

Computer Games Addiction or Aid?



Addiction or Aid?

While gambling disorder is the only addictive disorder included in DSM-5 as a diagnosable condition, Internet gaming disorder is included in Section III of the manual. Disorders listed there require further research before their consideration as formal disorders. There is a difference between excessive use and disordered use, however, and this is useful to explore with clients.

Excessive Vs. Addicted

The DSM-5 considers the box on the right to define disordered use—clients should exhibit five of the list in one year. Consider, however, how many of us use activities to help us escape anxiety or manage depression, and how a hobby inevitably leads us to make choices between activities. Some of these might also be linked to shame around gaming, and

1. Withdrawal symptoms when not playing Internet games.
2. A build-up of tolerance—more time needs to be spent playing the games.
3. The person has tried to stop or curb playing Internet games, but has failed to do so.
4. The person has had a loss of interest in other life activities, such as hobbies.
5. Preoccupation or obsession with Internet games.
6. A person has had continued overuse of Internet games even with the knowledge of how much they impact a person's life.
7. The person lied to others about his or her Internet game usage.
8. The person uses Internet games to relieve anxiety or guilt—it's a way to escape.
9. The person has lost or put at risk an opportunity or relationship because of Internet games.

cultural expectations, so use with caution. Clients who dislike their gaming practises often report a compulsion or feeling of lack of choice over their gaming—this is a key element to look out for. Think also about your judgements over gaming—do you consider it 'excessive'? Would you feel the same if it was an activity you or your culture approved of, such as reading?

Benefits of gaming

Gaming often gets a bad press, but there are many tangible benefits that often get overlooked. These are explored more when we look at how gaming *can* become addictive, but many people reap the benefits of gaming without the negative aspects at all. Some benefits reported by gamers and researchers are:

- Improved self-esteem and confidence
- Sense of accomplishment
- Escapism
- Relaxation
- Friendship
- Enjoyment
- Boredom breaker
- Safe
- Story telling
- Improved hand-eye coordination
- Creativity encouraged and rewarded
- Problem-solving
- Practice at focusing/concentrating
- Trial and error practice
- Pain relief
- Helps with depression
- Helps with comprehension in dyslexia
- Sparks other interest i.e. in History

See also: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/65008/15-surprising-benefits-playing-video-games>



Types of Video Games

This is not an exhaustive list—there are over 50 types of video games and the creative community is coming up with more everyday. Some are distinct but many are hybrids. This will give you a flavour of what is out there.

Strategy

Definition: A game that requires careful planning and skilful play to achieve, such as chess. Probably the most related to board games, as they can be turn based or real time.

Examples: Clash of Clans, Total War series, Worms, Command and Conquer

Puzzle

Definition: Sometimes called casual games, as you can pick up and put down (or not—these games can be highly addictive!), in these the gamer must solve puzzles to progress to new levels or increased skill demands. You often play ‘against’ yourself, or the computer (AI).

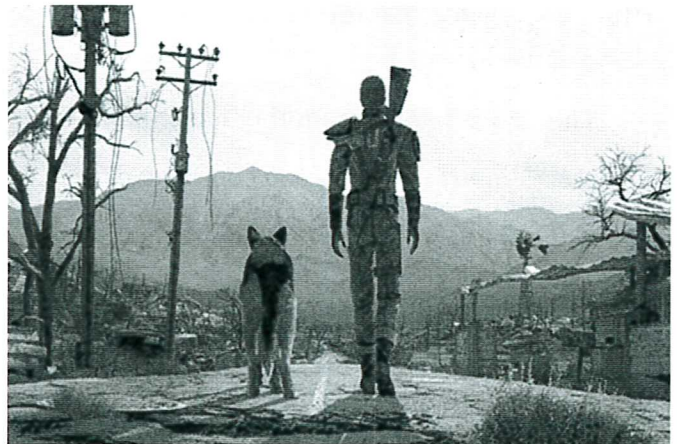
Examples: Tetris, Candy Crush, Mine Sweeper, Cut the Rope, Bejewelled, Monument Valley, Angry Birds



RPG

Definition: Role Playing Game. Take a character and adopt or customise them to make them your own—often there is a story arc to work through as you level up your character. As the game progresses, increased level of skill, knowledge, item acquisition and resources are required to complete the game. There are cultural differences—WRPG and JRPG. Western versions are often non-linear, meaning the gamer makes all the decisions. Japanese versions are more linear and follow a predefined story. Digital cousin to Dungeons and Dragons.

