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### ENTERTAINMENT

## Video game 'disorder' is real

Just when you thought it was OK to play violent video games like "Carmageddon" and "Manhunt" for endless hours, nanny state thinking wants to limit your Xbox activity.

But it's not about that last-century belief that gamers might turn into violent zombies. This time, the warnings are sobering and serious.

The World Health Organization recently named "impaired control over gaming" an official disorder. Now, two leading Southern California

experts predict the next step will be to call out the problem for what they believe it truly is — an addiction.

"We encounter a new video game addiction every single day," warns Dr. Sina Safahieh, a double board certified child and adult psychiatrist. "Over time it impacts the pleasure center in the brain."

If that sounds like hysteria, it's not. According to studies, there's an alarming increase in people — especially young people — who have difficulty pulling away from video games.

Consider that my review of psychiatrists and psychologists in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties found more than 100 who specialize in what they call "gaming addiction."

Understand, it's not just about cooler games. Techniques to lure gamers into more playing time are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and the reason is simple: More players online for more hours means gaming companies make more money.



**David Whiting**  
Columnist



ANDREW HARRER — BLOOMBERG

The “Fortnite: Battle Royale” video game is displayed on an Apple iPhone. A study by the CDC reports that one-fifth of adolescents spend five or more hours a day on video games or other non-academic computer use.

## Whiting

FROM PAGE 3

“It’s similar to gambling or nicotine addiction,” says Safahieh, who also happens to be the team psychiatrist for the Los Angeles Chargers. “They start losing interest in other activities.”

A study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that one-fifth of adolescents spend five or more hours a day on video games or other non-academic computer use.

Safahieh ticks off the impact: less time socializing with family, poor social skills, lower grades, less exercise, decreased sleep, more aggression.

“One child,” Safahieh confesses, “tried to kill himself when his parents took away his Xbox.”

Another extreme case involved a teen who managed to play for 30 straight hours by peeing in bottles. Safahieh says the boy died from an embolism.

### Money for nothing

Jerry Weichman is a psychologist, adolescent specialist and parenting expert. Working out of Hoag Hospital’s Neurosciences Institute in Newport Beach, he has helped thousands of teens over nearly two decades.

Since the advent of smartphones, Weichman reports, he has witnessed adolescent anxiety and depression jump 60 percent. He blames increased gaming on much of the problem.

“Look behind the scenes,” Weichman suggests. You’ll find more teenagers who feel more insecure and have more stress.

The psychologist calls the current wave of teens “Gen M,” for their obsession with multitasking while using multimedia platforms. “They’re completely tethered 24/7.”

According to a statistics website called Statista, worldwide there were 1.8 billion gamers five years ago. By last year, that figure had nearly doubled.

Experts agree that the number of gamers is increasing due to a variety of factors. One is simply that gaming has gone mainstream and new games are continually being introduced.

But other reasons are about enlisting more customers and piling on monthly fees as well as costly add-ons such as virtual food, virtual clothes and virtual weapons.

To use an old-world analogy, it’s like playing Monopoly but instead of Monopoly money you spend real dollars to buy teeny, tiny plastic homes and hotels.

influence of gaming rather than kids going rogue because of, say, “Grand Theft Auto.”

“Teens are influenced by other teens,” he explains. “Everybody’s a conformist.” And that means more kids now chase more digital breadcrumbs.

In some unexpected ways, studies bear this out. It’s probably no surprise that Centers for Disease Control recommends an hour or less as the optimum amount of daily gaming time.

But it probably comes as a shock that CDC also says a certain amount of game time is actually healthy.

“One hour or less spent on video gaming or other nonacademic computer use may reduce depressive symptoms, suicidal behavior, and being bullied compared with no use.”

That’s right. In some cases, CDC says, limited gaming can provide healthy comfort for teens, and that includes girls and boys.

A decade ago, video gamers were overwhelmingly male. Today, says Safahieh, about 55 percent are male and 45 percent female.

But again, that doesn’t mean more is better.

“Kids are overstimulated,” Weichman says of the digital era. When he was a teenager and wanted to blow off steam, Weichman offers, he shot hoops in his backyard. Today, most teens head for a video game.

After gaming, Weichman likens re-entry into the real world as similar to powering down a helicopter. He allows after he played a military game, he found himself looking in bushes while walking his dog.

Again, this doesn’t mean kids might shoot someone after gaming. But it does mean they likely are pumped with endorphins and that can have ripple effects.

“Dopamine,” reports American Addiction Centers, “is the same neurotransmitter involved in other addictive activities, such as alcohol or drug abuse.”

### Parent support

It’s a dark and stormy night at Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach and Safahieh and Weichman talk to parents about taking away their teenagers’ smartphones.

But parents fret. One mother says taking her daughter’s smartphone would mean not only taking away digital games, it would mean killing her social life.

“This is on you,” Weichman informs his audience. “Life is about balance. Tell them if they get their work done and have had family time, then they get to nav-

One of the most popular current video games is "Fortnite."

I downloaded and jumped on "Fortnite," but quickly jumped off. Here's what I liked: In the gaming world it's what's called a "free-to-play" game. Here's what I didn't like: I needed to buy "V-bucks" to do almost anything.

That's right, boys and girls, the old adage "Nothing's free" is still worth something.

According to Guardian reviewer Keith Stuart, "Fortnite" is popular because "it's free, it's fun and it has a very silly, offbeat sense of humor."

It's also popular because "Fortnite" was shrewd in its marketing. You can play its products with almost anyone over multiple platforms such as Xbox, Nintendo, iPad, Android phone.

### **Addictive aspects**

When it comes to gaming, Weichman allows he's more concerned about the

igate.

"Every kid is different," Weichman points out. "But gaming should not be more than an hour a day. Period."

Change, however, is not easy. YouTube videos show "psycho dads" destroying video games coupled with such ominous threats as, "Get a job."

On one video, a son declares that his job is playing video games. Dad dumps his son's game disks in the backyard and drives a power mower over them. It does not end well.

After the presentation at Hoag, one mom shares her son masks his gaming by immediately switching to homework when a parent approaches.

Weichman explains many kids do the same thing and that the practice even has a name — "tog-gling."

"I'm so happy I'm here," says another mom who declines to be identified. "This is like a parent support group."