

A woman with dark hair is lying in bed, looking thoughtful with her hand near her face. In the foreground, the arm and shoulder of another person are visible, suggesting a close relationship. The scene is lit with a cool, blue light, creating a contemplative mood.

GAMES

MANY SPOUSES AND PARTNERS SAY THEY FEEL LIKE THEY ARE THE THIRD WHEEL IN A RELATIONSHIP, WITH THE OBJECT OF THE OTHER'S INFIDELITY BEING AN ADVANCED COLLECTION OF PIXELS.

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a white hospital gown, lying in a hospital bed. He is looking down at a smartphone in his hands with a focused expression. The background shows the white metal frame of the bed and a white pillow.

ADDICTION

IT'S A REAL PROBLEM — AND NOT JUST FOR KIDS

BY TED LEAVITT, RCC

IN THE EARLY 1970s, a computerized game called “Pong” was introduced and quickly became a fad. Using a simplistic joystick control, Pong allowed users to deflect a small pixelated “ball” back and forth, either with an opponent or against the computer itself. At the time, the technology was incredible — everyone had to have one.

But while the popularity of Pong was predictably short-lived, it had opened the minds of consumers and electronics companies. It also opened the door to an industry that has not only shown incredible staying power, but also an ability to evolve and integrate the latest technology. In fact, the video game industry is where most new technology is introduced, whether it is within the programming of a new game or a new console or computer.

Today’s games are available in endless variety across countless genres, ranging from Massive Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG), to digitized game shows, card games, and first-person shooter games. Users can build cities, race expensive cars, create magical worlds, commit consequence-free virtual crimes, and battle against mythical creatures.

One wonders how Pong players, astounded by the technology of the time, would even fathom today’s video-game industry.

GAMER PROFILE

Video games are not just the stuff of childhood and adolescence. According to a recent review by Big Fish Games, the average age of video-game users is 35. And with many of the top-selling games built around concepts of assassination, crime, war, and fighting, it is not a surprise many of those who use video games

do not see them as being just for kids.

Nor are the players strictly male: while 75 per cent of those employed in the gaming industry are male and the stereotypical gamer is male, 48 per cent of females play games, compared to 50 per cent of males.

Despite all this, most of the negative attention garnered by video games is regarding their effect on the developing brains of younger users. Video games have been blamed for school shootings, sexual violence, apathy and malaise, poor social skills and learning outcomes, and even health problems.

The American Psychological Association established a task force to investigate these alarming allegations and after much time, effort, and money, concluded that the data is... inconclusive. Most of the studies were methodologically flawed and the outcomes were inconsistent.

Peer-reviewed research has found consistent associations between gaming and a variety of mental-health conditions, including depression, anxiety, ADHD, and addictive behaviour. While ethical research is limited in its ability to determine whether gaming is a causative variable or simply correlated with these conditions, many counsellors are seeing an increase in client cases where video-game use is either a peripheral or central consideration.

Addictive video gaming, in particular, is worth exploring further, especially as there is likely a considerable overlap between addictive behaviour and other presenting problems.

ADDICTIVE GAMING BEHAVIOUR

So how can a professional (or parent or partner) know the difference between typical gaming behaviour and addictive gaming behaviour? While the



WHAT MAKES SOMETHING ADDICTIVE?

Over the years, research has shifted the focus from the substance or behaviour to its neurochemical impact. In short, any behaviour that causes spikes of the neurotransmitters dopamine and/or

endorphins has the potential to create addiction. One of the best natural ways of increasing dopamine in the brain is the introduction of novelty and unexpected rewards. In video

gaming, the perfect storm is created: with each mission or objective, and around each corner, awaits not only a potential victory or defeat but also a virtual spillway of dopamine.

same question can be asked with any addictive behaviour, it might be more difficult to recognize with video-game playing.

I use a very broad definition of addiction: the inability to reduce or stop a behaviour despite its negative consequences in one or more areas of the individual's life. This is intentionally broad because I believe addictive behaviour, like many other behaviours, is most accurately graded on a spectrum or continuum rather than in a categorical way.

Like all other disorders in the DSM, regardless of how many symptoms are displayed, unless those symptoms cause significant impairment in functioning in occupational, educational, or relational

areas, the individual technically does not meet the diagnostic criteria for a disorder. This tells us the disorder is caused by the behaviour and is not the cause of the behaviour; the condition or conditions are the cause, while the disorder is the effect.

This means a single person with an advanced educational degree, a successful high-income home-based job, and no baseline desire for a relationship may game for upwards of 10 hours a day and not be considered to have a disorder. Because this behaviour is not causing impairment or negative consequences, it is arguable whether this behaviour needs to change or not.

However, it also means individuals who only game for an hour or two a

day may meet the criteria because of the severity of consequences. If the consequences are continually negative and occur as a direct result of the behaviour, then the absolute amount of time spent on the behaviour is irrelevant; what is relevant is the individual's inability to reduce or stop the behaviour.

