



Romeo Vitelli Ph.D. Media Spotlight

Are Video Games Addictive?

Is it possible to become addicted to video games?

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In 2005, Shanghai gamer Qiu Chengwei(link is external) stabbed a friend to death when he found out that he had sold a virtual sword belonging to Chengwei on eBay for 7,200 yuan (\$738). After narrowly avoiding a death sentence, Chengwei was sentenced to life imprisonment. In 2009, an Ohio court sentenced 17 year-old Daniel Petric(link is external) to 23 years in prison for the fatal shooting of his mother. Petric had shot both his parents after they took away his copy of Halo 3. During his trial, the court was told that Petric had become addicted

to the game after being left housebound following a jetski injury.

In 2011, Rebecca Colleen Christie was sentenced to 25 years in prison by a New Mexico court for allowing her 3 ½ year-old daughter to die of malnutrition while she spent hours playing World of Warcraft.

Is it possible to become addicted to video games?

While addiction remains a prime concern in most societies, whether drug addiction, alcohol addiction, gambling addiction, etc., becoming addicted to video games seems more controversial despite high-profile cases like the ones listed above. Media stories about extreme cases of video game addiction, especially online games, goes back to at least 1993 when Wired ran a story(link is external) on MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and the players who become addicted to them.

In the newly-released Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders(link is external) (DSM-V), Internet Gaming Disorder has been included among the conditions being considered for future study and possible addition to later DSM editions. At this time, however, video game addiction

(GA) is not considered to be a mental disorder. Yet research suggests that 0.5 percent of all gamers(link is external) and 1.7 percent of ninth graders experience symptoms associated with excessive video game use. Along with Online Gamers Anonymous(link is external) in the United States, clinics for video game addicts have been established in countries around the world including China, the Netherlands, and Australia. Even conventional addiction treatment clinics have been noting a rise in referrals for gaming addiction.

Adolescents (particularly male adolescents) seem especially prone to video game addiction though identifying young people who are vulnerable can be difficult given how popular gaming is in people of all ages. While researchers have linked excessive gaming to different personality factors such as impulsiveness, higher acceptance of violence and lower social skills, gamers having trouble coping with their lives in general can be vulnerable as well. Not only are people dealing with excessive stress and general unhappiness in their lives more likely to become addicted to video games, but gaming addicts are also more likely to be diagnosed with other disorders. These related diagnoses

can include attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, and anxiety.

But what other risk factors are associated with gaming addiction? Though researchers have looked at amount of time spent online as a risk for addiction, *type* of video game may be important as well. Not only are role-playing gamers more vulnerable to addiction but so are shooter and strategy gamers.

The motivation for playing also seems to be a factor in addiction. People who game for fun or socializing are less likely to become addicted than people who are caught up in the need for status or simply to escape from the problems in their lives. If you're dealing with real-life failure, escaping from that stress by playing games that give you a sense of victory or control over your life can be a helpful way of coping. Spending too much time online or "shutting out" the real world with intense gaming can be a different story, though.

When it comes to problems in socializing that might make gamers especially vulnerable to video game addiction, the following factors seem to be important:

- Lack of successful experiences in real life
- Low parental support
- High video game use by parents
- Divorce or separation of parents
- Behavioural problems or problems at school
- Truancy from classes
- School phobia
- Poor grades
- Repeating a grade

Actual studies looking at risk factors for video game addiction tend to be scarce. A recent two-year longitudinal study of more than three thousand Singapore students(link is external) found that longer gaming time, reduced social competence, and a history of impulsive behaviour increased the likelihood of gaming addiction after two years. Among the outcomes of pathological gaming are depression, anxiety, social phobias and poorer performance in school. But can social anxiety and other problems linked to excessive gaming be causing the problem or are the result of gaming addiction? A Dutch study(link is external) of 543 gamers found that reduced social skills appeared to result in increased problem game behaviour six months later though the opposite effect was not observed. Loneliness appears

to be a cause of pathological gaming and vice versa though the same result was not found for life satisfaction.

Looking at how problem gaming behaviour was linked to social and personality risk factors over time, a team of German researchers studied students in schools in central Germany(link is external). Florian Rehbein and Dirk Baier of Hanover, Germany's Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony surveyed 1,217 fourth-grade students and repeated the survey five years later. Questionnaires included information on how children interacted with their parents at home and social adjustment.

The fourth graders averaged 56 minutes of video game playing each day (76 minutes for boys and 38 minutes for girls). This rose to 207 minutes a day for ninth grade boys and 79 minutes a day for ninth grade girls. Of the adolescents in the study, 1.3 percent met criteria for video game addiction while an additional 2.65 percent were judged to be at risk. Overall, the single biggest factor that increased the likelihood of video game addiction was male gender. While being from a single-parent family was a significant factor as well, the effect size was relatively small.

Problem video game behaviour was also found to persist over time. Children who showed video game addiction in the fourth grade were more likely to show problem with addiction five years later. Therefore, children and adolescents who become addicted to video games do not simply “grow out of it” as many parents predict.

Socialization also appears to play a role in video game addiction. Children and adolescents who are well integrated into their class and who show good social skills are less likely to become problem game players. At-risk children are also more likely to have difficulty making friends or are less socially active. Results shown by Rehbein and Baier’s research, as well as similar studies, suggest that children who are more socially isolated or who face problems in school or at home may use video games as a way of regaining control over their lives.

One surprising finding reported by Rehbein and Baier was that level of emotional support or supervision provided by parents did not play a significant role in video game addiction. Though video game addiction has often been blamed on parental neglect in the past, factors such as coming from a single-parent family really aren’t that important.

While most educational strategies aimed at preventing video game abuse involve having parents take greater responsibility over what their children are doing, this appears to be not that effective. Other recommended approaches, such as restricting time spent playing games and taking away X-boxes and other gaming devices don't appear to be very effective either (except possibly for children under the age of ten).

A better approach for helping children overcome video game addiction would be to focus on the social problems that make retreating into video game so appealing to young people. Teaching children to improve their social skills, manage stress more effectively, and become less isolated may be the best approach to dealing with problem gaming.

Ultimately, people become dependent on video games for the same reason that they can become dependent on any other problem behaviour such as gambling or using recreational drugs. Getting away from problems in our lives by doing things that seem pleasurable or simpler to understand can be a potent lure for people in need, whether you are a child or an adult.

Learning that avoiding stressful situations is not the way to handle stress takes time, patience and understanding. Psychological crutches, whether they are video games or gambling casinos, are best handled in moderation.