

Can this man cure gaming addiction?

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March 20, 2019



Cam Adair's own habit nearly led him to take his own life – now he is helping thousands of other young men quit

Twelve years ago, Cam Adair's gaming addiction brought him low enough to consider suicide. Now, as founder of [Game Quitters](#) – the world's largest support community for [video gaming addicts](#) – he travels the globe, helping thousands of teen boys and young men struggling with their own habit. Not to mention their parents.

This week – as internet giant Google announced its first foray into the \$140bn video gaming industry, with streaming service, Stadia – Adair is visiting Britain. Almost 10,000 gamers from the UK ask Game Quitters for help every month, a figure which has doubled since last August.

Last week, two members of his Game Quitters' forum gave evidence on 'immersive and addictive technologies' to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in Parliament. As Adair notes, last year, "[the World Health Organisation confirmed that gaming disorder is a distinct clinical entity](#), regardless of underlying health conditions." Which is why a London hospital is preparing to launch the first ever NHS-funded internet addiction centre for young people and adults.

We assume that gaming is a teenage obsession that boys will outgrow – it isn't always so. This addiction often manifests in young adults who no longer have parental supervision – say, at college, where the sudden absence of imposed boundaries, combined with academic pressure and social isolation, can turn gaming into a compulsion. After graduation, [boomeranging home in search of a job](#), it can become an emotional crutch. Of the 75,000 gamers a month who seek help from Game Quitters, 50 per cent are 18 to 25.

Adair's own gaming addiction peaked at 18. Nicknamed 'Smiley', he'd always been a happy child and a talented hockey player, only starting to game at the relatively advanced age of 11 – “a modern day miracle!” – but at 13, he began being bullied and his self-esteem plummeted. “Gaming was a really effective way for me to escape,” the 30 year-old Canadian says.



Cam Adair (right) with British psychotherapist, Andy Leach Credit: Daniel Hambury/ Stella Pictures Limited

Soon, gaming was all he did. Once his mother wondered how long he'd play before he'd stop: “Fifteen hours went by.” As setting boundaries failed, his desperate parents sought professional help, but Adair says, “I was very manipulative and unresponsive. I refused to participate in anything.”

At 18, he wrote a suicide note. That same night, a friend invited him to see the film *Superbad*. “The shift from writing that note over dinner [to] laughing in the cinema made me snap out of my state,” he says. “I asked my Dad to help me find a counsellor. He helped me begin to turn my life around.”

But as Adair says, the most significant part was, “I made the choice – if I'm not going to end my life, I'm going to truly try to live it to the fullest. And I might as well start today.”

As hard as that was for him then, he believes it's worse now. As gaming technology evolves, and companies spend millions researching behavioural psychology, their products not only become more entertaining but more compelling. Adair sees Google's entry into video game streaming as further evidence that the gaming industry is tantamount to “a modern day gold-rush. When you think that gaming is bigger than film and music combined, it's no surprise that a company like Google would want to get into the fray. As devices such as the smartphone, the iPad, make gaming more accessible for everybody, we see bigger problems.”

Adair also consults for The Edge, part of a private addiction treatment centre called The Cabin, in Thailand, which offers a residential programme for young men aged 18-26 struggling with gaming addiction. Psychotherapist Andy Leach, from Surrey, who has worked there for seven years, stresses that, like alcohol, gaming is fine in moderation. But for an estimated 3 per cent, it's "pernicious. It's virtually identical to a drug addiction."

Two years ago, Leach was unaware of any gaming addicts – now they total a quarter of patients. Why are so many young men susceptible? "It's very much about emotional ability, ability to connect with others," he says. Social anxiety, trauma, and an adverse childhood environment can all factor in the likelihood of becoming addicted. "Gaming addiction is about the illusion of connection. A lot of the work we do is about complete digital detox, and learning how to socially interact and to get rewarded for that in a healthy way."



As gaming technology evolves, companies spend ever more on understanding behavioural psychology - and their products become even more addictive Credit:

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Robert Teague, headteacher of The Cedars, an independent boys' school in Croydon, invited Adair to address his pupils and their parents yesterday. "Games are very skilfully designed these days," Teague says. "They appeal to lots of positive drives, but channel them in a way that's a complete waste of time. All children want to create, they want to achieve, they like challenge. And all of these urges can be satisfied by doing worthwhile things. Gaming gives a short-term fix and enables these urges to be satisfied but in a fake way."

Even if our boys aren't addicted, many spend far more time gaming than ideal. Teague believes parents need to push back, in ways beyond setting time limits. "There's often a gap to be filled," he says, whether through sport, or learning an instrument. There's also, he believes, "a need for parents to get into the lives of their children. A lot of teenagers seem to be brought up by their peers. It's as though parents have vacated that space."

Adair agrees. If a parent has never set boundaries, the belated attempt to limit gaming can create huge conflict. “Setting limits from an early age is important,” he says, advising moving their devices to a central area in the home, to reduce isolation. But so is focusing on building a positive and healthy family relationship that doesn’t revolve around screens. “Make sure you have dinners together without technology, spend time doing other activities together at the weekend.”

Still, the contributing factors to addiction can be complex and painful. Lucy Farmer*, 48, based in Cambridgeshire, sought help from Game Quitters when she realised her son – now 28 and still struggling – was a gaming addict. He was passionate about gaming from six, but he also did well at school and sport. When he was 18, however, his five-year old brother died, and his habit became acute.

“I never thought it would become a problem in adulthood,” Farmer says. “You think, ‘He’ll go to work, get a girlfriend, get married some day’. None of that has happened.”



Almost 10,000 gamers from the UK seek help from Game Quitters every month Credit: Schedivy Pictures Inc/ Digital Vision

Looking back, she believes that school contained his compulsion, as sport and socialising were built in. But he took a gap year before university. “That gap year became, ten, 11, 12 years,” she says. “He couldn’t keep a job, he never showered, he never ate, he was moody.”

Understandably wanting to help, she paid his rent, and bought food. “I was trying to take all his problems away so he could get back on his feet. Now I realise I’ve been enabling his addiction.” On Adair’s advice, she recently withdrew financial support. The situation remains acutely distressing. “I don’t know much about gaming but I do know that it’s taken ten years of my son’s life.”

A gamer has to want to quit, says Adair; if they do, he suggests going cold-turkey for 90 days. His research with clinical psychologist Dr Daniel King found that just three months without gaming improved everything “from emotional health to physical health, time management, focus, family relationships, personal relationships, even their appearance.

“But 90 days is only the beginning,” says Adair. “After that they need to find replacement activities for the needs that gaming fulfils. New ways to see progress, feel a sense of purpose, deal with stress and anxiety, learn to relax, to socially connect.” This involves exercise, time outdoors, face-to-face interaction, and finding support – whether online or a professional.

Adair’s own recovery wasn’t straightforward. Early on, he relapsed. But now he says, “I feel great. I go surfing, I DJ, I have a girlfriend. My life is transformed.”

For those still struggling – there is hope.

**Names have been changed.*