

The content and context of screen use is more important than the amount of screen time

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*Mark Griffiths reflects on the realities, implications and consequences of “screen time” in the context of gaming. He argues that it is not about the amount of screen use, but rather about its content and context. His piece follows a special workshop¹ convened by the **Media Policy Project** and **Parenting for a Digital Future** on ‘Families and “screen-time”: challenges of media self-regulation’ and the publication of a new **policy brief** about families and “screen time”, authored by **Alicia Blum-Ross** and **Sonia Livingstone**. Mark is a Chartered Psychologist, **Professor of Gambling Studies at the Nottingham Trent University**, and Director of the **International Gaming Research Unit**. [Header image credit: L.E. Morgan, CC BY-SA 2.0]*

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Since 1999, the **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)** has advocated the **‘2×2’ screen time guidelines** to parents that their children should be restricted to no more than 2 hours of screen time a day and that children under 2 years of age should not be exposed to any screen time at all. Not only is this unworkable in today’s multi-media world but the guidelines are not based on scientific evidence. Thankfully, the AAP is **in the process of revising its guidelines**. For me, the issue is not about the amount of screen time but is about the content and the context of screen use. I have three ‘screenagers’ who have never known a world without the internet and mobile phones who everyday – like me – spend a lot of time in front of a screen for both work/educational and leisure purposes. Engaging in a lot of screen-based activities is not inherently negative – it’s simply a case of doing things differently than how we did 20 years ago.

One online activity that has received a **lot of criticism** is online video gaming. However, there’s now **much research** showing videogames can be put to educational and therapeutic uses, as well as showing how gaming can improve reaction times and hand-eye co-ordination. Their interactivity allows individuals to experience novelty, curiosity and challenge that stimulates learning. Although **I have published many studies** concerning online gaming addiction, there is little empirical evidence that moderate gaming (i.e. playing a couple of hours a day) has any negative effects



whatsoever. In fact, many excessive players (i.e. those playing six or more hours a day) do not experience detrimental effects.

Over the past 15 years, I have spent time researching the excessive online gaming. Online gaming involves multiple reinforcements where different features might be differently rewarding to different people. In video games more generally, the rewards might be intrinsic (e.g. improving your highest score, mastering the game) or extrinsic (e.g. peer admiration).

In online gaming, there is no end to the game and there's the potential for gamers to play endlessly. This can be immensely rewarding and psychologically engrossing. For a small minority, this may lead to addiction where online gaming compromises everything else in their lives. However, playing excessively doesn't necessarily make someone an addict. A few years ago, I published two case study accounts of two males who claimed that they were gaming for up to 80 hours a week. They were behaviourally identical in terms of their gaming, but very different in terms of their psychological motivation to play.

The first case was an unemployed single 21-year old male. His favourite online game was World of Warcraft and since leaving university he had spent an average of 10-14 hours a day gaming. He claimed that gaming had a positive influence in his life, that most of his social life was online and that it increased his self-esteem. He had no major life commitments and had the time and flexibility to play for long stretches. Gaming provided a daily routine and there were no negative detrimental effects in his life. When he got a job and a girlfriend, his playing all but stopped.

The second case was a 38-year old male, who worked as a financial accountant, was married, and had two children. Over an 18-month period, his online playing of Everquest went from about 3-4 hours of playing every evening to playing up to 14 hours daily. He claimed his relationship was breaking down, he was spending too little time with his children, and constantly rang in sick to work so that he could spend the day playing Everquest. He tried to quit playing a number of times but couldn't go more than a few days before he experienced "an irresistible urge" to play again – even when his wife threatened to leave him.

He further said that giving up online gaming was worse than giving up smoking and he was "extremely moody, anxious, depressed and irritable" if he was unable to play. He was eventually fired from his job for being unreliable and unproductive (although his employers were totally unaware of his gaming). After losing his job, his wife left him, leading him to "play all day, every day". It was a vicious circle because his excessive online gaming was causing all his problems yet the only way he could forget about all his problems was by playing Everquest.

I argued that only the second man appeared to be addicted to online gaming but that the first man wasn't. I based this on the context and consequences of their excessive play. Gaming addiction should be characterised by the extent to which gaming impacts negatively on other areas of the gamers' lives rather than the amount of time spent playing. For me, an activity cannot be described as an addiction if there are few (or no) negative consequences in the player's life even if the gamer is playing excessively. The difference between a healthy enthusiasm and an addiction is that healthy enthusiasms add to life, addictions take away from it.

Every week, I receive emails from parents claiming that their sons or daughters are addicted to playing online games or social media. When I ask them why they think this is the case, they almost all reply:

Because they spend most of their leisure time in front of a screen.

This is simply a case of parents pathologising their children's behaviour because they think what they are doing is "a waste of time". I always ask parents the same three things in relation to their child's screen use. Does it affect their schoolwork? Does it affect their physical education? Does it

affect their peer development and interaction? Usually parents say that none of these things are affected so if that is the case, there is little to worry about when it comes to screen time. Parents also have to bear in mind that this is how today's children live their lives. Excessive screen time doesn't always have negative consequences and the content and context of their child's screen use is more important than the amount of screen time.

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¹ A summary of the event on families and 'screen time' has been published by the Media Policy Project and Parenting for a Digital Future, and is available to read [here](#).

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