

A Very Human Need: Understanding the Motivations That Lead to Gaming Addiction

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Abstract

While most video game players play in moderation and for fun or to relax, a significant minority of players develop problematic or addictive patterns of gaming. Research has indicated that gamers' motivations for playing differ between addicted and non-addicted gamers. Accordingly, as with other addictions, if clinicians are able to understand the function of the addictive behaviour in the overall context of a client's life and the motivations that drive the addictive behaviour, they will be better placed to assist the client to overcome the addiction. Motivations for gaming associated with addiction can be summarised as gaming in order to experience meaning and purpose, to experience potency and achievement, to experience community and belonging, to experience escape and emotional regulation, and to experience a stronger sense of identity and self. This article examines each of these motivations in the context of modern gaming and provides clinicians with sample questions to guide an exploration of these motivations when working with clients affected by gaming addiction.

Waitara

Ahakoia he tākaro taurite whakapārekareka, whakatā noa rānei tā te nuinga o ngā kai tākaro ataata, ka whanake tonu ake he raru he hanga petipeti warawara. E tohu ana ngā rangahau he rerekē anō te hiringa ngākau ki te petipeti o te kai petipeti warawara ki tō te kai petipeti makere. Heoi, pērā anō ki ētahi atu warawaranga, mēnā ka mātau ngā kai haumanu ki te mahi a te whanonga warawara huri noa i te ao o te kiritaki me te hihiko whakaū i te whanonga warawara, ka mārama ake tā rātau āwhina i te kiritaki ki te whai oranga. Ko ngā hīanga petipeti whakapiri ki te warawara ka taea te kī he tākaro whai wheako tikanga wheako aronga, wheako taikaha paetae hoki, wheako hāpori me te whanaungatanga, ki te wheako pahiko me te whakarite kare ā-roto, ā, ki te whai wheako whakamana tuakiri whaiaro hoki. Ko tā tēnei tuhinga he aromatawai i ēnei hiringa katoa i roto i te horopaki o te ao petipeti

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hou ka hoatu pātai hei ārahi i tētahi rapunga o ēnei hiringa inā mahi tahi me ngā kiritaki kainga e te petipeti warawara.

Keywords: video gaming addiction; problematic video gaming; motivations for addiction; psychodynamics of addiction; addiction treatment; working with gamers

The 2014 Interactive Games and Entertainment Association (IGEA, 2014) report clearly showed that video games have become an entrenched part of Kiwi culture, with 94% of New Zealand households having a device for playing games with the figure at 98% in households with children. The data also shows that the typical conception of gaming being a young male's past-time is a misconception, with 71% of gamers in New Zealand being over the age of 18 and 48% of them being female. For many, gaming creates a lot of benefits including the development of spatial, reasoning, and social skills (Lager & Bremberg, 2005) and the majority of people play in moderation and are typically motivated by having fun, experiencing a challenge, or relieving boredom or stress (IGEA, 2014).

However, a significant minority of gamers play in ways that lead to negative outcomes, and research over the last decade has increasingly shown that gaming can become the focus of an addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). This has led to the addition of "Internet Gaming Disorder" (IGD) to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and an increase in research focused on understanding and diagnosing video gaming addiction. Much of this research showed more similarities than differences between gaming addiction and other forms of addiction including factors such as salience (thinking about/engaging with gaming), tolerance (needing to play for longer to feel satisfied), mood modification (using gaming to alter emotional states), relapse (unsuccessfully attempting to control gaming), withdrawal (experiencing negative mood states when not gaming), conflict (experiencing conflict with others due to gaming), and problems (experiencing other negative outcomes due to gaming) (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009).

While many factors such as those identified above can be readily related to all forms of addiction, some factors are unique to gaming addiction. In particular, the motivations for gaming appear to differ between addicted and non-addicted gamers (Hellstrom, Nilsson, Leppert, & Aslund, 2012). This mirrors my clinical experience of working with gaming addicts which has shown that understanding gamers' motivations for playing can be key to helping them overcome their addiction. In this article I draw on my own and other relevant research, as well as my clinical experience, to provide an overview of the motivations for gaming that are most correlated with addiction, and how to assess and explore these as a clinician.

Motivations for Gaming Addiction

A number of studies have investigated motivations for gaming, identifying a number that are strongly associated with addiction (Hellstrom et al, 2012; Chin-Sheng & Wen-Bin, 2007; Chin-Sheng & Weng-Bin, 2006; Shorrock, 2012). Such research and my clinical experience

shows that people game in order to: experience purpose and meaning, to experience achievement and potency, to experience community and belonging, to experience escape and emotional regulation, and to experience positive self-identity and self-expression. Other motivations include gaming for fun, to spend time with friends, and to experience challenge or exploration. However, these latter three motivations seem less associated with problematic or addictive gaming.

