Opinion Article

Development Hijacked! Gaming Addiction and the Path to Recovery

Keisha A Mitchell*

Department of Psychology, Clemson University, USA

*Corresponding author: Keisha A Mitchell, Department of Psychology, Clemson University, 321 Calhoun Drive, Clemson, SC 29634, USA.

Abstract

BBC and Netflix© recorded 16 million new subscribers in the first 3 months of 2020, almost 100% higher than…2019… Microsoft's© game servers had 10 million users, showing how the internet gaming industry has thrived in the pandemic… China …reported a sharp increase (23%) in the prevalence of severe internet addiction with a 20-fold rise in the dependence degree of those already addicted to the internet [1].

Human Lifespan Development

The premise of my previous work, Black Gold: Developmental Pathways to Human Resource Development in Jamaica [2], is that we learn to work through the way that we play. However, what happens when playing online video games turns into an addiction? Development gets hijacked. Only with intervention can any meaningful change be made and a return to an adaptive pathway to human development be restored.

According to Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, the critical conflicts resolved in late childhood and adolescence develop industry and role identity. With industry, the child (future worker) can perform a task by following the steps that they would have learned. Subsequently, the adolescent chooses to identify with the skills and competencies that they enjoy. This includes team sports, music, science and technology, social sciences or the arts and humanities. It is at this period of self-discovery that some adolescents may select a vocational career pathway rather than the traditional academic pathway. With so many new and emerging industries, the options are endless. Whatever the choice, a peer support network is established to affirm their chosen identity.

In this era of rapid technological development, online gaming has gained significance as a viable area of work. Video Games alone are expected to reach US$221.40bn in 2023, with more than 2,776.9m users anticipated by 2027 [3]. If we focus only on Microsoft, revenue generated in 2017 totalled approximately 90 billion USD dollars. By 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, revenues surged to more than 168 billion USD. With this surge of revenue also came more users into a virtual community.

What does this mean for human lifespan development around the world? What does this mean for a generation of children and young adults who have never lived without a cell phone, a tablet, a laptop, an iPhone or an iPad? It means that they could survive in a virtual reality receiving affirmation from other users all across the world whom they probably will never meet. It means becoming skilful in gaming technology while losing out on opportunities to develop social skills. It means choosing to live in a virtual world where the need for physical touch, eye-contact and other body language become redundant. It also means that the few relationships that are maintained with family and friends, and the

limited time spent off-screen, will be insufficient to cause maturity in cognition and social problem-solving. This increasing virtual reality will eliminate the need for team building, empathy, self-awareness, and more.

COVID-19 has resulted in a new standard for human development. All generations across the world, in particular the younger age groups, have learned to live with the threat of deadly viruses. We have all learned to make choices to protect personal health and the health of our families. This means that in a typical household, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, adults and children were required by law to shelter-in-place, resulting in remote learning and remote work. Being online and connected to various virtual platforms became an integral part of human development. Virtual meetings, virtual classrooms, electronic submissions, and virtual relationships redefined life for everyone impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, this was a hidden consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The staggering increase in the number of hours that individuals spent online could only be compared to the decreasing number of hours that individuals spent in face-to-face interactions. Among adults, online subscriptions to the BBC and Netflix rose by more than 23% within the first 3 months of the pandemic [1]. So, no warning signs immediately appeared when children began to disappear into their virtual worlds with online gaming.

Development Hijacked: Gaming Addiction

Gaming disorder is defined in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as a pattern of gaming behavior ("digital-gaming" or "video-gaming") characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences [4].

Why? Firstly, because there were severe disruptions to the individual's daily personal, family, social, educational, occupational, and other important areas of life. This disruption lasted for more than 12 months. Gaming addicts can spend anywhere from 20 to more than 35 hours of week gaming [5]. Secondly, addiction was confirmed with brain imaging techniques [6]. Brain scans showed that the brain of a gaming addict looked exactly like the brain of a cocaine addict. This is because the addiction impacts the same dopamine pathway that responds to pleasure and satisfaction. A notable case study is reported of Josh, a boy who spent between 10-12 hours per day gaming. Scans of his brain showed low levels of brain activity synonymous with chemical addiction. Read more about him in, "Case Study #1: Computer/ Video Game Addiction" [7].

Road to Recovery

One undeniable truth is that the virtual world accessible through computers and online gaming is here to stay. The COVID-19 era has forever transformed the way that humans live and work. It has even provided tremendous opportunities for professional psychologists to do research, and to discover and to treat new forms of psychological disorders. This awareness indicates that the path to recovery for the computer/gaming addict is one that must be developed in a caring community.

Caring communities begin with one. The identification of the addiction and the severe disruption to quality of life for the sufferer has to be felt and acknowledged by at least one person with whom they share a close relationship. Oftentimes, because of the developmental stages addressed here, those loved one are parents. However, they may also be friends who missed their peers, and exhausted co-workers who were being forced to assume more responsibilities for their afflicted colleague.

These significant bonds in relationship are critical in the intervention process. The loss of relationship must be emphasized so that the addict is willing to acknowledge the problem and to commit to working to restore order to a life and relationships that were disrupted. Parents have tremendous influence in terms of getting their children back on track developmentally. They are the first ones to recognize that a path to destruction lies at the end of living in a virtual reality. As a result, they seek out necessary and appropriate professional care.

Professionals help addicts to understand the neurochemical problem at the core of their addiction. With this insight, a treatment plan can be created to restrict screen time, to re-engage socially and to find satisfaction in accomplishing other goals – academically or professionally.

Other professionals like community psychologists can take a prevention approach. Making presentations in community organizations like service clubs, churches and other self-help groups can publicize the danger of computer/gaming addiction. Helping communities to strengthen their sense of belonging around what defines their community will provide outlets for creative energies of these recovering computer/gaming addicts. It will also provide a support network for social gamers. These support networks will provide developmental guidance, opportunities to showcase skills as well as economic opportunities.

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Conflict of interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest.

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