

**Losing Time:**  
**Taking a Look into the Dangers of Excessive Screen Time**

Yeidy Levels and Rachel Kaufman  
Hunter College: CS Education  
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**Overview:**

Content, especially content related to entertainment, has never been more accessible than at this time in history, and teenagers are a huge consumer of this content. Whether they are playing games on their computers/consoles, watching shows on smart TVs, or scrolling through their cell phones, their access to content is endless. Sometimes people get stuck looking through videos or photos on TikTok or Instagram, other times, they may become obsessed with finishing that level on a game they just can't seem to complete, even if it means spending their hard earned cash to get an edge. Thus, new behaviors have developed within society leading to an increased need to consume content. Most frequently this consumption comes through these highly powerful computers we keep in our pockets called smartphones. With such accessibility at our fingertips, it's getting harder and harder to put them down.

Although it is not officially recognized as a behavioral addiction, many people feel excessive use of social media and/or gaming apps can cause serious health issues. According to Zastrow (2017), "some evidence suggests video game addiction can lead to depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder(p. 1)." The neuro-logical evidence is growing that games may act like traditional substances of abuse, with compelling similarities between the effects of drugs and of video games on the minds of users (Zastrow, p.1). This makes sense considering many games will reward players for accomplishing tasks beyond the typical completion of a level. This may lead to a determination to try again until the goal is reached. Despite the lack of an official label, it is important to address this addictive behavior and use strategies to limit screen time. Without limiting our consumption, we run the risk of creating habits which can lead to many difficulties in our daily lives.

**Problem:**

There are several reasons why people can become addicted to the emotions associated with gaming. These emotions are developed in a way that leads us to push through even though chances of losing are high. Zastrow describes how “the reward of winning is not consistent but still obtainable; this only heightens its conditioning power” (p.2). Although you may not win on your first, second, or even your seventh try, you know with repetition you will eventually achieve the objective; “you don’t know when you will be able to kill the adversary or find the treasure that the video game is offering—but there is that moment when you do.” (Zastrow, p.3). That moment of satisfaction reinforces the need for continued gametime, per Nora Volkow (director at the National Institute of Drug Abuse), “because it’s actually something that you did well, dopamine goes up and it keeps you going” (Zastrow, p.2). The reward at the end of the journey is enough to both suck you in and condition you to want to keep going until you win. The trap though is quickly realized when you are presented with the next level or task. This can easily become a slippery slope for people. Kimberly Young (2009) writes, “They become preoccupied with gaming, lie about their gaming use, lose interest in other activities just to game, withdrawal from family and friends to game, and use gaming as a means of psychological escape” (para. 1).

The rise of microtransactions within gaming, or “in game” or “in app” purchases, have also become part of the problem. These are typically associated with games that are free at the point of download and offer players a way to progress more quickly through the game or gain some advantage that otherwise would not be available. These offers are oftentimes a few dollars here or there but over time will add up to a significant cost if not properly monitored. Not only are they spending countless hours playing the game, they now have a new monthly expense.

Yehuda Wacks and Aviv Weinstein (2021) highlight the problem with an abundance of screentime in their article on excessive use of smartphones:

Excessive smartphone use is associated with difficulties in cognitive-emotion regulation, impulsivity, impaired cognitive function, addiction to social networking, shyness and low self-esteem. Medical problems include sleep problems, reduced physical fitness, unhealthy eating habits, pain and migraines, reduced cognitive control and changes in the brain's gray matter volume (para. 2)

They suggest that prolonged use can end up leading to significant changes in the brain and should be further looked into by medical professionals.

According to Dr. Lembke in a article published in the New York times, an addiction is partially described by the three C's: control (using a substance or performing a behavior in ways that would be considered more so than intended), compulsion (an irresistible urge to behave in a certain way, especially against one's conscious wishes), and consequences (continued use in spite of negative social, physical and mental consequences) (Sneed, 2022, para. 3). Controlling screen time can be very difficult for people; it is often used as a means of entertainment when there is a lull in daily activities, such as waiting in line at stores, using the restroom, even when stopped at red traffic lights! Compulsion is seen when people have been so conditioned to use screen time that it happens subconsciously. Peer pressure plays a big hand when it comes to being compulsive at social media or gaming. It's difficult to feel left out, and people are often seen checking their notifications to see if someone has commented on their most recent post or if their gaming partner has logged online. This goes hand in hand with consequences; oftentimes gamers

become increasingly enraged when they lose, but instead of taking time to decompress and come back to the game when they have calmed down, they will continue gaming and negatively impacting their mental health. The consequences of excessive use does not stop people from continuing to engage in screentime.

## **Solution**

The solution to excessive screentime is moderation. The devices we use today have sophisticated settings; people can set a limit to their screentime and the device will automatically quit the application or lock. Parents can also play an important role in monitoring screen time, but as teenagers grow older, parents seem to loosen their restrictions. Jiang (2020) writes, “Most notably, parents of teens ages 13 to 14 are significantly more likely to set screen time restrictions than parents of teens ages 15 to 17” (para. 14). Another way to accomplish limiting screen time would be to remove access to the devices. The saying “out of sight, out of mind” rings true, when we do not physically see our devices, we are not tempted to check them at all hours of the day. Similarly, deleting applications, taking time-outs, and silencing our phones and notifications helps to eliminate the temptation. In cases over overspending, budgeting can help. Users should consider what they deem to be an appropriate amount monthly to spend on their screentime and limit their use once they reach the total.

There is a possibility that limiting or eliminating screentime could cause withdrawal-like symptoms. Furthermore, Dr. Lembke warns that “many people — even those with milder screen overuse — may notice withdrawal symptoms initially, like irritability or insomnia, but that over time they’ll start feeling better” (Sneed, 2022, para. 10). In these cases, replacing screentime

with other healthy activities, such as exercising or reading, can help with these symptoms. Other types of fun that require physical and social activities are recommended, such as joining a club or a team. The time spent in front of a screen can be better spent interacting with friends and loved ones.

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