

Gathering data in a playful manner

In brief

- Online gaming is popular; the sector is growing continuously.
- Almost every modern video game can be played online – on a PC, console or a mobile device.
- The way gamers behave is a source of lots of information.
- Up until now, the topic of data protection has been neglected.
- Governance by game producers and regulation by governments is required, as is greater awareness on the side of the consumer.

What is it about?

Over the last decades, video games have become mass media, ranking number one in terms of media consumption amongst the younger generations, leaving radio or television trailing behind. At the same time, video games are also a professional sports discipline (e-sports) and represent a flourishing market worth billions. At the same time, they have become a virtual space which is being monitored by companies as well as intelligence services.

In Europe, millions of people, amongst them children and adolescents, play video games – most of them online. Everything they do whilst gaming is being recorded and analysed by different entities. Nothing remains secret for the intelligence services, for programmers and publishers, for server operators, owners or production companies. How will people feel in the future when they realise that there will be profiles for everyone, containing all the details on their behaviour and inconsiderate expressions from their most private in-game moments?

For many, games are an important space which can be explored, where different things can be tried and fantasies can become virtual reality, where ability or social skills are trained, and where they meet their friends and talk about everyday problems. Increasingly, all of this is being monitored and analysed by commercial and secret service actors. At the same time, data protection is considerably under-represented.

Like Web 2.0, by connecting players and making video games interactive, gaming has changed significantly – on all platforms (smartphones, video game consoles, tablets, PCs) people are no longer playing alone anymore. Even if they are playing in single-player mode, they are also talking to friends about the best strategy, the current situation in the game or everyday life matters.



Who is thinking about data protection in moments like this?

The act of gaming allows for specific behavioural analysis. The results are stored in extended profiles and commercially exploited. In the future, deficits with regard to data protection and the situation for consumers could be improved through more research on this topic, through more political attention as well as practical measures. In general, in the field of online gaming it is necessary to establish the concept of data protection and compliance with data protection regulation. Especially in situations where a lot of data are generated, more awareness regarding data protection issues could help to avoid detrimental societal developments in the future.

Basic data

Project title:	Privacy in Online Games
Project team:	Peissl, W., Krieger-Lamina, J.
Duration:	01/2017 – 07/2017
Funded by:	Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour, Department for Consumer Protection

Key results

Forcing players into being always online has become easier thanks to technical advancements in the fields of mobile networks and end user devices. Furthermore, provision and availability of high-bandwidth networks has also played a key role. The focus is on the commercial exploitation of personal data. In the gaming sector, digitalisation and commercialisation have been advancing rapidly. The gaming industry is a professionally operated 'machine', providing people with entertainment for money and data. Because one is continuously online, generated data are all-encompassing and readily available almost in real time. Such data provide information on the person, their behaviour, their relationships with others, their preferences, financial possibilities and other details of their real life. The analysis of gaming data also allows for drawing conclusions on social networks, health-related information or political attitudes. By accessing mobile phone data, e.g. location data, which is typically granted during installation of a gaming app, it is possible to obtain a complete picture of someone's life and to sell this to all kinds of interested parties.



Data protection in online gaming is practically not an issue.

Not only the vast amount of data and the number of recipients is problematic in this context, but also the situation in which the data were obtained, i. e. during gaming: when people are fascinated by the storyline and their attention is with their avatars and the in-game content. Gamers take on new roles, thereby revealing a lot about themselves. In situations like these, data protection is not a concern at all, unlike, for example, during online shopping where more people are perhaps thinking about their data and what it might be used for. In addition, vulnerable groups within society, such as children, are being monitored whilst they are unable to assess the consequences of their online actions. By opening an account for an online game, people waive their right to informational self-determination and bow to the logic of the market, which is often in contradiction to their expectations regarding data protection. Up until now, research in the fields of game studies and surveillance studies has neglected the subject of data protection in online gaming. In the near future, interdisciplinary research on this issue must reach a level matching today's societal importance of online gaming.

What to do?

Online Gaming has become a mass media phenomenon, which requires more political attention. In addition, this context calls for more awareness on data protection from users and manufacturers alike.

At present, game providers set the rules for data usage which gamers have to agree to or cannot play at all. In doing so, providers are in a powerful position leaving users without a real choice. Governments and policy makers could discuss the following options:

- More rigorous restrictions should be introduced when it comes to the use of personal data for maximising profit.
- Sharing collected data with third parties should either be prohibited or done in a transparent manner.
- The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, effective from May 2018) provides an opportunity to enforce European data protection standards in the gaming sector.
- Close supervision by national data protection agencies is imperative.
- In particular, children and adolescents should be a priority where the protection of their rights is concerned.
- On the one hand, providers should ensure data security and protection; on the other hand, users should demand it.

Further reading

Krieger-Lamina, J., (2017): Privatsphäre in Online-Spielen. Projektbericht Nr. 04-2017, ITA: Wien
epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-projektberichte/2017-04.pdf

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