

# The Problematic Coexistence of “Internet Gaming Disorder” and Esports

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## ABSTRACT

Whether or not gaming causes addiction continues to be debated in the scholarly literature. The American Psychiatric Association has proposed “Internet gaming disorder,” a non-substance addictive disorder, in order to encourage further research on the subject. We suggest that competitive gaming, better known as esports, might provide a unique platform on which to discuss the validity of the proposed disorder.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• Applied computing~Consumer health

## KEYWORDS

Internet gaming disorder, game addiction, excessive gaming, esports.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The gaming disorders

Based on a review of more than 240 articles on the subject, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has proposed that excessive gaming might be conceptualized as an addictive mental disorder under the label “internet gaming disorder.” In 2013, this disorder was included in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition) as a condition for further study [1]. Likewise, the World Health Organization’s ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases) Beta Draft includes proposals of similar disorders: “hazardous gaming” and “gaming disorder” [2]. It is important to stress that none of these disorders have officially been recognized as mental disorders yet.

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Conceptually speaking, such behavioral addictions are highly controversial even in the perspective of some of the researchers behind the abovementioned decisions [3][4][cf. 5]. Clearly, there are many proponents for the inclusion, but there are also those who are skeptical, as evinced by the recent publication of an open debate paper signed by 26 scholars [6].

This paper probes the validity of the diagnostic criteria formulated by the APA by looking at them through esports; the competitive play of commercial games, which has recently become a prolific cultural practice [7]. Our goal is thus not to deal with the question whether gaming causes addiction or not, but rather with the specific conceptualization of “internet gaming addiction” presented in the DSM by the APA.

### 1.2 Esports

Esports have arguably surfaced as the fastest growing sector of today’s sports industry [8]. The growing concern about gaming seems to correlate, perhaps not coincidentally, with this growing passion for esports, as masses of present-day gamers dream of careers as professional esports players. According to the database Esport Earnings, more than \$94 million was awarded as prize money in esports tournaments around the world solely during the year 2016, excluding salaries and sponsorship deals. Next to all financial profits, professional esports players tend to benefit also from an elevated social status as worshipped celebrities in local as well as global contexts [e.g., 9–11].

Unfortunately, however, very few will be able to reach the professional level. Of the estimated 1.5B contemporary gamers, only some thousands seem to be enjoying a professional competitive status. Getting there seems to take at least around six daily hours of deliberate esports practice for several consecutive years, excluding various non-deliberate forms of practice that can easily add up to the same hourly amount [12]. In other words, those striving seriously for a professional esports career can be expected to spend almost all their waking time on esports play and related activities.

## 2 INTERNET GAMING DISORDER

In order to be able to discuss esports in relation to “internet gaming disorder” this section reproduces the APA’s nine criteria verbatim. According to the APA [1, pp. 795–796], the features of the disorder are:

Persistent and recurrent use of the Internet to engage in games, often with other players, leading to clinically significant

impairment or distress as indicated by five (or more) of the following in a 12-month period:

1. Preoccupation with Internet games. (The individual thinks about previous gaming activity or anticipates playing the next game; Internet gaming becomes the dominant activity in daily life). Note: This disorder is distinct from Internet gambling, which is included under gambling disorder.
2. Withdrawal symptoms when Internet gaming is taken away. (These symptoms are typically described as irritability, anxiety, or sadness, but there are no physical signs of pharmacological withdrawal.)
3. Tolerance—the need to spend increasing amounts of time engaged in Internet games.
4. Unsuccessful attempt to control the participation in Internet games.
5. Loss of interests in previous hobbies and entertainment as a result of, and with the exception of, Internet games.
6. Continued excessive use of Internet games despite knowledge of psychosocial problems.
7. Has deceived family members, therapists, or others regarding the amount of Internet gaming.
8. Use of Internet games to escape or relieve negative mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety).
9. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of participation in Internet games.

Note: Only nongambling Internet games are included in this disorder. Use of the Internet for required activities in a business or profession is not included; nor is the disorder intended to include other recreational or social Internet use. Similarly, sexual Internet sites are excluded.