Of course, the individual engaging in the behaviour is not always the best source for assessing negative consequences. Addicted individuals often see their behaviour as reasonable and not out of the ordinary. It's always possible to find someone worse off who can serve as a standard example of "true addiction."

Other more objective ways of assessing the effect of the behaviour might include questions such as:

- Is gaming often a source of contention between the individual and others?
- How much time does the individual spend thinking and talking about gaming when not actually gaming?
- Has the amount of time spent gaming increased?
- How does the individual respond when prevented from gaming?
- Does gaming contribute to financial difficulties?
- Does gaming take time away from more important activities?
- Does the individual have a poor sense of how much time is spent gaming?

While not an exhaustive question list, these points are mostly objective. Either they do or don't spend three hours; it is not a matter of opinion. What is up for discussion is the impact of those three hours.

It is easy to vilify time-consuming and costly pursuits, but there are many other activities that drain money and time and impact relationships but are seen as healthy: exercise, practicing an

instrument, or working. The activity itself is irrelevant — what is relevant is the impact.

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS SPECIFICALLY

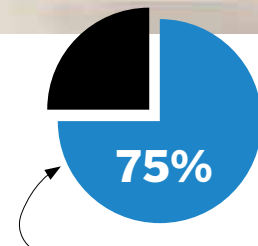
One of the common presenting issues clinical counsellors assist clients with is the impact of infidelity on relationships. The betrayal of trust, feelings of violation, and questioning of beliefs can lead to long-lasting trauma. It may sound melodramatic, but addictive behaviour can have an equally devastating impact, particularly if there is an element of secrecy involved (and there usually is). Many spouses and partners say they feel like they are the third wheel in a relationship, with the object of the other's infidelity being an advanced collection of pixels, and when a partner is gaming addictively, it is very difficult for the non-gaming partner to feel a sense of connection.

In order to take gaming addiction seriously, it is helpful to see the parallel with other addictive behaviours. Consider the following statement:

"My husband never pays any attention to me anymore. He's always talking about this game or that upgrade or making plans with his online friends to go raid a castle or something. I've asked him to cut back and spend more time with me, and he always says he will, but the games always seem to pull him back in. I don't think he can stop."

To some, this may seem like the quintessential nag, a killjoy who doesn't understand her husband is just having some harmless fun with his friends. However, what if we make a few vocabulary changes:

"My husband never pays any attention to me anymore. He always seems to have a beer or glass of wine in his hand, or he's making plans with his



75 PER CENT OF THOSE EMPLOYED IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY ARE MALE.

DID YOU KNOW?



48 PER CENT OF FEMALES PLAY GAMES, COMPARED TO 50 PER CENT OF MALES.

work friends to get together and have more beer and wine. I've asked him to cut back and spend more time with me, and he always says he will, but the alcohol always seems to pull him back in. I don't think he can stop."

If a person expressed this concern about her husband's drinking, a series of follow-up questions would be automatically forthcoming with due attention paid to the issue.

When it comes to gaming, however, it is tempting to dismiss the concern as parallel to a disagreement about which TV shows to watch on a Friday night.

If someone approached a counsellor seeking help for living with or helping a spouse or partner who experienced depression, anxiety, ADHD, or any other mental-health condition, it would not even be a question as to how the presenting client would be impacted by his or her partner's struggles.

Remember then, much research has shown a clear link between excessive gaming and these very same mental-health problems. It is a logical leap to make that if a person has concerns about his or her partner's gaming, they are just as likely dealing with a partner's mental-health struggle.

WHAT TO DO

In the Narcotics Anonymous recovery program, one of the maxims is "a drug is a drug is a drug." The intention is to underscore that heroin is no different from marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, or any other drug. This doesn't mean that the chemical makeup and chemical effects are identical, as many have falsely assumed; it means that the process of becoming addicted to any drug is the same across all drugs.

When working with behavioural addictions, such as spending, eating, Netflix, or video games, it can be a

beneficial reminder to rephrase this statement as "addiction is addiction is addiction." This means that if an individual is seeking help for addiction to alcohol, pornography, sugar, or Pokemon, the underlying driving forces are essentially the same: the felt need to escape one's present circumstances.

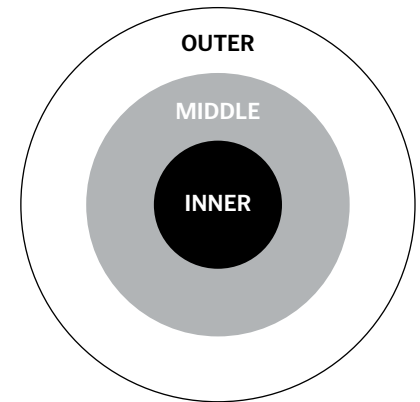
While the impetus behind addiction is fairly consistent, approaches to treatment must be tailored to each individual's unique needs, abilities, and situation. This is especially vital when the object of addiction is not something the individual can simply eliminate from their life, like drugs or alcohol. If a person is addicted to online pornography but must use the internet daily for work, it will be necessary to develop a workaround. Similarly, behavioural addictions to eating or spending also require a way to manage behaviour rather than eliminate it entirely. One way of approaching this is to use the Three Circles approach.*

The outer circle consists of behaviours that are healthy and positive.

