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News UK News Mental health

The terrifying truth about gaming addiction and what it's doing to UK children

The Mirror investigates the impact of the computer gaming industry as children as young as 11 are taken into care over fears they are addicted

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By **Danny Buckland**
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NEWS



Clinics are experiencing a rise in people signing up for electronic detox programmes after they spend up to 14 hours a day gaming [file image]

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Computer gaming is an industry fizzing with creativity and wonder but in its shadows lurks the growing concern that it is exposing a generation to addiction.

The excitement of these games unfolds in households everywhere and computer game purchases are predicted to eclipse book sales in the UK this year.

But, as we fret over screen time and smartphone dependency, it has emerged that clinics are experiencing a spike in the number of people signing up for electronic detox programmes after they spend up to 14 hours a day gaming.

A Mirror investigation found children as young as 11 are being taken into care over fears they are addicted to games, while recent studies have also revealed that kids are spending twice as much time using gadgets and phones as they do speaking to their parents.



Around 32.4 million people in the UK play computer games [file image]

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Gaming is not just for children though. Around 32.4 million people in the UK play computer games, the vast majority enjoying the stunning graphics and gameplay safely.

But fears over their addictive qualities were increased when the World Health Organisation classified "gaming disorder" as a mental health condition last year.

The UK games industry has a market value of £5.11 billion – a 12.4% rise from 2016 – but it is now being blamed for children blowing GCSE exams, students dropping out of university and adults falling to hold down jobs.

The first NHS funded internet addiction clinic – The Centre for Internet Disorders, based in London – is preparing to open its doors to treat up to 30 children and adults whose early exposure to computer games has led to excessive playing that has disrupted their lives.

The impact of the games is disputed, with the industry highlighting research that casts doubts on links to addiction, and it has warned against demonising children who game as a hobby.

"I have been working in the field for 15 years, which is when I first started to see people playing multi-player games and developing an addiction that was disrupting their lives, their education and their work," says consultant psychiatrist and internet addiction specialist Dr Richard Graham.

"Certainly the use of video games can reach a level where the term addiction is not inappropriate."

Dr Graham, who is clinical director at Good Thinking: The London Digital Mental Wellbeing Service, adds: "The problems develop when it becomes the focus of your life and you prioritise it above anything, getting into conflict with people around you, perhaps deceiving yourself and them as to the extent of it."



The UK games industry has a market value of £5.11 billion [file image] (Image: Getty Images)

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"It is much harder to break an established habit so it is important to learn how to get the most out of these wonderful technologies while knowing when to stop.

"But I don't demonise game playing because you can be a very enthusiastic gamer and still get up to go to school and do your homework."

Other experts believe that intensive gaming acts as a trigger to release the body's reward chemical dopamine so that the brain recalibrates to synchronise its release in line with gaming's in-built leader board achievements.

"If you start young then your neural pathways get their dopamine from it alone and your brain gets rewired. It is literally hijacked by its relationship with computer games.

"I have treated people who play up to 14 hours a day but they don't even realise they are playing that long," says John Logan, head counsellor at The Edge clinic, which runs a 90-day programme to break the addiction of extreme gamers.

"In some cases, it becomes the only focus of their life. Their only relationship is with the screen. Often we see a parallel addiction to marijuana because it makes them relaxed and able to play for hours on end.

"They end up often just scraping through school but then fall apart at university, getting kicked off courses. Often their relationship with their family has been destroyed along the way."

His rehab clinic, based at The Cabin, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, treats Brits on a 45-day total ban on computer use, before introducing short supervised online sessions over the next 45 days.

It also works with Game Quitters, a leading online forum providing help and advice.

"We treat a lot of people from the UK and have had inquiries from the parents of a seven-year-old desperately worried by the amount of time he was spending on games," adds Logan, 49, from Dublin.

"The sad fact is that this is on the increase yet it's a problem we don't take enough notice of as a society. We just don't know enough about the impact of handing an iPad to a six or seven-year-old and we may not know that fully for 20 years."



Gaming is now among the factors being blamed for children blowing GCSE exams, students dropping out of university and adults failing to hold down jobs [file image] (Image: Getty)

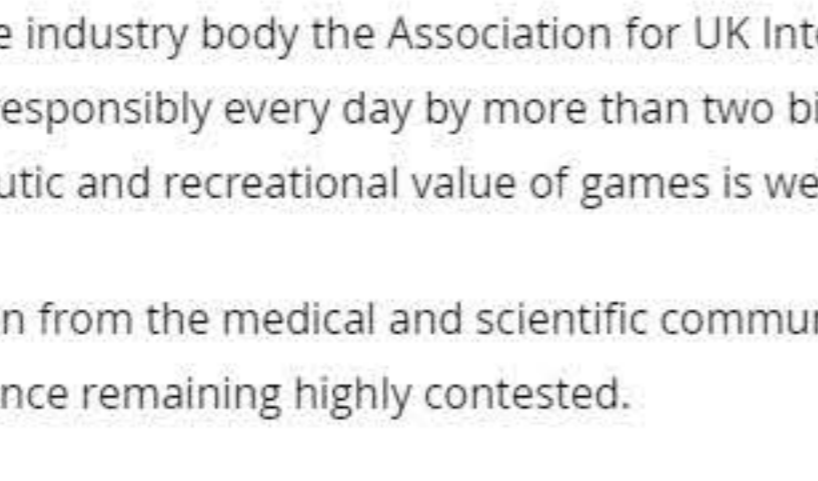
The gaming industry cites reports by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health that say the harm from screen time was often overstated, and a Unicef study which found little evidence that a significant number of children were addicted, adding that "no evidence exists to suggest that moderate use of any digital technology has a negative impact on children's brains".

It also highlights research from Oxford University and Johns Hopkins University that the WHO move to classify "gaming disorder" was not evidence based, and that other research demonstrated computer games can positively influence cognitive, motivational, emotional and social development.

Dr Jo Twist, chief executive of the industry body the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment, adds: "Games are enjoyed safely and responsibly every day by more than two billion people of all ages across the world. The educational, therapeutic and recreational value of games is well-founded and widely recognised.

"There remains strong opposition from the medical and scientific community to links between playing games and addiction, with evidence remaining highly contested.

"The industry takes its responsibility towards people who play games, particularly children, very seriously."



For parents who are worried, Dr Graham says: "The best approach is to talk to your children to understand better what is going on and what their motives are for gaming.

"It is important to create a dialogue for understanding on both sides."

Computer games are now a big part of the entertainment industry and they will continue to fascinate younger people, but it seems research could take years to deliver a definitive understanding of their impact on behaviour.

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