*Specify current severity*

Internet gaming disorder can be mild, moderate, or severe depending on the degree of disruption of normal activities. Individuals with less severe Internet gaming disorder may exhibit fewer symptoms and less disruption of their lives. Those with severe Internet gaming disorder will have more hours spent on the computer and more severe loss of relationships or career or school opportunities.

### 3 EVALUATING THE CRITERIA

This section will theoretically discuss the validity of the nine “internet gaming disorder” criteria. We examine each criterion in relation to our understanding of dedicated esports play and its requirements.

#### 3.1 Preoccupation

As implied above, spending inordinate amounts of time thinking about past games and anticipating future games is a crucial part of any dedicated sport practice. In order to improve as a player,

it is not enough to play a lot, but players must analytically contemplate their performance outside the activity as well. Considering such behaviors as pathological preoccupation is problematic. This criterion would benefit from an added distinction between constructive or pleasant thoughts on the one hand and intrusive or unpleasant thoughts on the other.

#### 3.2 Withdrawal symptoms

In the APA’s proposed form, this criterion does not feature physical signs of pharmacological withdrawal, but is described more broadly as the presence of irritability, anxiety, or sadness. Obviously, it is difficult to imagine an aspiring esports professional (or a dedicated amateur) who does not feel irritability, sadness, or anxiety when prevented from engaging with their valued activity. This criterion does not adequately distinguish between everyday annoyance and the debilitating withdrawal symptoms associated with substance addiction.

#### 3.3 Tolerance

No one becomes an expert without significant time investments [13]. Likewise, dedicated athletes need to spend great amounts of time on practicing their sport. Especially at the earlier stages of their careers, the athletes’ mental and physiological limits function as constraints: to optimize recovery and growth, they cannot practice as much as they would like to. Accordingly, building up tolerance for the activity is one of the basic principles in athletic development (and a popular reason for doping use). Spending increasing amounts of time playing esports is thus an unavoidable step on the path toward professionalism; and just like in other sports, the hard work that needs to be put in is not always pleasurable. Aspiring esports players undoubtedly have to play even on days when they would rather not. It will be hard to formulate a criterion that measures tolerance without inadvertently labeling hard work as addiction.

#### 3. 4. Unsuccessful attempt to control the participation in Internet games

Presumably, this criterion is meant to gauge whether an individual has lost control. When applied to dedicated esports play, there is a risk that it measures something else; namely, how successful one is at maintaining work-life balance. While a skewed work-life balance can indeed have adverse consequences on an individual’s life, there is a significant conceptual difference between controlling substance use and controlling time spent on a cherished practice or job. We consider the loss of control as the most prominent aspect of addiction; however, treating the control of hedonistic and instrumental behaviors as a single category simplifies the issue drastically. We recommend this criterion to regard the acknowledged theories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [e.g., 14] in order to elaborate on its purpose.

#### 3.5. Loss of interest in previous hobbies

This criterion might inadvertently mistake dedication for anhedonia (a lack of the ability to feel pleasure). Due to our limited time and energy resources, dedication can easily be confused with a loss of interest in activities that were previously pleasurable. With reference to a long history of psychological studies in passion [15], we stress that many passionate individuals, such as those dedicated to esports play, often find themselves immersed in the enterprise to an extent that can reduce their interest toward other activities. This may well reflect a specific passionate state, obsessive passion, which is not addiction. We encourage scholars to explore the passion-addiction relationship in their future research on this criterion.

### **3.6. Continued excessive use of Internet games despite knowledge of psychosocial problems**

This criterion is problematic in two ways. Firstly, the criterion seems to assume a unidirectional causal relationship between play and psychosocial problems; that is, it does not consider play as a potential coping strategy in the face of psychosocial problems. Evaluating the direction of the causal link is extremely difficult, especially given the preexisting negative or positive biases towards gaming [16, cf. 17]. Secondly, the criterion seems to ignore the possibility of the most important social bonds being shared with coaches, teammates, mentors, and competitors. Misinterpreting this as a sign of mental disorder would be to reproduce the mistakes that were made in the 1990s when computer programming were thought to be addictive [17]. Preliminary reports suggest that playing can be experienced as a valid strategy for people to cope with social challenges [18], and this possibility should be taken into consideration.

