

Between Fears and Needs for Information: German Parents' Computer Game Concerns

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In this chapter we deal with German parents' concerns regarding their children's use of computer games. The central empiric discovery can be outlined in the following way: By talking about *concerns of parents* from a German perspective the term is obviously connected to negative feelings and apprehension. The attitude of German parents to usage of computer games by their children is characterised by: worries, fears, apprehension, mental overload, incorrect assumptions and need for information. This is demonstrated by Google Germany's autocomplete: the search "which computer games" was in 2017 completed by "...cause addiction" and "...should I prohibit my child from playing"¹. With reference to empirical data, this first indication of a rather sceptical perspective of German parents concerning computer games is going to be substantiated below. For this purpose, we will first analyse some surveys with a focus on *common concerns of German parents* before illustrating the findings with concrete examples and assumptions.

GERMAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS' CONCERNS ABOUT COMPUTER GAMES

The commonly known concerns of parents regarding their children's use of computer games are present in the relevant literature on the topic (cf. Ganguin & Junge, 2012; Hornung & Lukesch, 2012) as well as in public discourse (cf. Leng, 2007). The nature of these concerns is usually subject to particular development trends. There are questions about which games and topics are currently popular

1 All quotations in this chapter are translated into English by the authors.

and in demand (cf. *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle*, 2013)² or practical concerns such as limiting the time spent on playing them (cf. Heinz & Schmölders, 2012).

Young people's affinity towards playing computer games is in particular a prominent subject of upbringing in German families (cf. Bischoff, Büsch, Geiger, Harles & Holnick, 2014). There is, however, evidence that the use of computer games by younger children aged between two and five is increasingly becoming a subject of parents' attention (cf. *Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest*, 2015)³. Nevertheless, the significance of this topic is not as widely reflected in the concerns of German educational researchers and their empirical research. For example, in a representative survey on media behaviour in German families focussing in particular on children aged three to five their parents are not even asked about using computer games (cf. MPFS, 2012). This survey comes to the conclusion that children come into contact with computer games at the age of eight (cf. *ibid.*). Regarding the contradictory nature of the findings, doubt may be cast upon the extent to which the media habits evaluated in this survey are indicative for wider social trends. The *miniKIM* survey is one of the few surveys in Germany that examines the media habits of children aged between two to five (cf. MPFS, 2015) and comes to the conclusion that, although computer games play a minor role for children aged between four to five, computer games are present for children aged two to three (albeit only to a limited extent). The entirely random sample however shows that the use of computer games by these children significantly lags behind other media and non-media activities, which might be an explanation for the insubstantial empirical evidence in this field (cf. *ibid.*). German educational researchers do not seem to be concerned about younger children's gaming habits and there is barely any empirical evidence in this area. Indeed, the overall state of empirical evidence with respect to computer games usage is rather poor (cf. Wagner, Gebel & Lampert, 2013b).

However, the *DIVSI U9 survey Children in the digital world* by *Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet* (German Institute for Trust and Security on the Internet, DIVSI) does take into consideration the Internet usage of

2 *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* (USK) is the German institution that classifies computer games.

3 The analysis of online games shows that manufacturers of mobile touchscreen devices are increasingly establishing app and gaming markets for younger children so that children's attitudes towards gaming will gain in importance (cf. Lampert, Schwinge, Kammerl & Hirschhäuser, 2012).

children aged three to eight and their parents' attitudes and value orientations towards the Internet from a milieu perspective (cf. DIVSI, 2015; cf. also DIVSI, 2012). Although this survey is not primarily concerned with computer gaming, it is nevertheless revealing for the subject at hand. The survey illustrates the area of conflict between desirable potentials and suspected risks in which parents find themselves when observing their children's usage of digital media: even though 58 per cent of the respondent parents agree "that computer games may improve their children's power of concentration and coordination skills" (cf. DIVSI, 2015, p. 17, our translation) two thirds of these parents fear the risks of the digital world and ban their three to eight-year-old children from the Internet (cf. *ibid.*).

GERMAN PARENTS' CONCERNS ABOUT COMPUTER GAMES

The following discussion refers to two studies which highlight the educational handling of topics related to media use in families and allows for conclusions regarding the use of computer games (Wagner et al., 2013a/b; Friedrichs, von Gross, Herde & Sander, 2014). The findings give insights into parents' concerns regarding their younger children's use of computer games and form the basis for our contentions.

