

LEARNING COMPONENT: Peter Churchill – Video Gaming Presentation

(Abstracted from LGMS School Council Minutes: Wednesday 10 April 2013)

Notes: About 30 people attended this presentation.
Council had to leave at 7:30 pm and did not cover Peter's final part of his presentation

Peter Churchill supervises the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs (PChAD) program through AHS Youth Addiction Services in Calgary, and lectures on addictions at the University of Calgary and MRU. He has been a counselor for 20 years, focusing on addiction, child protection, and assessments for court. He has worked as a researcher for a number of universities, federal departments, and private firms – Sponsored by LGMS Parent Council

Mr. Peter Churchill commenced his presentation with the question, “What is gaming?” He noted that video games are the number one business in worldwide industry annual revenue! Once new popular games, e.g. Halo are released, box office revenue drops. Since then, all movie releases are scheduled around new video game releases. The only thing that out-sells other video games is video games!

Approximately 90% of all youth are in an environment where they are either surrounded by or exposed to video games. Peter advises being cautious of threatening to remove games from the environment as the kids may have social struggles afterwards because this is a major way students socialize and communicate today. Video games are so popular that even among adults, 1:9 say they game every day. The average gamer is 35 years old, more physically active than others, and more financially secure than others. Most are engaged but are not addicted with gaming.

Online games are the ones that are the most problematic...One reason for this is that the player can play the same game repetitively, only each time the game is different as the characters are played by a variety of people online. With these games, there is a feeling that the gamer needs to be available to play the game at a certain time, almost to “meet the opponent”. One of the things that makes gaming appealing is the strong “social” element. Parents are most concerned about shooting-type games. Ones with weapons and tactical objectives as compared to role play games with adventure-type settings. Some popular games are “Call of Duty” and “Sky Rim.”

Peter talked about the various genres of games:

- a) First Person Shooters: In these games, the hours of play appeal to competitive players. This genre often involves team players, they rank players and contain a lot of fast action. With shooters there is an industry of “prize” play i.e. in Montreal the best team of 4 splits a purse of \$100,000. Parents are concerned about the content of these games. “Grand Theft Auto IV” and “Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2” are some examples of this genre. These often involve an “open world” where you can go in any direction and see a huge variety of unique and different things. It is a very “immersive” type of experience, one that often involves drugs, prostitutes, violence, and adult content....yet younger kids are playing these games!

What is the hidden content we as parents should know about? There is a profit-driven industry that doesn't want a lot of the content to be known. There has been a push in the USA for more accurate labeling but this idea has been defeated. With movies in the theatre, they are sensitive to “bad” press as it may hurt revenue. The gaming industry, on the other hand, can claim that parents are being reactive. This theory often works in favour for the gamers as the publicity increases interest for that game. There is very little or low monitoring for games and most retailers don't care if a particular game is rated. They will sell the games as their main concern is profit!

These are very successful entertainment products despite the content warnings. Why? Some companies want to “normalize” the games by claiming that despite the content “everybody plays these games!” These games are popular and regardless of age, the players are probably going to find these games appealing. Heavy metal music is usually playing in the back ground, and visually, these games are very polished. The competitor is virtually playing with hundreds of people who are playing the same scenario.

- b) Role Play Games: These are similar to “*Dungeons and Dragons*” where an alternate persona is created and an imaginative adventure occurs. These games are very tactical and some play for only a few minutes. While many go onto these games for social reasons i.e. like Facebook, others may go on to play the game for its purpose/ role. About 40% of all role play gaming is with the game, “*World of Warcraft*” has over 11 million subscribers (which is the size of some countries). Online scams are occurring for this game, and people claim to be support groups for addicts, etc. This game is as “addictive as Crack”. When people claim that it is addictive, the negative publicity works the opposite way and almost becomes praise, causing more people wanting to play it.
- c) Life Simulators: In these games the player creates a character who tries to balance the various aspects of life. Some examples of this genre include: *Sims 3* (125 million copies sold) or *Second Life* (15 million members).
- d) Social Gaming: This is a newer trend developing. The games are addictive and have been enormously successful, i.e. *Farmville* (85 million players) and *Zynga* (\$1 billion). These are more often played by women in their 50’s and 60’s.

How can someone get so addicted and drawn into a game?

Companies tend to say or to rely on the societal belief that, “If someone has a problem with gambling it doesn’t seem to be the game’s fault, it’s the parent’s fault!” Peter’s thoughts were that although this tends to be the message, it is too easy to say...Gaming represents a huge social change and the consumer needs to also be responsible as well. These games have been designed to be as addictive as possible! They use a “behavioral game design” where they’ve used psychology to draw people into playing and manipulate people with various aspects of gaming.

How? They do so by the following strategies: using various and multiple levels, by continuing the achievement of the gamers, and by enticing the players by winning rare items. In “shooters”, players are reinforcing each other as they really want to win. Sometimes the players are looking for better gear etc. and receive it once they reach a certain level. Other games include extra rewards to keep rewarding players when it isn’t fun anymore. These companies use the same payout math as Video Lottery Terminals. Some want you to pay 50 cents to 1\$ a day for an online membership.

Alberta Health Services believe that “Games don’t kill grades, people do.” As parents, we need to look at gaming as a symptom for a bigger problem i.e. maybe the children aren’t doing well at school and perhaps social problems exist. Malcolm Gladwell said, “*Most people are looking for autonomy, complexity, and accomplishment. Does effort = reward?*” Most adults don’t get two out of these three. Adolescents, children, those who aren’t finding social success, students who don’t participate in extracurricular activities, may experience life at school and home as low in autonomy, etc., so they go to video games to experience these.