Examples: Fallout 4, Final Fantasy IV, Dragon Quest, Tom Clancy’s The Division

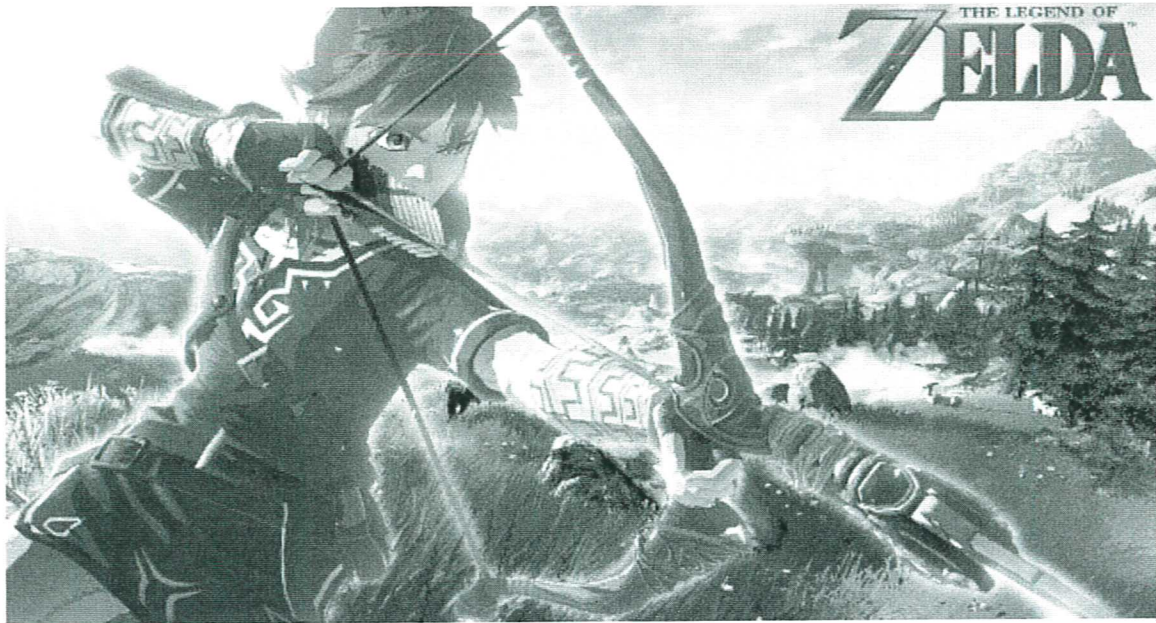


MMORPG

Definition: Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Large numbers of real time players create a character from scratch and interact in huge online worlds or galaxies. Can be fantasy or real world, often sci fi.

Examples: World of Warcraft (WoW), The Elder Scrolls, Battlefield, Runescape





Adventure

Definition: A game where you take on a character and engage in exploration and puzzle-solving to complete a storyline. Often involves a quest or some kind, or completion of a myth or fantasy story—relies heavily on a narrative approach.

Examples: the *Zelda* series, *Myst*, *The Walking Dead*, *King's Quest*

Simulations

Definition: A game that recreates, often with high realism, an experience, event or scenario. Some examples are:

- Life Sim - simulating another life based on scenarios such as work and relationships
- God Sim—often when you construct or manage a civilisation or environment from a god's eye view
- Vehicle Sim—realistic operation of a vehicle such as an aircraft or car

Examples: *SimCity*, *Second Life*, *Caesar*, *FlightGear*, *The Sims*, *Populous*

Sports

Definition: These simulate sports, such as shooting, racing, football, hockey and so on.

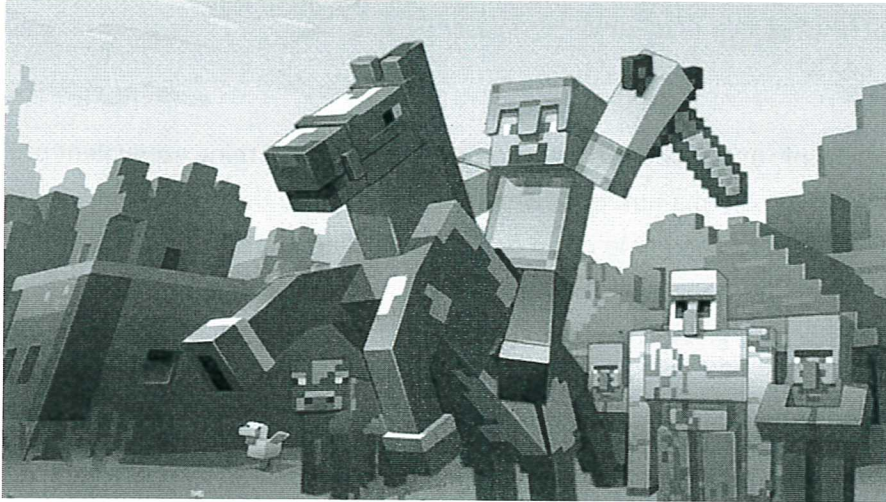
Examples: *FIFA*, *Wii Sports*, *Mario Kart*



Sandbox

Definition: Normally a type of RPG. Allows gamer large amount of freedom to explore, manipulate and interact with the environment to create, develop or destroy. Like playing in a sandbox!

Examples: Minecraft, Grand Theft Auto, No Man's Sky



Game Acronyms

RPG

Role Playing Game

FPS/TPS

First Person Shooter/Third Person Shooter

4X

Refers to the four aims of the game: eXplore, eXtend, eXpand, eXterminate. Often a type of strategy game, giving gamers control over a whole civilisation or universe, over a long period of time.

AI

Artificial Intelligence. In gaming terms, this refers to computer generated characters, rather than other real-time players

HP

Health Points—how much 'health' you have to withstand attack/disease etc. before you die

XP

Experience points. As with health points, you gain more of these when you progress in the game, and can be earned through completing quests, time spent in game, fulfilling certain activities etc. Can unlock features i.e. resources or weapons.

Some Gaming Terminology

This is a fascinating area—gaming is often likened to a culture, and each game can have it's own culture. Culture clashes, misunderstandings and enrichments can occur when cultures overlap, merge or overwhelm others. The language often reflects this, and as any language is ever changing and dynamic. Expect to hear lots of terminology not reflected below!

Rage Quit

When a gamer quits suddenly out of sheer frustration or anger. The gaming equivalent of flipping the monopoly board and storming off in a huff over when you land on Go Directly to Jail. Considered selfish, childish or unsporting, as quitting the game often dooms their team mates to annihilation. This is worth remembering when looking for 'stopping points' as it might feel very wrong to a player to stop the instant they aren't enjoying themselves, given the cultural frowning on such gaming behaviour.