Both studies use the term *computer games* as an umbrella term for electronic devices that may be used for gaming⁴. Wagner et al. address "the practice of media education in families with children aged between five and twelve. [...] Inter alia, a representative survey among 453 parents with children aged between five and twelve as well as 48 qualitative family studies were carried out" (2013a, p. 1, our translation). For the statistic foundation of this survey they took charts and items (some of them had to be adjusted) from former studies which were concerned with television use. The authors justify this selection by stating that the patterns of parental scepticism show major similarities in comparison (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). Friedrich et al. analysed "fourteen families with children and younger people aged between six and seventeen years" (2014, p. 2) by using qualitative semi-structured interviews (*ibid.*) to carve out the "media-educational habitus of parents" (*ibid.*, our translation) based on the *habitus* concept according to Bourdieu (*ibid.*, p. 3).

4 Friedrichs et al. (2014) refer to any "kind of digital/electronic game, independent of the device" (p. 11, our translation). Wagner et al. also analyse a broad spectrum within the field of computer games: "computer/console games in their entity (mobile/stationary as well as online/offline)" (2013b, p. 56, our translation).

Both studies show that computer gaming is a meaningful media-related activity for the younger children of the cohort (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b; Friedrichs et al., 2014) and that the significance of gaming rapidly increases from primary school age (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). The gaming activity of children is often problematic for parents and one reason for displeasure within the family. Particularly for male children, gaming consoles and computer games are a dominant educational topic because their interest as well as possession of such consoles is notably higher than that of female children. One reason for the fact that parents of the former worry more than parents of the latter is not only that boys have a greater general preference for gaming but also that they tend to be more interested in action-packed titles. Worries and assumptions about the negative effects are particularly related to violent content of the games (cf. *ibid.*). The assumption of such a causal relation also derives from the fact that parents' educational and fundamental attitudes and positions as well as subjective aesthetic judgements are fundamental for an educational approach towards computer games (Friedrichs et al., 2014). The ability to respond to the needs of children (often designated by the term *Kindorientierung* [child orientation] [Wagner et al., 2013b, p. 215]) is, as expected, also central to media education issues⁵.

Computer gaming has some specific characteristics compared to other types of media use. While intergenerational patterns of television use have emerged over time, there are no such patterns for computer games because parents consume them infrequently or not at all (cf. Friedrichs et al., 2014). Knowing that the media-educational conduct of parents is essentially influenced by fundamental media-related attitudes⁶, this particular challenge is compounded by the fact that parents lack the user experience and prior knowledge to relate to computer games (cf. also Fritz, Lampert, Schmidt & Witting, 2011). When German parents are asked for a global estimation on media in general (with no reference to specific types of me-

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- 5 The lack of understanding for the child's need for aggression also becomes apparent in other areas and indicates a constitutive moment of being a family: "Aggressions develop – from infancy through early childhood to kindergarten age. [...] To abandon their aggressions is to abandon their development, their curiosity and their willingness to learn" (Rogge, 2013, p. 193, our translation).
 - 6 The related knowledge and attitude is referred to as "media-educational habitus" (Friedrichs et al., 2014, p. 2, our translation) and includes "a system of permanent media-educational dispositions which appear as educational and organizational principles for media-educational practices as well as related ideas and judgements" (Friedrichs, 2013, p. 3, our translation).

dia), a negative valuation with reference to media influences is dominant independent of age- and social-related differences (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). When it comes to particular types of media, computer games are the negative frontrunner and their influence in particular is rated unfavourable (cf. *ibid.*):

Compared to other types of media, parents rate computer games particularly critically: they are said to have the least positive and most negative influence. How strongly parents rate this influence to a certain extent depends on how often they use computer games themselves. The frequency of gaming in general and of joint gaming correlate respectively. (*ibid.*, p. 130, our translation)