### **3.7. Has deceived family members, therapists, or others regarding the amount of Internet gaming**

Recent research indicates that the stereotype of gamers as unpopular, overweight, and socially incompetent is not true [19]. That does not mean that the stigma has no role in gamers' perceptions of themselves. It may be the norm, rather than the exception, that dedicated esports players feel the need to downplay or lie about the amount of time they spend playing (to certain people in their lives) in order to avoid stigmatizing labels [18]. Therefore, this criterion runs the risk of measuring whether or not a given activity is socially acceptable or not instead of evaluating pathological behavior. It is important to note that the APA explicitly states that "conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are not mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict results from a dysfunction in the individual" [1, p. 20]. Given the complicated generational discrepancies in the acceptability and general status of gaming [16], we do not believe that this criterion is an effective measure of potential addiction.

### **3.8 Use of Internet games to escape or relieve negative mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety)**

Relieving oneself from or escaping negative moods is one of the skills that all humans need [20]. The behavior (or drug) that one chooses to use to achieve this end naturally makes a difference. It is unclear that engagement with esports (as leisure, work, or social activity) is necessarily worse than other activities—such as sports, reading, sex, work, etc.—which are commonly used to escape or relieve negative moods. Just as with the criterion above, escapist play might be more reflective of our cultural (or generational) differences rather than disorder and dysfunction. These cultural differences call for further studies [see 21–23].

### **3.9. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of participation in Internet games**

We consider esports a legitimate means for social interaction and career path. Hence, we do not see it problematic to pursue relationships or careers in esports at the cost of other possible paths. Choosing one thing often means sacrificing something else, and there is no fundamental difference between taking risks to pursue a career in esports contra physical sports, acting, painting, or writing. Notwithstanding, we do think of this criterion as worth further examination and scrutiny. Sacrifices of the discussed type should not be taken lightly in the context of any career path.

## **4 CRITIQUE**

We are grateful for the constructive critique that we received from our reviewers. We believe addressing some of that criticism directly will benefit the ongoing discussion. Hence, below we address two specific concerns that our analysis has not touched on yet.

### **4.1 Withdrawal symptoms**

Reviewer-1 is concerned that we have misunderstand some of the APA's criteria. They argue that "withdrawal is not defined as feeling sad or disappointed about not being able to take part in an enjoyable activity (something to which we can all relate), but a more dramatic reaction resembling dysphoria or anhedonia more than just temporary irritability" (personal communication). We think this is a good example of the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 being able to produce too many false positives. We believe that Reviewer-1's wording of the criteria is, in fact, a good point of departure for refining the second criterion's present form in the DSM-5.

### **4.2 What about poker?**

Reviewer-3 is not convinced that the existence of esports is mutually exclusive with the notion of "internet gaming disorder." They raise the analogous case of professional poker's

co-existence with the gambling disorder. This is an excellent point. However, the crucial difference here is that the DSM-5 includes a specific caveat for their gambling disorder: social gambling and professional gambling are not disorders.

According to the DSM-5, social gambling typically occurs with friends or colleagues and lasts for a limited time and with acceptable losses; moreover, in professional gambling risks are limited and discipline is central [3, p. 589]. The lack of similar sensitivity in the description of "internet gaming disorder" is exactly what we are critiquing.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Esports, as a theoretical concept and booming practice, poses serious problems to the notion of "internet gaming addiction" as proposed by the APA. The fact that hundreds, thousands, and millions of hopefuls strive for professional careers in various athletic practices, including esports, makes an interesting case for addiction scholars in general. The current formulation of the proposed criteria does not seem to be well suited to distinguish problematic play from competitive play. This question warrants empirical, longitudinal investigation in order to move beyond speculation. What we have argued here is not that "internet game addiction" might not exist in some form; rather, our argument is that the conceptualization (as presented in the DSM-5) has not been able to keep up with the developments of our modern gaming culture and practice. As a result, dedication might be misread as addiction.

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