

Commentary: Pulling the plug on video games? Slow your roll

*By Ryan M. Earl
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As a college freshman, I was big and muscular, confident, goal-oriented, and I frequently led small and large groups of diverse people. I was involved in many complex activities and I was proud of my accomplishments. I belonged. I mattered. I felt connected to my friends. I was happy.

As long as my Xbox or PC was on, anyway.

Away from video games, I was a scrawny, depressed kid who was uncomfortable in the conventional college social scene. Most of all, I was alone — a kid who left his dorm room only to go to class, waiting to return to the worlds where he was accepted.

According to the recent definition of gaming disorder, I probably could have been mistaken for having a real problem.

The World Health Organization's decision to add "gaming disorder" to the International Classification of Disease has sparked considerable debate among representatives of the video game industry and mental health fields. So much so that it's garnered significant media attention in the days following the announcement.

But without video games, I would never have finished my freshman year of college, which means I wouldn't have had the confidence to transfer schools my sophomore year, let alone later earn a master's degree and ultimately a Ph.D. And I certainly wouldn't be a therapist.

As a therapist and educator, the skills I most rely on every day are leadership, problem solving, flexibility, improvisation, confidence and communication. All skills I learned by playing video games. Lots and lots of video games.

Yet when I try to explain this to some of my clients — especially parents of gamers — they can't wrap their heads around it.

Parents who do not take the time to be informed about their child's video gaming will see that this new disorder exists and will likely jump to self-diagnosing their kids. After all, "video game addiction" is already frequently cited by parents as the reason they seek my services on behalf of their video-gaming children.

Unfortunately, such a self-diagnosis means that parents could then completely miss out on the fact that, although this might (rarely) be the case, their child is likely playing an "excessive" amount of video games for a valid reason, such as needing a social outlet in which he or she feels respected, valued and even admired.

Video games can provide people with a chance to safely explore who they want to be and how they want to interact with the world. They give people the chance to learn valuable skills, such as problem solving, leadership, improvisation, confidence, communication and more — skills that are transferable to the real world. They offer community, belonging, purpose and sometimes even escape from the difficulties of the real world.

I'm not suggesting that video game consumption shouldn't be limited on an individual basis. After all, parental boundaries, rules and consequences are important. Those boundaries, however, should to some extent be created and enforced from an informed perspective. You may consider asking questions such as: Why is my child playing so many video games? What types of video games is he playing? If I pull the plug, what am I actually pulling the plug on?

While quantity of time spent playing video games is often described to me as the major issue, quantity is rarely an indicator of a problem. There can be downsides to gaming, though, particularly if it is detrimental to daily functioning or if a person is engaging in toxic behaviors in online games such as cyberbullying or "griefing." These are bannable offenses in most games; if your child is banned from a game he's been playing, this could be warning sign that your child may be engaging in these types of behaviors.

Gaming can also have financial consequences if not kept in check, particularly if a person is playing games that include microtransactions or loot boxes. The detrimental effects of gaming vary on a case-by-case basis but are increased when parents do not take the time to learn about what their children are doing and/or to set appropriate boundaries around gaming.

Video games have the potential to positively influence social development, identity formation and a host of skills that are directly transferable

to the real world. While this shouldn't overshadow the determinantal effects video game use may have on a particular individual or family system, they absolutely should be given equal platform and energy.

I'm afraid that the inclusion of gaming disorder could actually prevent both parents and mental health professionals from considering the context within which video games are being used. Understanding a person's relative context is important and helpful whether that person fits the diagnostic criteria for gaming disorder or not. And, to be clear, most gamers will not fit the criteria for diagnosis.

If you do suspect that you or somebody you know is potentially struggling with gaming disorder, seek consultation from a mental health professional who is knowledgeable about video games. Otherwise, you run the risk of pulling the plug on more than meets the eye.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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