This applies to younger children in particular. However, this negative viewpoint qualifies with increasing age to a slightly positive evaluation of gaming influence (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). This perception is also influenced by marital status. Single parents basically consider the influence to be more negative (cf. *ibid.*). Based on current findings in the field, Wagner et al. pointed out that the question of how experienced parents assess themselves with reference to media education, has decisive influence on the rating of different types of media: whenever parents feel competent with regard to media education, they tend to rate the impacts of media “on family life” (*ibid.*, p. 47, our translation) to be positive and *vice versa*. This corresponds with the fact that younger parents and those who played or play computer games themselves have a rather positive attitude towards computer games compared to elder parents or parents without experience in gaming (Friedrichs et al., 2014)⁷. Likewise, those parents who play computer games together with their children state that the media influence on children is rather positive and *vice versa*: “It seems to be comprehensible that both positive and negative assumptions about possible influences of computer games are reflected in the frequency of use of computer games” (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b, our translation). Especially with regard to younger children parents feel uncertain about the media-educational effects of computer games: here “the question of how children perceive and process particular media content seems to contribute to uncertainty about educational issues” (*ibid.*, p. 93, our translation).

Although not as much as in the area of computers and Internet, the need for information about computer games is relatively high compared to other types of media (cf. *ibid.*). As expected, less experienced parents are particularly receptive to the kind of press coverage that promotes negative assumptions about the impact

7 According to the *FIM 2011* survey however, only 15 per cent of all parents play computer games themselves on a regular basis (MPFS, 2012, p. 58).

of computer games on the development of children (cf. *ibid.*). A significant part of the critics among Germans see this as a substantiation for their own scepticism.

Computer games are connected to a variety of concerns: “According to the majority of respondents, computer games increase the potential for aggression especially in case of time-consuming use” (Friedrichs et al., 2014, p. 5, our translation). Likewise, there is a dominant belief that a lack of primary experience (the German term is *Primärerfahrung* and embraces all non-medial experiences) is fundamentally harmful for children. Even if computer games are rated positively, this valuation is “almost completely related to particular types of games or game genres such as games for mental performance, strategy or learning games” (*ibid.*, p. 5, our translation).

Even though parental concerns mainly focus on the field of computer games, joint gaming is a rare phenomenon in particular compared to other types of media use (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). Unlike television, which frequently takes place in family contexts, gaming is characterised by being a solitary activity and even joint gaming takes place with friends rather than with parents. It is especially surprising that children’s and young people’s usage of computer games – besides content and time frames – differ in the sense that young people play in their own room whereas children revert to devices in communal rooms (cf. Friedrichs et al., 2014).

The study participants mostly limit the form of supervision of children playing computer games to establishing and monitoring rules for “the restriction of the quantitative usage of computer games (playing time) and qualitative usage of computer games (game content)” (*ibid.*, p. 7, our translation). Regarding the interviewees, even if children directly or indirectly express their wish to spend time on playing computer games together with their parents, this does not result in the parents fulfilling this wish extensively or regularly. This also applies to follow-up communication⁸ between parents and children which is often absent (cf. *ibid.*)⁹.

With respect to their children’s behaviour with media a typical reaction is to lay down rules¹⁰. With computer games these mostly refer to the times at which usage is allowed, the amount of time and the selection of content (in ascending or-

8 These are conversations about the media use following the media activity.

9 The *FIM 2011* study also proves a discrepancy between the significance of playing computer games and having a conversation about them (position 9 out of 14) whereas conversations about content on television rank at position 1 out of 14 (MPFS, 2012, p. 39).

10 The findings in the current *FIM 2011* study also point out that the question of regulating playing computer games (this refers to playing all kinds of digital games) has a dominant position within families (cf. MPFS, 2012, p. 19).

der of frequency) (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). For children under the age of six the predominant assumption is that media consumption needs parental supervision. This especially applies to computer games whereas television consumption is seen to be less in need of supervising. Parents often refer to the age recommendations of the USK as a basis for the assessment of media offerings (cf. *ibid.*; Friedrichs et al., 2014)¹¹. The rigidity of the rules (for example willingness to negotiate in exceptions) correlate positively with the parents' level of educational attainment and is the highest for well-educated parents (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). In a survey of parents' media educational behaviour Junge also determines that rules for media consumption are primarily concerned with time and are aimed at creating room for other activities (cf. Junge, 2013). A frequent pattern entails restricting media consumption if more important duties, for example homework, are being neglected (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b).

Parents with migration background appear to be more liberal and less anxious regarding the media consumption of their children. This especially applies to the field of computer games, where children on average start playing at the age of 6.15 years whereas children of parents without migration background on average start playing at the age of 6.64 years (*ibid.*). Wagner et al. (2013b) conclude on the basis of this that parents with migration background are less influenced by age ratings.