The middle circle consists of behaviours that are questionably healthy, that increase the chances of pushing boundaries, or that have unclear consequences. Additionally, the middle circle may include circumstances or emotional states that increase the likelihood of addictive behaviour.

Finally, the inner circle refers to behaviours that are inarguably unacceptable. As individuals work through their addictive behaviour patterns and cycles, it becomes increasingly apparent which behaviours belong in which circles.

An example using addictive gaming with an adult male is illustrative (see right). Note the circle with the most



OUTER CIRCLE

- Playing less than two hours a day
- Buying a new game if it doesn't negatively impact an important financial area
- Playing outside work/school hours
- Playing without interfering with responsibilities
- Wanting new games

MIDDLE CIRCLE

- Playing on lunch break at work
- Checking game status while socializing with others
- Spending lots of time researching games
- Consistently updating the game and accessory wish list
- Playing longer than planned
- Being irritable or angry when prevented from playing
- Arguing about gaming with partner
- Spending more on gaming than planned

INNER CIRCLE

- Playing at/during work
- Playing in secret
- Hiding the amount of gaming from partner
- Hiding the amount of money spent on gaming from partner

*The model used here is a modification of the Three Circles approach advocated by Sex Addicts Anonymous.

items is the middle circle: there is a large grey area between responsible, healthy behaviour and irresponsible, harmful behaviour.

The most critical element for ongoing recovery is how well the individual navigates through that fog. As individuals become more self-aware and more aware of their surroundings and circumstances, the middle circle will often expand and contract.

The Three Circles approach is dynamic, in that it is an ongoing and continually edited treatment plan. It does not penalize inner-circle behaviour but seeks to understand the middle-circle circumstances and/or choices that led down that path. Clinical experience has demonstrated that the degree to which an individual resists moving something from the middle circle to the inner circle is the degree to which the addictive behaviour is difficult to reduce or eliminate.

For example, Tom has acknowledged that he plays his favourite game far too much and that it has had a negative impact on his relationship with Tammy. She feels isolated and alone and has repeatedly expressed frustration with Tom's unwillingness to reduce the amount of time he spends gaming. Following an ultimatum that Tom must choose between his avatar and Tammy, Tom has sought help.

After an assessment of the addiction's severity, Tom and his counsellor complete the Three Circles inventory. Included in Tom's middle circle is the item "playing on lunch break at work." Tom labels this middle-circle behaviour because it "isn't hurting anyone" and he isn't missing work or falling short in his responsibilities. The counsellor asks how often Tom's lunchtime playing overlaps into working hours. Tom says this occasionally

happens but is rare. They decide to leave this behaviour in the middle circle for the time being.

Two weeks later, Tom receives a written warning about playing his game during work, which leads to a heated argument with Tammy. The counsellor suggests playing on lunch break is more risky for Tom than he believes. Tom denies this, saying he will be more careful. In further discussion, Tom begrudgingly agrees that when he plays his game at lunch, he has repeatedly gone on to play during working hours. When he does not play at lunch, he has never gone on to play during working hours.

This is the point at which Tom must decide how serious he is about changing his addictive behaviour. If Tom stubbornly insists this behaviour is fine and he's just going to try harder, he will likely continue

in harm's way. As he moves these behaviours and situations from the middle circle into the inner circle, he finds it easier and easier to manage his addictive impulses, building trust with Tammy and his employer and building confidence within himself.

To return to an earlier point, if the object of Tom's addictive behaviour was a substance or dangerous activity, it would be more readily accepted as a clinical issue and treated with the respect and attention it deserves.



THE AVERAGE AGE OF VIDEO GAME USERS IS 35. AND WITH MANY OF THE TOP-SELLING GAMES BUILT AROUND CONCEPTS OF ASSASSINATION, CRIME, WAR, AND FIGHTING, IT IS NOT A SURPRISE MANY OF THOSE WHO USE VIDEO GAMES DO NOT SEE THEM AS BEING JUST FOR KIDS.

down the path he has already been on, grow increasingly frustrated that the consequences continue, and possibly give up on the idea of changing. If Tom moves this behaviour into the inner circle, he greatly reduces his chances of accidentally gaming during working hours.

While many individuals struggling with addiction would grind to a halt at this point, over the next few months, Tom recognizes the small decisions he is making that continue to put him

Because addictive video gaming can be equally harmful mentally and emotionally, and in some cases, even physically, it is clearly time to recognize it for what it is and treat it as such. After all, addiction is addiction is addiction. ■

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