

# **What are the ethical implications for video game developers to make addictive games and how can developers help stop video game addiction?**

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This essay is about video game addiction and how it is unethical for developers to be purposely designing games to be addictive. The essay look into how video game addiction can be harmful to players, how addictive games are designed to trick the player into being addicted and proposes Humane Design as a better alternative to creating fun and enjoyable games, as it focuses being good to the player.

## **1 Introduction**

Video game addiction (also known as gaming disorder) can be a serious problem amongst certain gamers, there are many stories that you can find online on message boards about gamers who have gotten addicted to games

and have suffered from it, some even claiming that the addiction has ruined their lives.

This essay will be looking at the ethical implications of developing addictive games, and looking into what makes a addictive game and who is to blame when a player becomes addicted to a game.

## **2 Video game addiction, what is it?**

The World Health Organization's definition for gaming disorder is "Gaming disorder is defined as a pattern of gaming behaviour characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences."

In short video game addiction is a form of substance abuse, in which the player will keep playing a game or multiple games to the point that it starts negatively effecting their life and they will carry on playing despite being aware of the problems.[1, 2]

## **3 What are the negative effects?**

People who are heavily addicted to video games often endure many negative effects and consequences from playing games for long durations.[3]

Some of these effects include:

- physical and mental strain
- loss of sleep
- failing daily life commitments

- Poor personal Hygiene
- Isolation from friends and family
- Feelings of dependency towards games
- obsessive-compulsive disorder
- depression
- anxiety

And in some serious cases it has even lead to death [4].

Video game addiction can be a very serious matter just like any other kind of addiction and substance abuse.[1, 2, 3]

It would be highly unethical for a developer to be creating a product that can have these effects on a player, even if it's on a small number of players.

Developers should avoid creating games that could potentially impact players in these ways.[5] Individuals who are addicted, need to find ways out, and learn to better understand how they might of gotten addicted to avoid getting addicted again.

## **4 ways in which games are designed to be addictive**

In many cases developers create games designed in specific ways to hook the player with addictive game design, with the hope to retain as much of the player's attention, in order to try and profit from the player through different means.[6, 7]

Free to play (F2P) games are designed like this in order to get the player seeing advertisements or buying into in-game items and currencies that cost

real money.[10] [11]

A lot of addictive video games design revolves around the skinner box method which hooks a player into wanting to play more using operant conditioning. [8] Operant Conditioning tricks the player into thinking they need to keep playing in order to hopefully get the next goal or reward the game is offering you.

Things like: loot boxes, unlock-able rewards, collectibles, progression systems...etc play into being skinner box methods as they condition the player to want to play for longer in order to try and get these rewards. [9]

## **5 who's responsibility is it?**

The responsibility for avoiding addiction should primarily fall onto the user as they are in charge of handling the use and time management of the product.

But the responsibility should also be given to the developers, as they decide on how the game might be designed. In the case of addictive games (games that are purposely designed with addictive hooks) developers should take responsibility for potentially harming individuals who develop addictions around the game that they created. These developers should be taking an ethical stand on how their game(s) might affect the player and create counter measures for players with addictive personalities to help them in not becoming addicted.

But there are also cases where it might be completely out of the developers control, as a player might develop an addiction to a game because they are looking for an escape.

In the 1970's Bruce K. Alexander (a Canadian psychologist) and his colleagues did a study on rats known as the Rat Park Experiments, in which they experimented with the consumption of morphine amongst rats, to see if they would get addicted under different circumstances, they found that a rat in a cage by itself with the choice to drink either water or water laced with morphine, would choose to drink the laced water and overdose on the morphine as it had nothing else to do, but a rat that was in a nicer cage that had balls and toys to play with and other rats to interact would almost never use the laced water and would never overdose.[12, 13]

The conclusion of the experiments was that the individual's environment is the cause for addiction.

In the case of video games, this theory of addiction makes sense, if a player played video games as a form of escapism to escape from their bad or inadequate life to a fantasy life with limitless new possibilities, then it's no surprise that they would overplay and give less care to their real life, bringing in the negative effects.

There isn't much a developer can do if a player is stuck in a bad environment, but they can still take it into consideration and try to design and develop exits for the player using Humane Design.[14]

## **6 Humane Design**

Humane Design in video games is all about designing a game that is good to the player. The goal of Humane Design is not to capture as much of the player's time as possible (unlike addictive game design) but instead the goal is to create a worthwhile, fulfilling and engaging experience.[15, 16]

Developing games with Humane Design and being aware of how it might affect the player(s), should in theory create games that are less likely to be addictive with more opportunities for the player to leave the game and go back to their lives, hopefully feeling more satisfied after playing the game instead of feeling dependent and or addicted towards the game.

## 7 Conclusion

The main ethical implications that video game developers might get from developing addictive games is highly addicted players who are negatively affected in different ways from playing games, with the chance of ruining real human lives.

To avoid these ethical implications, developers should strive to create games using Humane Design in order to create a good experience for a player instead of an addictive escape.

A player should feel satisfied and happier after playing a game rather than feeling stuck with no way out.

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