Pwn/Pwnage

Myth has it this was a misspelling of 'own' as in "you got owned!" - you got destroyed/humiliated/defeated. In their excitement at defeating their foe, the gamer typed a p instead of an o, and a legendary term was born. Can also be used, "you've got pwnage" (you've got game) or "You've been Pwn3d" (you've been humiliated). Some online bullies will use this term. From Leetspeak (computer slang, now considered too 'try hard' by genuine hackers. Sigh.).

Nerf

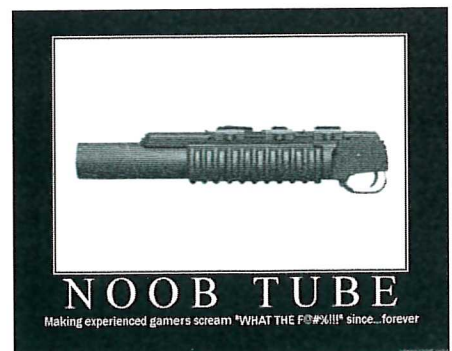
Changing something in a game to make it less desirable. For example, developers changing the accuracy of a gun or the special ability of a hero character might result in gamers complaining "they nerfed it".

Buff

In gaming updates, the opposite of nerf—improving an item/character/power up. In MMORPGs, to buff something would be to temporarily increase it's capability/power/speed etc. For example a buffed spell would have amore powerful effect on the enemy.

Newbie/N00b

A new player. Often used as a derogatory term, "you total n00b" meaning you are unskilled, ignorant, useless. Often frustrate more experienced gamers when playing online together. Can be used amongst friends, as many derogatory terms are, or in reference to self, "I felt like such a n00b", "I made such a newbie error".



Spawn/Respawn

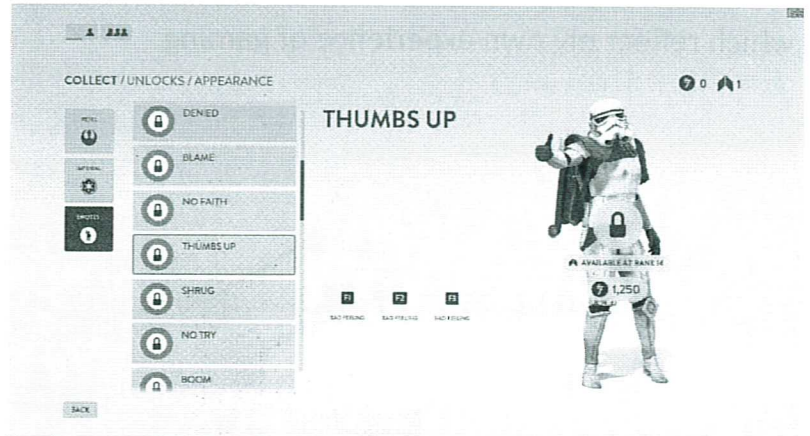
To spawn is to start your 'life' or go. Where you 'come back to life' after you die—a spawning site.

Camping

When you hang out or hide, often near the enemy team's spawning site, killing them before they get a chance to get into the game properly. Annoying.

Emotes

Set actions/phrases you can get your character to make/say. Triggers a short animation your character will display to other players.



The Map

This generally refers to the area of environment the gameplay takes place in. It can be in different locations reflecting different environments, offering different challenges to players. For example, a forest in winter time, a beach in a warzone, a desert, a derelict building. Most players have distinct preferences within their games for the maps they enjoy, or even the types of maps they like across different games. Maps in strategy games are different—they are actually traditional maps of an area in the game, such as a dungeon or landscape. Advice to new players is often to 'learn the map' as taking advantage of the various crevices, vantage points and item locations can improve your chances far more than skill alone. This can be a useful metaphor to use in counselling!

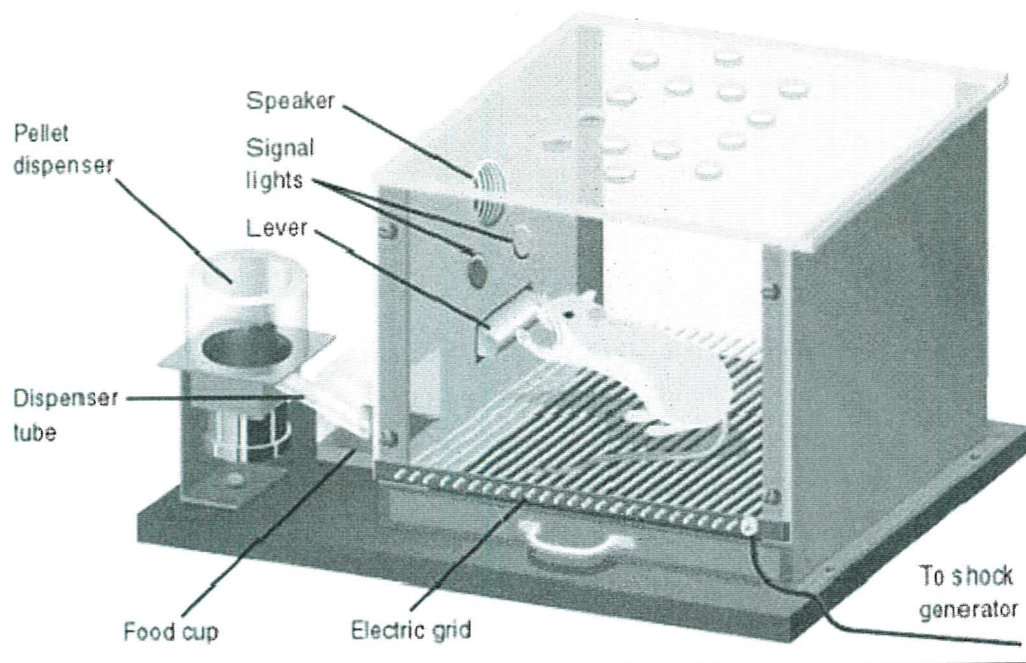
Fog of War

In strategy games, this refers to the area of the map you can't 'see' yet. You need to move your character/army etc. to that point of the landscape for it to be revealed and detail added to your map. Sometimes it is represented by a fog, but often it is blacked out.



