



MIND U

# Irresistible Urge or Healthy Enthusiasm?

Gaming, content, and context: Excessive gaming and addictive gaming are not the same



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ver the past two decades, there has been much debate on screen time particularly in relation to how much time children should be spending on activities like videogame playing, social media use, and watching online videos. For me, the issue is not about the amount of screen time but is about the content and the context of screen use. I have three ‘screenagers’ (i.e., children often referred to as ‘digital natives’ who have never known a world without the internet, mobile phones and interactive television) who all – like me – spend a disproportionate amount of their everyday lives on front of a screen for both work/educational and leisure purposes. Engaging in a lot of screen-based activities is not inherently negative – it’s simply a case of doing things differently than we did 20 years ago.

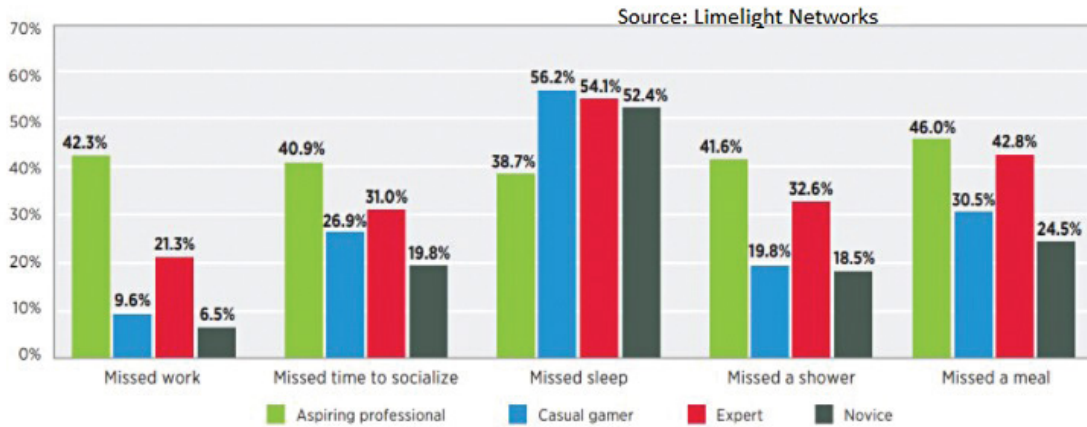
One online activity that has received a lot of criticism in the media is the playing of online videogames. However, there is now a wealth of research which shows that video games can be put to educational and therapeutic uses, as well as many studies which reveal how playing video games can improve reaction times and hand-eye co-ordination. Their interactivity can stimulate learning, allowing individuals to experience novelty, curiosity and challenge that stimulates learning. Although I have published many studies concerning online gaming addiction, there is little empirical evidence that moderate

gaming has any negative effects whatsoever. In fact, many excessive players experience detrimental effects.

### Excessive Gaming

Over the past 20 years I have spent time researching the excessive playing of online videogames like Everquest and World of Warcraft (WoW). Online gaming involves multiple reinforcements in that different features might be differently rewarding to different people. In video games more generally, the rewards might be intrinsic (e.g. improving your highest score, beating your friend’s high score, getting your name on the “hall of fame”, mastering the game) or extrinsic (e.g. peer admiration).





What daily activities have you missed due to playing a video game?

In online gaming, there is no end to the game and there is the potential for gamers to play endlessly. This can be immensely rewarding and psychologically engrossing. For a small minority of people, this may lead to addiction where online gaming compromises everything else in their lives. However, playing excessively doesn't necessarily make someone an addict. A few years ago, I published two case study accounts of two males

who claimed that they were gaming for up to 80 hours a week. They were behaviourally identical in terms of their game playing, but very different in terms of their psychological motivation to play.

