

Addiction to Online Video Games?

Curfew Panda

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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It seems a tall, ambitious and very authoritarian order: [imposing bans](#) on persons under the age of 18 from playing online games between 22:00 and 08:00; rationing gaming on weekdays to 90 minutes and three hours on holidays and weekends. This is the [response](#) of the People's Republic of China to fears that video game addiction must be combated, less with modest treatment regimes than the curfew method. Perhaps more importantly, the aim here, as with other systems of state surveillance, is to create a system of verification matching a user's identity with government data.

The guidelines also seek to restrict the money minors can spend on online games – those between 8 and 16 are permitted additions of \$29 in digital gaming outlay each month. Those between 16 and 18 can add \$57. Teachers, parents and the good authorities are also encouraged to influence the gaming habits of the young. Onward principled instructors.

Video gaming, with its virtual communities, has created worlds of isolation. As John Lanchester would [observe](#) in 2009,

“There is no other medium that produces so pure a cultural segregation as video games, so clean-cut a division between the audience and the non-audience.”

When the video-gamer has made an appearance in cultural discourses, it has usually been as a spectacular horror story, violence on screen begetting violence off screen. This nexus remains forced but no less convincing for the morally concerned.

The concern now is less that minors will rush off and gun down their peers than dissipate themselves in cerebral sludge and apathy. In November 1982, the US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop [declared](#) his personal war on video games, which offered “nothing constructive” and consumed the “body and soul” of their users. While having no evidence at the time about the effect of such games on children, he, [according](#) to the *New York Times*, “predicted statistical evidence would be forthcoming soon from the health care fields.”

The current literature is peppered with warnings that the Internet has ceased being the rosy frontier of freedom and very much the hostage taker of controls and desires. Freedom has become vegetate and dulled; users have become narcotised. In 2012, Daria J. Kuss and Mark D. Griffiths in *Brain Sciences* [observed](#) that, over “the past decade, research has accumulated suggesting that excessive Internet use can lead to the development of a behavioural addiction.” Such an addiction “had been considered a serious threat to mental health and the excessive use of the Internet has been linked to a variety of negative

psychosocial consequences.”

The review of 18 studies by Kuss and Griffiths makes for despairing reading. Neural circuitry is adjusted via internet and gaming addiction (“neuroadaptation and structural changes”); behaviourally, gaming addicts suggest constriction “with regards to their cognitive functioning in various domains.” But as with everything else such studies on claimed influence and corruption face the usual sceptical rebukes; research is criticised, if not ignored altogether, for being heavy with biases and distortions.

We are left with such non-committal observations as those of Pete Etchells, who makes the rather dull point in [Lost in a Good Game](#) that,

“There are as yet no universal or conclusive truths about what researches do or do not know about the effects that video games have on us.”

Etchells certainly does his best in underscoring the good effects, claiming that “video game play is one of the most fundamentally important activities we can take part in”. Consider, for instance, escapism when facing the death of a parent.

Such views have not impressed the World Health Organisation, which has come down firmly on the side of the anti-gaming puritans. The body has added its voice to the debate, [describing](#) such addiction rather discouragingly as “gaming disorder”. It is “defined in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as a pattern of gaming behaviour (‘digital-gaming’ or ‘video-gaming’) characterised 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.”

Such a view was bound to cause a flutter of irritation in the gaming industry. As Ferris Jabr [noted](#) last month in *The New York Times Magazine*, the word addiction is an uncomfortable combine involving religious scolding, scientific disapproval, and colloquial use describing “almost any fixation.”

With such opinions circulating, state regulators have decided to come out swinging. In 2018, a game-obsessed China, with the then world’s largest market, unearthed a new gaming regulator: the State Administration of Press and Publications, operating under the auspices of the publicity department of the Chinese Communist Party. The GAPP, as [outlined in a document](#) published on the website of the education ministry, would “implement controls on the total number of online video games, control the number of new video games operated online, explore an age-appropriate reminder system in line with China’s national conditions, and take measures to limit the amount of time minors [spend on games].”

But the rationale for having such a body is not exactly one of enlightenment. Fine to wean the young off their addictive devices and platforms, encouraging healthier living, but supplanting it with the guidance of the all-powerful President Xi Jinping? Much equivalent is this to the idea of replacing a symptom with a cult, a questionable solution at best.

Video game companies have made modest efforts to rein in times of use for those of certain

age. The world's largest gaming company, Tencent, took the plunge by limiting game time to one hour a day for those under the age of 12, and two for those between 12 and 18. Such moves seem ineffectual given the sheer variety of games users can expect to sample.

Having such regulators, whatever the noble purpose, is an incitement to capriciousness. Times of use can be adjusted in accordance with whim. The genres of games can be pulled from the market at any given moment for stretched political and social reasons. The Chinese case is rich with examples, [including](#) the designation that mah-jong and poker be removed the approval list over concerns regarding illegal gambling.

The effort to restrict those of a certain age from immersing themselves in virtual reality for fear of contaminating the world of flesh and feeling remains current and, in many circles, popular. The Chinese experiment is bound to be catching, but going behind the regulations, weaknesses are evident. The PRC gaming restrictions [do not](#), for instance, cover offline experiences or single-player forms. The addict need merely modify the habit. The true purpose of such moves remain conventional and oppressive: the assertion of state power and surveillance over individual choice.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Articles by: [Dr. Binoy
Kampmark](#)

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