Video Game Addiction—how it can work

I strongly recommend you read the online article [Five Creepy Ways Video Games Are Trying To Get You Addicted](#) by [David Wong](#). The following is based on his conclusions, which reflect my own experience of gaming.



There are *some types of games*, often MMORPG subscription type games such as World of Warcraft that use behavioural manipulation techniques to prolong game use. They do this by using B.F. Skinner's research into behaviour. Here's how...

1. Putting you in a Skinner Box

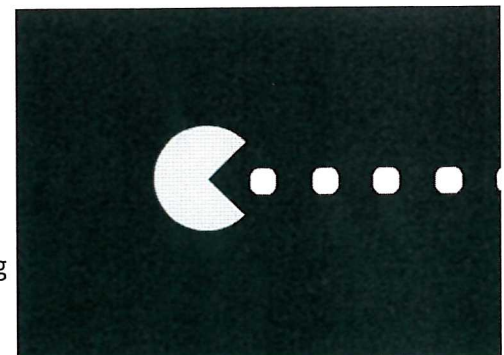
They want to groom patterns of behaviour that they want. In this instance, prolonged, frequent and consistent computer game use. This is because on a subscription based model, the longer you play, the more you pay...

2. Create virtual food pellets for you to eat

In games, levelling up your character/base/technology etc. involves going on quests or performing tasks in order to get items or awards. A higher level game involves more complex, interesting and challenging gameplay.

'Pellets' can be:

- Items earned in games, maybe to progress your character
- Items earned by defeating enemies, quests, *even amount of time played*
- Items earned to complete challenges



- Tasks or combinations of tasks that allow you to level up
- Items often come in the form of collecting things – common items and rare items (remember collecting stickers?)

Remember—you tend to value things it takes effort, time and skill to get. Any thing.

Most games operate like this – you value the things you 'earn' in them. Think about it – gold doesn't do anything, but people value it. A virtual magical sword protects you...Sounds different? You are paying for IDEAS in both cases.

That's why the highest court in South Korea ruled that virtual goods are to be legally treated the same as real goods – note – S. Korea does not allow gambling. It allows this as it takes time, effort and skill...

3. Making you press the lever

This means Variable Ratio Rewards. It's no good giving you a reward every time you press the lever. It's reliable, so you can walk away and know it is there when you come back, a pellet any time you want it.

By making it random, you keep them there, pressing the lever as much as possible...So the food pellets, (the items in a lot of cases) become random and rare, with a lot of common useless items thrown in. This is where the comparison with gambling often comes in. Remember how bad humans are at understanding probability! We are Meaning Making Machines; we tend to apply patterns to those that aren't there and infer meaning from them. The Gambler's Fallacy is a good example of this. Think about a coin tossed 10 times. If H=Heads and T=Tails, which outcome do you think is more likely?

- A) HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
- B) HTHTTHTHHHTHTTTHTHTHHHTT



The answers is neither. Both are equally likely, but we *expect* randomness to look, well, random. The long series of Heads makes us suspect a meaning, maybe a bias, is in play. We tend to assume the previous results is a good indicator of the next result. In true randomness, IT ISN'T!

So first, you make the rewards thick and fast. This establishes and reinforces the desired behaviour (playing the game). Then you lessen and go to random. This means the behaviour is presented more and more often, for less and less reward. It's called shaping. This is again where it starts to sound like addiction—you have to play for longer and longer to get the same 'kick' out of it.

4. Making you press it, forever...

Here's how!

Ease them in

So we've seen how games ease you in and ramp the behavior.

Eliminating stopping points (don't engage brain!)

There are no longer a limited number of lives of fixed number of levels in these types of games.



No 'Game Over' to give you a nudge to engage your pre-frontal cortex and check out if you want to keep playing.

Play it or lose it

This is what I find particularly distasteful. Many games will 'punish' players (remember the electric floor in the Skinner Box?) who don't continuously play or who take breaks. The village they've painstakingly built will become full of weeds and buildings will fall down. The warrior you created will grow weak and die, the online community will leave you behind and move on to places you can't follow. Sometimes characters in the game will 'tell you off' when you finally log back in. Your 'inbox' will be overflowing with virtual emails, highlighting all the opportunities you've missed since you've been gone. The rare virtual insect you've been keen to collect was only out at midnight on midsummer's eve, and you've missed it. Your Tamagotchi will die.



A game called Animal Crossing—very cute looking but very manipulative...

This might sound familiar to some of you. A mix of inconsistent reward, punishment and isolation are all hallmarks of an abusive relationship. Narcissists are great at this, and those children growing up with narcissistic parents often present behaviour to their carers again and again in the hope it will gain them the reward they know is there sometimes, but not always.

It also might sound a bit like the rat race. In this respect, we all know what it's like to try and keep on top of emails, keep up with the neighbours, friends, family, what's expected of us etc.

5. Getting you to call the Skinner Box home

If you do something enough, it becomes part of your life. But it's more than that. Games offer some wonderful things.

