

eGambling

THE ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF GAMBLING ISSUES

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{This letter resulted from a retirement tea discussion about gambling and addiction to electronic devices. – The Editor}

How I Became Famous Once

Once upon a time (in a galaxy far away) ARF's [*Addiction Research Foundation –ed.*] training department was known as the School for Addiction Studies Division ("ARF U."), and was housed in a renovated mansion in Rosedale, in downtown Toronto. I spent 13 years there as an Education Consultant.

In the early '80s video games burst upon the scene. Parents worried that their kids would fritter away time on video games to the detriment of school and family life, and their fears were justified in some cases, as usual. Eventually there was talk of kids who were "hooked" on video games, kids who were "addicted" and pursued the games to the exclusion of everything else. They even stole money from mom's purse, and ran off to play games at the video game arcade. Kids were reported to have gone to play video games at lunch and not returned for afternoon classes.

The mayor of North York, a spotlight magnet named Mel Lastman, supported a proposed bylaw that would prohibit the establishment of a video game parlour within N meters (250? 500? I forget) of a school.

A reporter for one of Toronto's newspapers got the idea that he would look into reports of video game addiction. A logical step in his research was to call up the Addiction Research Foundation, the Provincial Government agency with the responsibility in that area. The SAS receptionist knew me as a person who was willing to shoot off his mouth on any topic in the addiction field, so she put the reporter's call through to me.

"Can a person be addicted to video games?" he asked. I said that the word

'addiction' was being used loosely, because gaming obviously doesn't involve the ingestion of chemicals; a characteristic of mainstream addiction. However, there may well be changes in the brain as a consequence of repeated patterns of behaviour, and in that sense might parallel addiction. Off the top of my head I also thought that there might be other parallels.

Video games result in very rapid reinforcement compared to, say, school work. Depending on what we think the reinforcement is, it might be seen to come rapidly and frequently. For example, if your friends tell you that shooting down an alien rocket is super cool, you might be able to have that sense of accomplishment many times per minute, and with only a split-second delay after your action. Sense of accomplishment, or mastery, or achievement, can get a real workout with a video game. Rapid, high-rate reinforcement is a well-known way to instill a behaviour.

The reinforcer is available at very low economic cost, thereby reducing one of the most obvious barriers to addiction. Availability is also enhanced by the absence of age barriers and the (then) widespread appearance of game parlours.

Another barrier to addiction is missing, in that the route of administration is not aversive, as smoking is initially, and as needles are in the common mind. Becoming skilled at the game brings more challenging levels of play, with less frequent reinforcement, but most importantly, the reinforcement occurs on an unpredictable schedule. Once a behaviour has been instilled by a reliable, high-rate schedule of reinforcement, it can be amazingly resistant to extinction by shifting to an unpredictable schedule of reinforcement.

Having played out these parallels between video game addiction and historical "typical" addiction, the reporter was full of enthusiasm for the topic, and quoted me extensively in a newspaper article.

The next thing I knew there was a radio station from Hamilton, Ontario on the phone. Then a TV station called up for a session in their studio, then Homemaker's magazine, a radio station from Halifax, another from Kingston, then one from out west.

For a few weeks the topic was hot, and so was I. The Powers That Be decided that there was nothing dangerous in my philosophical ramblings, and it made ARF look good; being helpful in the midst of public controversy. Pretty soon it all died down, and the crisis of video game addiction faded away.

Unless there is a bylaw on the books of the former City of North York, I doubt that there is much left from that brief time, apart from my memories of "How I became Canada's foremost expert on video game addiction."

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We invite our readers to submit **Letters to the Editor** on gambling topics. Please note that we can publish only a fraction of the letters submitted. All letters must be signed. We cannot publish anonymous letters, or those of a libellous nature. Letters to the Editor are reviewed and chosen by the editor and members of the editorial board. Letters may be sent to either the e-mail or the regular mail address given below. Once a letter has been accepted, we will request an electronic version. Each published letter will include the writer's first and last names, professional title(s) if relevant, city, province or state, and country. We reserve the right to edit each submission for uniform format and punctuation.

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