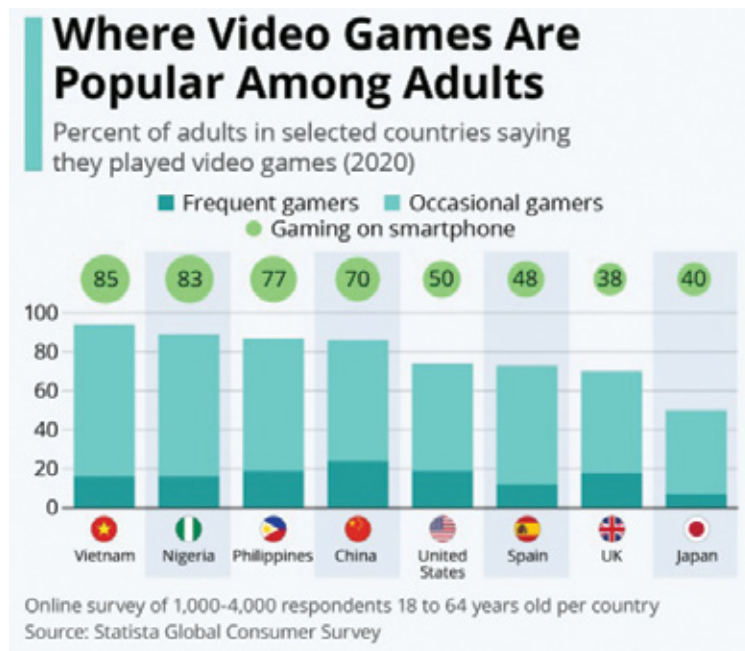
### Positive and Negative Influences

The first case was an unemployed single 21-year old male. His favourite

online game was World of Warcraft and that since leaving university he had spent an average of 10 to 14 hours a day playing WoW. He claimed that WoW had a positive influence in his life and that most of his social life was online and that it increased his self-esteem. He also argued that he had no other commitments and that he had the time and the flexibility to play WoW for long stretches. Gaming provided a daily routine when there was little else going on. There were no negative detrimental effects in his life. When he got a job and a girlfriend, his playing all but stopped.

The second case was 38-year old male, a financial accountant, married and had two children. He told me that over the previous 18 months, his online playing of Everquest had gone from about 3-4 hours of playing every evening to playing up to 14 hours a day. He claimed that his relationship was breaking down, that he was spending little time with his children, and that he constantly rang in sick to work so that he could spend the day playing online games. He had tried to quit playing on a number of occasions but could not go more than a few days before he experienced "an irresistible urge" to play again – even when his wife threatened to leave him.

Giving up online gaming was worse than giving up smoking and that




he was “extremely moody, anxious, depressed and irritable” if he was unable to play online. Things got even worse. He was fired from his job for being unreliable and unproductive (although his employers were totally unaware of his gaming behaviour). As a result of losing his job, his wife also left him. This led to him “playing all day, every day”. It was a vicious circle in that his excessive online gaming was causing all his problems yet the only way he felt he could alleviate his mood state and forget about all of life’s stresses was to play online games even more.

### Genuine Addiction

I argued that only the second man appeared to be genuinely addicted to online gaming but that the first man wasn’t. I based this on the context and consequences of his excessive play. Online gaming addiction should be characterized by the extent to which excessive gaming impacts negatively on other areas of the gamers’ lives rather than the amount of time spent playing. For me, an activity cannot be described as an addiction if there are few (or no) negative consequences in the player’s life even if the gamer is playing up to 14 hours a day. The difference between a healthy enthusiasm and an addiction is that healthy enthusiasms add to life, addictions take away from it.



Every week I receive emails from parents claiming that their sons are addicted to playing online games and that their daughters are addicted to social media. When I ask them why they think this is the case, they almost all reply “because they spend most of their leisure time in front of a screen”. This is simply a case of parents pathologizing their children’s behaviour because they think what they are doing is “a waste of time”. I always ask parents the same three things in relation to their child’s screen

use. Does it affect their schoolwork? Does it affect their physical education? Does it affect their peer development and interaction? Usually parents say that none of these things are affected so if that is the case, there is little to worry about when it comes to screen time. Parents also have to bear in mind that this is how today’s children live their lives. Parents need to realise that excessive screen time doesn’t always have negative consequences and that the content and context of their child’s screen use is more important than the amount of screen time. 



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