Autonomy

Freedom to plan, to achieve, to *fail* (that's important—true trial and error is an essential element of a lot of skill based games. We often *say* it's ok to fail, but there are very few situations where we actively USE failure in the way games do), to decide which way to go, when, how... How many opportunities do children and young people have in 'reality' to exercise their autonomy?

If you think they are tricking themselves (in a rule driven game, it's an illusion of control) remember: Jean Paul Sartre: Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you. It's no different to any other kind of 'real' freedom in that sense.

Think also about existential dread of true autonomy. What box did you climb into to avoid this feeling?

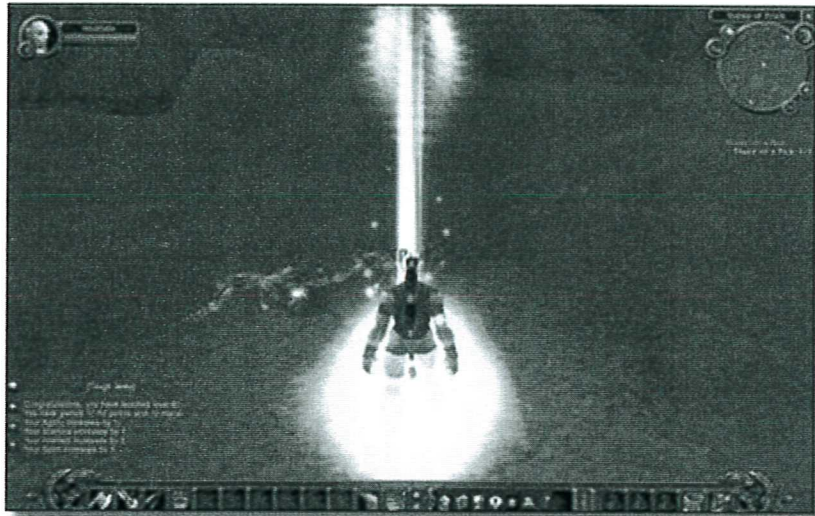
Finally, think about the key elements of motivation; autonomy, mastery, purpose. Games have all of these in buckets.

Complexity

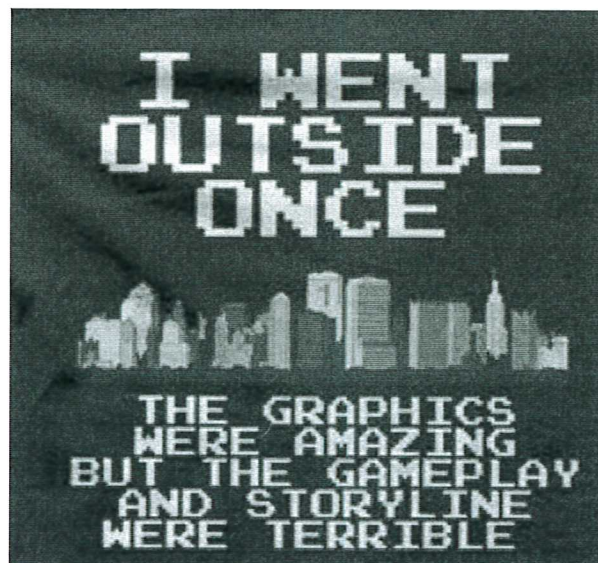
Tasks and gameplay is *just complex enough* not to be boring, but *not so complex as to be inaccessible*. Life, especially our education system, is not like that. Games are, and it makes us feel like we are achieving, increases confidence, self-belief and knowledge.

Connection between reward and effort.

This is the one. A satisfying and fulfilling reward the *very instant* you achieve something you value. Wow. We tell our young people, “work hard and you’ll do well” but in ‘real’ life, you can work very hard, and actually not get anywhere. Think about some of the children you work with who are disengaged from education. Most people do want to work hard, but we mostly work hard at things we are good at. It’s rewarding. Games are very accessible—you don’t need to be chosen for the team, or be the best, but you can still play, and get better.



When you next do something well, at work, with your kids, on a team, with a client, does a giant beam of golden light spill out of the heavens and turn you into a superhero? Does a fanfare play? Do you get to strut about in a special suit of armour made of gold pieces, so that everyone knows how awesome you are? No? Huh. Sounds lame...