PARENTS' MEDIA EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

The above findings paint a clear picture: the majority of German parents view their children's computer game consumption with scepticism or even disapproval. Differing opinions and needs regarding usage are often the reason for conflict-ridden discussions.

Putting their own results into context in the field of comparable studies (Junge, 2013; Lampert et al., 2012; Kutner, Olson, Warner, Hertzog, 2008) Friedrichs et al. identify certain comprehensive findings of typical media educational activities within families:

11 Theunert and Gebel differentiatingly point out in their study that although parents are highly approving of the age regulations, media consumption in everyday life is only guided marginally by the regulations and then only by highly educated parents (cf. Theunert & Gebel, 2007).

- Rules refer to the restriction of the length of time of usage and the consumption of games with violent content (cf. Friedrichs et al., 2014).
- Rules are intensified if activities besides media activities and social interactions are being neglected (cf. *ibid.*).
- Communication about computer games hardly takes place (cf. *ibid.*).

Wagner et al. use scales and items for the evaluation of media educational behaviour that stem from prior studies on television usage (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). The fact that these have proven to be resilient points to a *culturally pessimistic automatism*, which is characterised by a lack of ability to adjust its criticism according to the specific quality of the medium that is being targeted (this automatism has many characteristics and can be found across all groups of people. Here he refers to parents who are concerned about the media behaviour of their children). Instead it is aimed at new media whose usage does not correspond to the critic's personal routines and habits (formerly television, now computer games). This is demonstrated, for example, by the astounding gap between parents' rejection of computer games and their lack of willingness to spend time on assuring themselves of the correctness of their own fears. The following statement made by a mother points to the scant willingness of parents to address the media needs of their children:

But I also just don't have enough patience to have a talk about it, I think. It's just not my cup of tea. I can't listen to it either, because I'm just not at all interested in what is happening there. I just want him to, that I know, [...] that it [the activities] is appropriate to his age. (Friedrichs et al., 2014, p. 7, our translation)

This is especially surprising in relation to the fact that a not too small fraction of the resentment refers to games with violent content. A well-grounded rejection of these would imply that one has at least become acquainted with them. The *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*¹² (bpb) (German federal agency for civic education) has reacted to this desideratum and offers so-called *Parent-LAN* events in the style of LAN parties at which parents are invited to try out or actually become acquainted with computer games (often first-person-shooters) (cf. bpb, n.d. a). In addition the *spielbar.de.de* web portal has been developed to inform parents about computer games and children's and young people's usage of them (cf. bpb, n.d. b; Raczkowzki, 2018, this volume).

12 www.bpb.de

A multitude of findings suggest that concerns about computer games occur in a highly diffuse field and are often clouded by other criteria. As already mentioned, single parents for example rate the negative effects of media and especially the effects of computer games especially high (cf. Wagner et al., 2013b). One may hypothesise this is actually about a general feeling of being overwhelmed on the part of single parents.

If computer games are approved of by German parents, then only when they are educational. In this regard the journalist Tanja Dückers poses the questions of exactly why computer games have become “the devil incarnate” (Dücker, 2012, p. 1, our translation). She sees a connection with the permanent wish of parents that their children’s activities should all be meaningful and beneficial to prepare and practice for the German achievement-oriented society. Computer games as an activity “for the sake of enjoyment” (ibid., p. 2, our translation) only seem appropriate if connected to education-related requirements: “Because of this, labels like ‘Benefits fine motor skills’, ‘Benefits eye-hand coordination’ or simply ‘Educational’ are stuck on every second toy in Germany” (ibid., p. 2, our translation).

In a similar way, articles can be found in the ‘reputed’ German press, for example giving advice on exactly which games you should be playing or rather which games are valuable. At the same time a black and white picture is also being painted here. For example, the subheading of an article giving recommendations for suitable – because beneficial – games states: “Video games have a bad reputation: They are time-consuming – and make people aggressive. But there are also games that are fun and that have positive effects” (SPIEGEL ONLINE, 2015, our translation).