For clinicians, understanding how these motivations are met through gaming can help them better empathise with client experiences, and can assist in identifying alternate strategies for meeting these important psychological needs.

Purpose and Meaning

Many gamers, particularly gamers of what are described as “massively multiplayer online roleplaying games”, describe gaming as providing a clear sense of purpose. Most games provide players with an explicit set of goals to be achieved whether it is reaching the next level, defeating a particular monster in the game or acquiring a particular item. Gamers often describe how this creates a sense of meaning and purpose — there is always something more to do and the steps to get there are clearly laid out.

For someone who lacks an overall sense of purpose or meaning, this can become a very compelling reason to game. Rather than being confronted with endless possibility, an infinite number of options for where and how to live one’s life — an experience that can create a profound sense of anxiety (Yalom, 1980) — games give players a direct path to follow and provide positive reinforcement for following it in the form of in-game rewards and recognition from other players.

One of the gamers interviewed for */afk* (Stickroth & Stuetze, 2011), a film about gaming addiction, described this experience when he stated: “I know what I’m doing out there and I know the people I need to be grouped with to get things done. And fortunately, this is a fun way of getting things done. Not so easy in real life sometimes, but ... there’s less hassle, the objective’s right in front of you really. You have more control over it I think.”

Clinicians can help clients to think about whether this is a primary motivator for playing by asking questions such as:

- Do you sometimes feel clearer about what you’re doing and what you want in the game than in your real life?
- Are there other things that you find meaningful besides games?
- Do you ever feel that life would be boring or meaningless without games?

Achievement and Potency

Alongside providing meaning and purpose, many games provide players with a sense of achievement and potency. Games usually contain a series of scaled challenges designed to present the player with increasingly difficult obstacles to overcome as well as providing the tools to do so. This creates a sense of progression and achievement which is reinforced by in-game rewards as the player progresses. These rewards include in-game bonuses, collectible

“titles” and “achievements”, recognition from other players, and noise and visual effects when players reach certain points. The impact of some of these feedback mechanisms is evidenced by the fact that many players now use the phrase “ding” to refer to making progress or reaching the next level, a word derived from the sound effects that accompanied levelling up in early online games such as Everquest.

Multiplayer games also provide ways for players to compete against each other and to directly track how well they are doing compared to others. For many players this adds to the sense of challenge and fun but for a few it can also contribute to the development of problematic or addictive gaming. This is particularly true for players for whom games provide their only sense of potency and achievement. One client I worked with made this very clear, stating “I know I want to give up games but I don’t know how — it’s the only thing I’m good at!”

Clinicians can assist clients by helping them identify whether gaming has become a primary way of meeting these needs by asking questions such as:

- Do you ever feel like gaming is the only thing you’re good at?
- Do you feel like you get more recognition in-game than in real life?
- Do you feel more capable when gaming compared to real life?

Community and Belonging

Many games, particularly those most highly associated with addiction, take place online and involve interacting with other players. For some of these games the social aspects play a central role with players required to work as teams, either to compete against each other or to overcome substantial in-game challenges that require co-operation and teamwork. As a result some players end up joining semi-permanent gaming organisations, teams or guilds. The social aspects of these games can be gratifying and rewarding, and can create positive benefits such as the development of social and leadership skills (Hastings, 2015; Sublette & Mullan, 2010). A Swedish study which questioned 7757 adolescents about gaming habits found that some of the social aspects of gaming were correlated with healthy gaming and positive outcomes while some were more correlated with negative outcomes (Hellstrom et al, 2012). Specifically, gamers who played in order to play with friends or to have fun reported fewer negative outcomes from gaming, whereas those who played in order to gain status amongst other players or because of a sense of obligation to other players experienced more negative outcomes.

My clinical and research experience suggests that for some players there can be a natural transition between these motives. When gamers first begin playing the social aspects are often enjoyable and players value becoming part of an in-game community and being acknowledged and respected by others. As players become more heavily engaged with online games, particularly those that require a large time investment and co-operation between players, some gamers report feeling an increasing sense of obligation, that they would be “letting people down” if they did not “show up” to play the game. The social elements of gaming can be a very strong factor in people’s desire to play in both positive and negative ways, and exploring the ways in which a person experiences the social world of

their game can be very fruitful territory for clinicians working with gaming addiction.

Correlations have been found between social anxiety and gaming addiction (Lee & Leeson, 2015) so it is not unexpected that people who exhibit problematic gaming often have much more positive social experiences in-game than they do in real life. For some, gaming may be the first time they have experienced a sense of community, belonging or being valued and respected by others. Again, this can be a very strong motivator to continue gaming and can lead to problematic or addictive gaming.

