

For some, video games can become a significant life problem



The World Health Organization (WHO) recently announced that video game addiction can be recognized as a mental health disorder. The WHO, based in Geneva, announced that it would list “gaming disorder” in the upcoming 11th edition of its highly respected compendium of medical disorders, the *International Classification of Diseases*. This publication is used by health professionals around the world to diagnose and classify health conditions.

The gaming industry is big business. Real big. In fact, the worldwide annual revenue of video games eclipses the worldwide yearly revenue of motion pictures. The largest revenue-grossing motion pictures of all time are: 1. *Avatar* and 2. *Titanic*. Each of these two movies brought in about \$2.2 billion worldwide (\$4.5 billion total).

In comparison, the top video game, Pokémon, generated over \$52 billion, more than 10 times the amount of these two films combined! New video game superstar, *Fortnite*, is predicted to generate almost \$5 billion in revenue in the next year, alone.

Last year, over \$100 billion was spent on video games, compared to only half that for the global movie industry.

Simply amazing. One-third of all households in the U.S. have video game players, and 2.6 billion people play video games globally.

Video games are designed to hook players. Designers optimize any and all actions and strategies that keep players engaged. When new games are introduced, the biggest compliment for the designer and company is, “I am not able to put the game down.” That is why WHO has recognized that players can actually become addicted, introducing the term “gaming disorder.”

Although WHO may recognize the new mental health disorder of gaming addiction, not all doctors and mental health professionals agree. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) said that there is no convincing evidence that “gaming addiction disorder” is a unique mental health disorder or addiction.

Some fear that the diagnosis will stigmatize many young people who play and enjoy video games. Others think the

decision was based more on moral beliefs than scientific research.

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It can't be denied that video games have been associated with several player deaths in the past decade while participating in marathon gaming sessions. Many more people have engaged in video games so much that their participation has adversely affected many other areas of their lives.

The hallmark of gaming disorders is that players significantly diminish or sever ties with friends and family, work performance and grades drop, and the players stop participating in daily activities and interests that they usually enjoy or require. The players are unable to discontinue engaging in gaming activities even when the actions affect them adversely, and often increase their gaming participation.

The WHO says this type of behavior should be exhibited for 12 months to make the diagnosis of gaming disorder. Some experts think that this definition of gaming disorder may apply to almost one percent of people worldwide.

Other mental health professionals say that instead of focusing on the disorder itself, the focus should be on what is causing the abnormal participation in gaming, which like many other addictions involves self-harm and escaping from reality. The reason many want to escape from reality may have an underlying cause in anxiety and/or depression.

The other elephant in the room is the extremely violent and mature nature of many of the games. Although beyond the scope of this article, it should be acknowledged that how these video games affect the behavior and perception of the players concerning killing, death, and social interactions must by its very nature be a grave concern.

Whether the WHO is right, or the APA is right may merely be a matter of semantics. At least, the definition of gaming disorder starts the process of mental health professionals being able to identify the condition and set up treatment program protocols.

The WHO designation may help encourage those whose lives have been adversely affected to seek treatment and encourage more mental health experts and other healthcare providers to offer help. This may set the stage so that insurance companies will more likely pay for the treatment of gaming addiction. Currently, it is very difficult for those who need help for gaming addiction disorder to get qualified help.

If you know someone who participates in an abnormal amount of video gaming, ask the following questions:

- Have they decreased interactions with friends?
- Have they reduced interactions with family?
- Have their grades suffered?
- Has their work performance declined?
- Do they not participate in hobbies or activities that they have enjoyed in the past?
- Are they neglecting required activities like eating and bathing or other self-hygiene or health tasks?
- Are they getting less sleep than they should as a result of gaming?
- Have they had a significant increase in health problems since participating in gaming?

If the answer to two or more of these questions is "yes," talk to your doctor about ways of getting a formal mental health evaluation for them.

Gaming is big business. It can also be a significant life problem for a small percentage of players. Regardless of arguing about definitions, the WHO took a big step in helping those who are being adversely affected by video games.

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