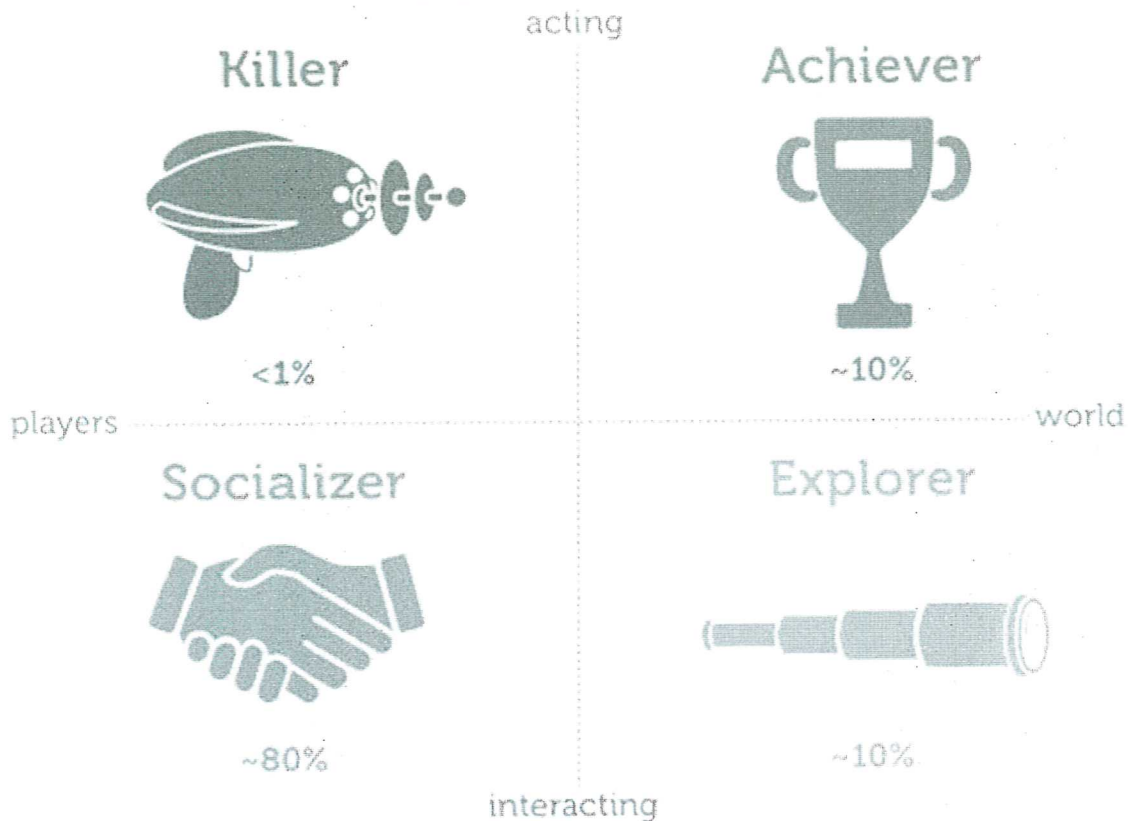


Types of players

Not all gamers are the same...

Which kind are you?

Bartle's Player Type



Killers like to provoke and cause drama and/or impose them over other players in the scope provided by the virtual world. Trolls, hackers, cheaters, and attention farmers belong in this category, along with the most ferocious and skillful PvP (player versus player) opponents.

Achievers are competitive and enjoy beating difficult challenges whether they are set by the game or by themselves. The more challenging the goal, the most rewarded they tend to feel.

Explorers like to explore the world - not just its geography but also the finer details of the game mechanics. These players may end up knowing how the game works and behave better than the game creators themselves. They know all the mechanics, short-cuts, tricks, and glitches that there are to know in the game and thrive on discovering more.

Socializers are often more interested in having relations with the other players than playing the game itself. They help to spread knowledge and a human feel, and are often involved in the community aspect of the game (by means of managing guilds or role-playing, for instance).

How to work alongside Computer Gaming

How you work with your client is really variable, but here are some ways I work with video gaming:



Explore enjoyment

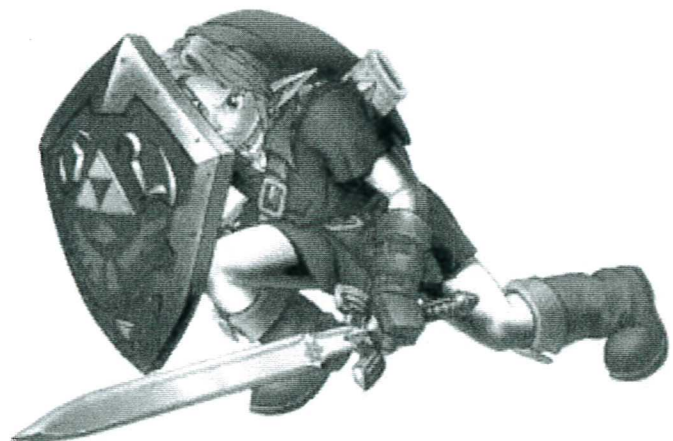
Compulsive video-gaming is different to *enjoying* gaming. Be curious. Your curiosity will raise awareness for you both. Explore with your client how they started the game, where they are now, and how enjoyment has evolved. Did they enjoy it more at the beginning? Is it a grind? Does it feel more like work? Do they have to grind on through the game to get the same enjoyment they used to get after a short time of playing? Have they considered how much they enjoy it now? Scaling (measuring enjoyment or boredom on a 1-10 scale) can work here, but it depends on the client. Sometimes simply asking the question 'what do you enjoy?' can get a very puzzled and bemused response. A game that deploys behavioural manipulation techniques on gamers often bypasses our conscious thought and goes straight into our 'hindbrain'. Reengaging that conscious prefrontal cortex can be like

switching on a light for the gamer. Sometimes it can kick in a defence...

Stroke the defence

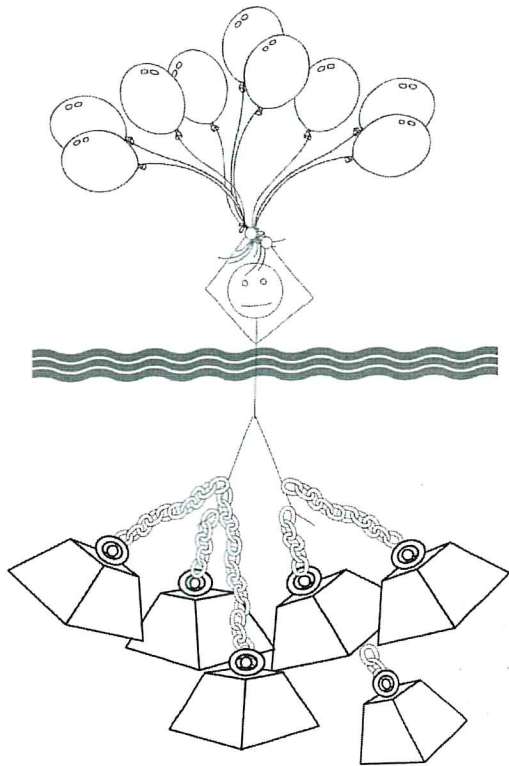
A defence is there for a reason. You don't need to know the reason – chances are this might be out of awareness right now. But you can explore and give space to the defence itself. I start at the standpoint that we are all trying to help ourselves. Maybe the way we are trying isn't helping us much anymore, or the side effects of that help are becoming intolerable. Maybe it is an 'old help' that isn't fit for purpose or has become irrelevant. If we try and stop the defence without listening to what it's trying to do, it will tighten, as it attempts

