocial characteristics? We believe that the social community is likely to play a particularly influential causal role: The more time you spend engaged in groups where hateful beliefs and behaviors are normalized, the more likely you are exposed to them, and the more opportunity you have to internalize those beliefs and, consequently, endorse or act out behaviors that are racist, sexist, and so on. That said, it remains unclear whether this means certain gaming cultures attract people with these particular traits or if being entrenched in certain gamer cultures cultivates these actions and ideologies. It is likely that both are happening. However, we believe the most powerful component, as well as the most actionable by game makers, is the latter. Being entrenched in cultures where hate is normalized, not consistently or transparently moderated, and potentially reinforced through the game content itself (for example, through ethnocentric views of the world), can impact the way players see and interact with the wider world around them. After all, when hate is normalized in one space, it normalizes in all spaces.

While “gamers” should not be pigeonholed into outdated stereotypes, the normalization of hateful beliefs in gaming cultures and the potential of gaming communities to afford identity fusion with these cultures are causes for concern. Our findings are deeply worrisome, as they indicated that individuals whose personal identities are fused with gaming culture are more likely to endorse a range of anti-social behaviors. More research is needed to understand the role of identity in the propagation of anti-social and extremist beliefs in gaming spaces to more clearly pave the way for the development of safeguards designed to mitigate such beliefs.

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