To counteract the (supposedly) shortcomings of parents who are clearly overstrained in regard to the media consumption of their children, the market and the web provide numerous guides. These react quite precisely to the educational deficiencies and emphasise needs, for example the absent (willingness for) follow-up communication. The EU initiative *klicksafe* formulates precise advice for parents concerning the handling of computer games, for example: “Show interest!”, “Consider games on mobile devices!”, “Pay attention to age-appropriate time windows for using video games!”, “Offer alternatives!” (klicksafe, n.d., p. 3, our translations).

Links can be found particularly to the much-cited need to regulate the time spent playing computer games. In a guidebook entitled *Children and media – What adults should know* (our translation) Neuß (2012) gives precise instructions for the maximum length of time children should be using computer games depending on their age:

- Four to six years old: approx. 20 to 30 minutes a day with parental supervision
- Seven to ten years old: approx. 30 to 45 minutes a day
- Eleven to thirteen years old: approx. 60 minutes a day. (ibid., p. 97, our translation)

According to this guidebook the way in which German parents deal with their concerns about computer games is marked by a certain deference to authority and an accompanying feeling of *educational absolutism*. Public broadcasting media, the opinion of the respected press, age recommendations and access-restricting software are popular and show how much insecurity and lack of personal experience is connected to the use of computer games

In conclusion, the concerns of parents in Germany indicate that they are characterised to a large extent by ignorance of what happens in computer games. In addition, general attitudes and behaviour patterns which are influenced and manifested by public opinion play a central role, whereby two central patterns for a sceptical view of computer games can be identified according to educational background:

- 1) The fear that ‘better’ and more important educational content could be neglected (more educated households)¹³. The following statement by a parent is a good example:

Well, what we, the way we see it with *Sendung mit der Maus*¹⁴ is that you (parents) don’t need to watch every single thing, you can trust public television, at least we don’t bother watching *Sendung mit der Maus*. That’s the place she can let off steam, as it were. (Friedrichs et al., 2014, p. 8, our translation)

- 2) The fear that important ‘practical skills’ may not develop sufficiently (less educated households). The following statement by a parent is a good example:

13 The findings of the *DIVSI U9* study are similar and state with regard to the milieu of the “responsibility-conscious mainstream”: “The parents have a basically critical attitude to playing games on computers, smartphones or tablets; their children spend altogether less time playing both educational and recreational games than the average of the children of all internet milieus” (DIVSI, 2015, p. 45, our translation).

14 *Sendung mit der Maus* literally means “The programme with the mouse”. It is a children’s TV programme that premiered in 1971 on German television and combines entertaining and educational elements. It is among the historically most popular German children’s TV programmes.

They're just not craftsmen any more. I tell you: look at me, I'm a manual worker and I can do just about anything my job needs. And the kids growing up nowadays, they only know about that stuff. [...] It's ridiculous y'know. They know all about their computer whatsits, y'know, but not a thing about anything else. And I say that's really, really bad. (ibid., p. 5, our translation)

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

To sum up, it can be concluded that German parents confront their children's computer game activities with many worries and concerns. The findings feed a suspicion that their scepticism is often very vague.

An important reference value for understanding German parental concerns is personal media use. The studies carried out to date draw mainly on parents who have little or no personal experience of computer games and who assume their effect to be adverse, whereas parents with greater affinity with computer games (the minority sample) are less concerned. In order to promote understanding, follow-up studies must also involve parents with past and current personal experience of computer game use. For example, statements and appraisals by the generation of early first-person shooters¹⁵ or parents who are active players would be valuable.

Even if the participants of the quoted studies do not call themselves *players*, it is assumed that some of them (born after 1970) had contact to computer games when they were younger. If this is the case, it would be interesting to ask where their scepticism with regard to their own children comes from. One possible reason could be that the proximity of today's games is much higher, and computer games in the 1990s are not equal to current games.

The concerns of German parents about the use of computer games by their children are often diffuse and are often not based on solid findings. Specific trainings would therefore be helpful and appropriate. Such measures could help parents to practice an unexcited approach to the subject.

Against the background of ever new technological developments it requires multi-perspective studies to enable more differentiated statements. Recent studies have focused on playing habits. Qualitative studies that take children's needs into

15 In this way some of the young people who played the *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998) game, or somewhat later the popular *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) from 1999/2000 onwards, now have children themselves.

view would be helpful to build a bridge between parental fears and the behaviour of their children.

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