Clinicians can help clients to understand the role that the social elements of games hold for them by asking questions such as:

- Do you have more friends online than you do in real life?
- Do you ever feel more respected or needed in-game than you do in real life?
- Do most of your conversations with real-life friends revolve around gaming?
- If you stopped gaming what would it mean for your online friends?
- Are you a member of any teams or guilds in the games you play?

Escape and Emotional Regulation

As with all addictions games can also provide an escape from difficult life experiences or stressful situations and can be used to regulate emotions and anxiety. The Swedish study mentioned previously found that gaming to escape was another motive clearly correlated with negative outcomes from gaming (Hellstrom et al, 2012). Like many other hobbies and outlets, gaming can be used as a healthy escape or for the sublimation of emotions. For players who can only “escape” or manage difficult emotions through gaming, gaming can quickly become addictive. Unlike other addictions gaming can also be used in this way from a very young age. One participant I interviewed for my Master’s research (Driver, 2014) stated that the earliest photos he had of himself, from around age four, showed him holding a game controller. He described a household where the young children were terrorised by abusive, alcoholic parents, and stated that he strongly believes that even from the age of four or five he used gaming as a way to avoid becoming involved in his parents’ disputes or becoming the target of their ire.

While using gaming to escape externally stressful situations may be effective in the short term it can become problematic when it becomes the primary mechanism for coping with difficult situations, particularly since gaming to escape prevents a person from effectively addressing the situation that is causing difficulties. This leads to the predictable “downward spiral” of addiction where a person’s addictive behaviour begins to cause problems in their relationships with others or at work, motivating further addictive behaviour as a means of escape from the stress brought on by these problems. This is exacerbated further when a person uses addictive behaviour to escape from intrapsychic rather than external stressors as these tend to return immediately and often more powerfully when the person stops the addictive behaviour. One participant in my research described this experience: “You’re just so depressed and because you know that when you turn the PC off, your life is nothing, really. You just have no sense of self worth, and the depression just comes at you like a sledgehammer, smacks you in the face” (Driver, 2014, p. 72).

Clinicians can help participants to think about the ways in which they might use gaming to escape or to regulate emotions by asking questions such as:

- Do you ever play games in order to not have to think about problems in your life?
- Do you ever play games in order to not feel sad, angry or upset?
- Do you sometimes feel better just deciding to game, before you actually begin?
- Do you sometimes feel happier when gaming than you do in the rest of your life?

Identity and Self-Expression

Many games also provide gamers with an opportunity for identity creation and self-expression (Bessi re, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Williams, Kennedy, & Moore, 2011). In multiplayer games, players are constantly talking and interacting with others, and develop a sense of themselves in the game based on their actions and interactions with others. For some players this self-in-game may vary substantially from the way they experience their self in real life. A person who might usually be socially anxious and uncomfortable around others may find that in-game they can be expressive and confident, or even domineering. Others who usually experience themselves as ineffective and impotent may experience themselves as potent and capable in-game. In this way, motivations related to identity are linked to other motives discussed above. For example, it is not just the experience of *potency* that is a motivator for someone to game, but the implications this has for their *experience of self* when gaming.

Some games, particularly role-playing games, explicitly place the player in the role of another character of their creation. Players thus become known in-game through this character, their online avatar. The greater a player's level of identification with their online avatar — that is, the more they see it as representing themselves when they are playing — the higher the likelihood of their gaming become problematic or addictive (Zhonga & Yao, 2012). This is particularly true when a player experiences their avatar or self-in-game as being very different from their real self. For example, a participant in my research stated, "My whole sense of self worth was just so much bigger in the video games for me, than my real life. There was such a large disconnect between your online persona and your real life sense of worth. Your persona's increasing but your real life is suffering" (Driver, 2014, p. 72).

Clinicians can help clients to think about the significance of identity in motivating their gaming by asking questions such as:

- Do you sometimes feel like you are a different person in-game than in real life?
- Do you feel like people know you better in-game than in real life?
- Do you feel like other people like the person you are in-game more than the person you are in real life?
- Do you like the person you are in-game more than the person you are in real life?

Implications for Clinicians

One of the main ways that clinicians can help people with addictions is through helping

them develop an understanding of the function that addiction serves in their life and identifying alternative ways of meeting the same needs. Addictive or compulsive gaming can meet quite specific needs that are not always paralleled in other addictions such as substance use or gambling. Being aware of these motivations can prepare clinicians to more meaningfully explore the function that gaming serves in someone's life, and can help them to identify when gaming might have become a primary way of meeting needs for purpose and meaning, for achievement and potency, for community and belonging, for escape and emotional regulation, or for a positive sense of self. I encourage clinicians working with this population to continue to be curious, and to learn from their clients how they experience their gaming and, perhaps more importantly, how they experience themselves while gaming. If we can do that, then we are well placed to help those people for whom gaming has become a destructive force in their lives.

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