keep protecting us. If we turn towards that part of ourselves with kindness and compassion, it will unclench. It's got a lot to teach us, so we must listen carefully and without judgement. There's a good chance a client with excessive video game use will have a lot of shame, confusion and judgement (from themselves and others) around their usage. There might be a lot to unclench here, so the following exercise might be helpful...



Use the Drowning Man Exercise

I like to use this with clients of all ages. The idea is we are all survivors—we have all learnt how to survive. Yay us! Thing is, we might have put in place some pretty relentless or inflexible solutions to our



survival dilemmas. The Drowning Man is a Transactional Analysis exercise, that suggest we put in place Drivers (solutions to problems) to tackle Injunctions (things that could destroy us). A classic example is an Injunction of 'Don't exist'. A person might adopt the Driver 'be perfect' in order to negate its effects *just enough* to allow them to survive. "I can exist, as long as I am perfect". This can lead to a life of anxiety, however, as perfection is a unobtainable goal. If we work on the Driver only, and attempt to remove it (nobody's perfect!) the person is left with no defence against the injunction (don't exist) and other solutions, such as suicide, could occur. In the exercise, the Drivers become balloons, keeping us afloat, and Injunctions weights, attempting to drown us. So what is gaming trying to counteract? What does it get the client that nourishes them, or parts of them? Don't worry about filling it all in at once, keep it around and look out for balloons and weights as you work together.

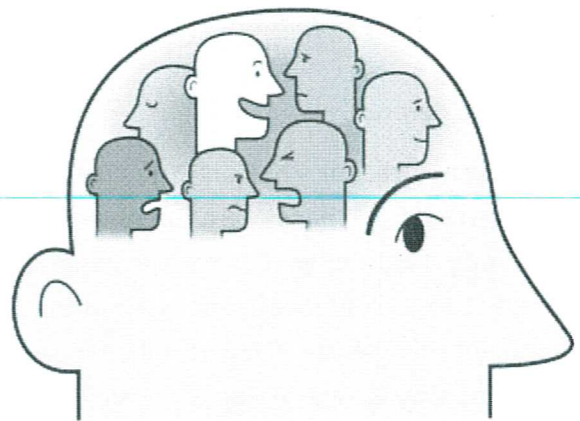
Use parts of Self

Gaming, like other forms of escapism, can involve 'splitting off' of parts of ourselves. Gamers can give themselves a name in most games, and this is often public. Think about that. Naming yourself. There's a lot of power in that.

Again, we are not seeking to 'get rid of' parts of self, but reintegrate them into the whole person. So let's explore the gamer identity. The name chosen, and why, what it means to them. What part of them does it represent, what part *isn't* there. Working creatively is really helpful—story-telling, drawing the 'character' bringing in

the gamer identity to help them with other aspects of their life. For those who enjoy a solutions focused approach, this can be also used as examples of when they have solved a problem. Chances are, in the game they have tenacity, doggedness, negotiation skills, hand/eye skills, patience, knowledge, respect, focus, clarity...the list is endless. If they have split this off into a part that only interacts in a gaming environment, they might not see how to access it in everyday life. Reintegrating this into the whole, first by acknowledging and honouring it, is a great first step. It can also acknowledge those tricky contradictions we are so *wonderful* as human beings at maintaining,

"I'm hearing a part of you is tired of this game, and another part really needs it right now. I wonder what each part would say to each other, given the chance?" Chair work, anyone!?"



Acknowledge Identity and Loss

We all take on a number of roles and identities to help us navigate life. We can over-identify with some, or under-identify with others, pulling excessively on or squishing down parts of our self. A helpful exercise you can do yourself is writing a list of roles or identities you associate with your self. Try and put them in order of importance. Then see which ones you could give up. Most of us can tolerate one or two being taken away—any more than that and we can crash. We can grieve as if it were a death. If you've ever been made redundant, you might know what this feels like. If a gamer decides to stop playing a game they identify with, has been a big part of their life, be respectful of this as an ending.



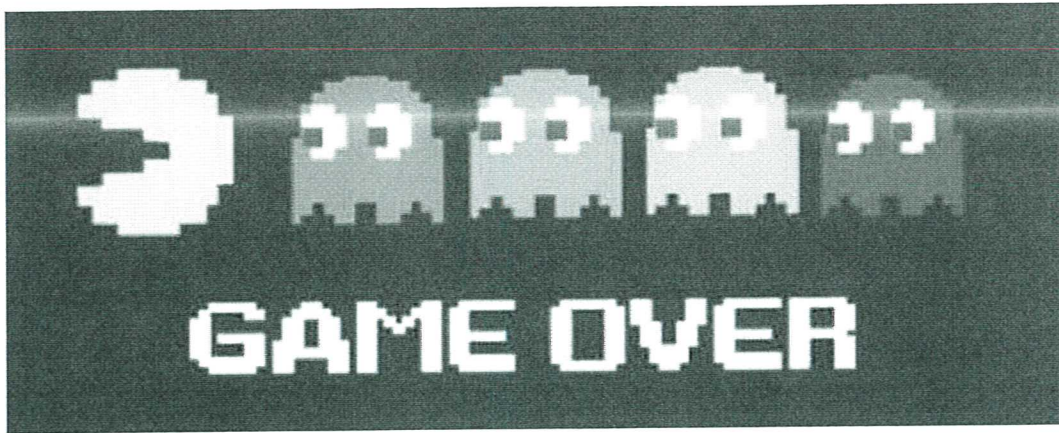
Use metaphor

Games are stories. They are often based on archetypes, and can have a rich and fascinating pedigree the gamer might have been involved in for years. What *kind* of games attracts your clients? Who do they identify with? What alienates them? What frightens or inspires them? Some common stories games use are:

- Build and Defend
- Survive in chaos/Apocalypse
- Warrior
- Build an empire/world/fleet
- Hero
- Rescue
- Create
- Solve

Get creative!