Ivan Goldberg, M.D. said “Internet addiction should be a diagnostic category.” Although he was kidding, no one got the joke and it became a treatment industry designed to terrify parents about video games.

Peter talked about “*Forced Tolerance*”. This is when game developers would like to create situations where gamers will play games that involve a repetitive act, or play games that are actually quite boring i.e. mining ore, magic potions etc. The content is easy to put into the game, but younger people will play it as they just have to click to achieve a manufactured goal. The question is, “*Are they really having fun?*” “What will happen if they don’t play?” “Is this product “just fun” enough to be “cost effective” and its players won’t quit?” The issue is not that problem gamers choose fun over boredom. The issue is that they have been trained to choose more boredom than fun, and to need it, and not to notice it.

How does Tolerance work? If the game is more exciting than the normal day, over time this stimuli doesn’t exist as much anymore, as it is artificially stimulated such as substance abuse or games. Eventually via abuse and dependency, the gamers feel happy only if they are playing the game.

What should parents look for? Peter suggested parents look for “*Pleasure Decay*”. Chemically, initially the player is increasing his/her pleasure related neurotransmitters. Over time, the brain stops emitting these chemicals, but they are at too low a level to experience enjoyment. Other types of pleasure are emitting these same chemicals, i.e. while one is taking part in some activities, the other activities he/she used to take part in are being sacrificed. When young people stop doing what they used to enjoy, there is a neurological shift so that they can’t take pleasure from what they used to do because their tolerance has been built up. When people give up gaming, the other interests come back...initially kids are going to have to be very physically active to achieve that “pleasure”.

As Canadians we spend more time online than we do watching television! Internet use has more than replaced that, it has doubled!

It’s not all addiction: The symptoms of addiction/interest could include: preoccupation, mood modification and euphoria, and tolerance i.e. playing more than used to. These are worth taking note of as a casual gamer doesn’t show these features. The ones we want to worry about are: substitution (doing it instead of), conflict i.e. (with parents or siblings, teachers, peers), withdrawal and relapse (i.e. couldn’t have a good time on vacation as they didn’t have a game.)

Different motives exist for wanting to play video games. Most of these motives are healthy i.e. kids want to socialize with friends, they experience teamwork to achieve larger goals, and the game states create a satisfying escape from time.

Massive multiplayer online (MMO) games are appealing because of the following reasons: persistence, mood management, creativity, excitement and challenge, and absorption rate (The fast pace is meant to keep young kid’s eyes glued to the screen. If you can increase the action, you can manipulate the absorption rate i.e. the extent to which it is stimulated, creativity, excitement/challenge).

Peter listed several benefits of playing games, some of which may include:

- 1) Pain management: People regain mobility faster when playing video games, and precognitive problems are recovered faster.
- 2) Social connection: Later in life gamers have better social skills...or the opposite can occur if before age of 12 yrs these individuals were not strong socially.
- 3) Narrative development: Language skills improve.
- 4) Fine Motor Skills: Gamers tend to have better fine motor skills i.e. surgeons.
- 5) Cognitive development and ability to assess risk improves.
- 6) Stress and Anger management is improved.

As a parent how much play would be too much? Electronic entertainment occupies 40% of the average person's time, 55% of the average youth's time. Over 2-3 hours a day are too much as other time is also spent on technology i.e. online (18 hrs/week), TV (17 hrs/week), cell phone (0.5 – 4 hrs/wk), and this equals about 36 hours plus of total screen time!

Are major life areas impacted? As parents we have to look at relationships with family and friends. Are the kids withdrawn from sports or other leisure activities, is gaming a social asset or a substitute (are they making more friends or losing friends and are they depressed and anxious)?

At the moment, gaming abuse isn't considered a mental illness, but it probably will be in the next 4 years. In the meantime, it exhibits the same abuse criteria we see in drugs, gambling, alcohol, etc. Alberta Health Services are worried about what society is headed for. Video games have a dramatic effect on 8 – 10 year olds, as this age group is more apt to copy what they see. The more realistic the game, the stronger the effect.

Specific symptoms that parents should look out for include: mood swings, social withdrawal, lying about grades or activities, decline in hygiene and appearance, increased conflict, gaming instead of studies and chores, impaired or reduced sleep.

What do gamers say? 80% say they are addicted to games. The majority say they have played more than 10 hours at a sitting, and the majority say they play too much.

How to intervene?

- Limit the type of play and duration of play
- Promote social skills and social activity
- Know who the child's friends are
- Monitor bullying
- Monitor grades
- Take the blue cord (i.e. the Ethernet cord)
- Be aware of where the gaming is taking place
- Be activity based with treatment, i.e. use art, sports, etc.
- Track the hours of use and how often it was actually fun vs. routine
- Use 'risky' activities, i.e. downhill skiing, biking etc.

The AMA states that video gaming is linked to seizures, aggression, and other social impacts.

American Academy of Child Adolescents Psychology **recommends you limit your child's video game playing to 1 – 2 hours per day and watch for signs that gaming** is interfering with socializing, academics, or family time.

Allow play only after all homework is complete and encourage participation in other activities.

Consult a qualified mental health professional if you are concerned.

Links:

<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/>