Why not ask your gamer to use Minecraft, if that's their game, to show you what world they want to live in? What world are they in right now? Side-by-side activities can also be helpful.



Introduce stopping points

We've seen how modern games don't have the traditional stopping points older games did—running out of lives, time etc resulting in Game Over. Keep an eye out for stopping points nevertheless. Your client is NOT playing the game 24/7, so they are there. Chances are they will be able to identify them for themselves, once awareness is given to the idea. Points at which the game becomes boring or frustrating is a good clue. Gamers will know these for themselves—maybe the length of time it takes to join an online game, connect to a server, have to restart a quest. Identify and expand on these stopping points, even if the client just grounds themselves for a moment, reflects on six things in the room, notices how they feel, jumps up and down and stretches a bit. It's a start.

Be inspired by the actualising tendency 😊

I am a humanistic practitioner, so I work with the idea that we are all working towards a constructive, social good, to be all that we are, we inalienably forever grow towards our full potential. I find it inspiring to notice how the actualising tendency strives against the conditions we place on it, and clients who game are doing just that. They want to be part of something, feel good about themselves, achieve or produce something, protect it and grow it, tend to it and nourish it. If they can't do that through work, school or family life, they find a way to do it online. And there they can grow and flourish.



Quick Facts

Does playing computer games cause C&YP to become violent?

The short answer is no; this is from the PEGI (Pan European Game Information)

“The research on the impact of videogames has been focused primarily on violence. Numerous studies have been published, but until today there is no evidence that playing violent video games causes any long-term or lasting increase in aggressiveness or violence among players.”

Are there specific health risks associated with gaming?

There are no specific health risk associated with gaming. Health risks are associated risks involving eyesight. As such, it is not a good idea to play for hours on end. Do play in a well-lit room, take regular breaks and sit a good distance away from the screen. Gaming, as with other leisure activities such as reading or drawing, can be sedentary, so moving and stretching is very helpful.

Young people who game for an hour a day are better adjusted

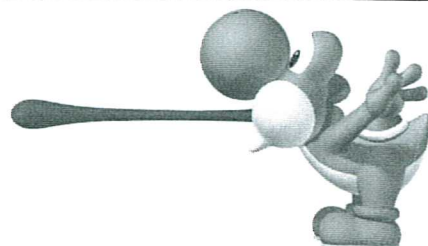
10-15 years olds who game for around an hour a day were found to be more helpful to others, felt more satisfied with life, have fewer emotional or social problems and were less unhappy about friendships than those who don't game at all.

Why you should hope your Keyhole Surgeon plays video games

Surgeons who play video game make 32% fewer errors, perform 24% faster and scored 26% better overall (time and errors) than their nonplaying colleagues. When comparing demonstrated video gaming skills, those in the top tertile made 47% fewer errors, performed 39% faster, and scored 41% better on the overall (time and errors) score. Regression analysis also indicated that video game skill and past video game experience are significant predictors of demonstrated laparoscopic skills.

It's Big Business

If a young person wants to make a career in video games, there's a vibrant industry out there. The UK is particularly well know for it's innovative independent game designers with major titles, such as **Grand Theft Auto**—the most successful entertainment product of all time, **Monument Valley**, downloaded over 26 million times and **No Man's Sky**, one of the most eagerly awaited releases of 2016.



Useful Links

<https://soundcloud.com/replyall/50-the-cathedral>

This podcast relates to the Empathy Game I mentioned at the end of the workshop, about a father who wrote a computer game about his son dying of cancer. Well worth a listen to see how the media of gaming can communicate very deep and personal meaning from one person to another.

www.depressionquest.com

Depression Quest is an interactive fiction game where you play as someone living with depression. You are given a series of everyday life events and have to attempt to manage your illness, relationships, job, and possible treatment. This game aims to show other sufferers of depression that they are not alone in their feelings, and to illustrate to people who may not understand the illness the depths of what it can do to people.

www.pegi.info/en/index

Pan European Game Information website. A helpful, clear and concise guide for parents and carers about computer games. Includes an Advice, FAQ and Facts section.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/65008/15-surprising-benefits-playing-video-games>

Ever wondered if video gaming had wider benefits? Online article at Mental Floss covers some interesting aspects and areas of research in “15 surprising benefits of playing video games”.

<http://ukie.org.uk/>

The Association for UK Interactive Media, with useful information about the UK’s £4.2 billion game industry.

<http://www.gadgette.com/2015/09/29/7-female-youtube-gamers-youll-want-to-subscribe-to/>

Links to some of the female gamers with channels on YouTube—excellent to find out more about various game types and listen to another point of view.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006m9ry>

If you do nothing else, watch BBC click every Saturday. Not only will you be kept up to date with a variety of technology, including video games, but the content is free on iPlayer and presented in a fun, entertaining and sometimes irreverent style.

