

Episode 248—Stephanie Diez: Internet Gaming Disorder Among Youth: Research, Policy, and Practice Considerations

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello my name is Louanne Bakk and welcome to inSocialWork. While there are a number of benefits associated with the internet, recent evidence shows that some younger persons develop a preoccupation with certain aspects of this form of technology, particularly online games. Internet Gaming Disorder has become increasingly prevalent in younger persons worldwide and is associated with physical and psychosocial impairments. In this podcast our guest Stephanie Diez talks about the relationship between Internet Gaming Disorder and other addictive behaviors. She discusses how internet gaming is categorized within the DSM-5, Current updates regarding the diagnosis criteria and signs and symptoms of internet gaming withdrawal. The status of social policy initiatives that are designed to address this disorder are described, including current national and international efforts. She concludes with suggestions on how and why social workers are well positioned to address this important public health issue. Stephanie Diez is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Florida International University's program in social welfare. Her research focuses on behavioral addictions in the physical, social, emotional, and psychological damages behavioral addictions can cause to individuals, families and society. She was interviewed in July 2018 by Charles Syms LCSW ACSW and clinical associate professor emeritus here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:02:19] Hi this is Charles Syms and today I'm speaking with Stephanie Diez and we're talking about Internet Gaming Disorder. Hi Stephanie how are you today?

[00:02:27] I'm good Charles, thank you for having me.

[00:02:29] Excellent. So let's start with what drew you to look at or to study Internet Gaming Disorder?

[00:02:35] Well it was really a combination of things. When I was a young undergrad I was in a course that specialized and focus specifically on addictions and in this course we discussed primarily substance use disorders but also did cover behavioral addictions. And it's there where I started looking into what Internet Gaming Disorder was, right? Wasn't call Internet Gaming Disorder then, it was known more as problematic video gaming or video gaming addiction and most of the literature that existed on it, most of the research really looked at the effects of violent video games on adolescent males and didn't so much look into the potential addictiveness of video games or how video game designs might perpetuate pathological gaming if you will or continuous gaming. And so when I realized that there really was a lack of literature there I started digging in a little more and I had a lot of friends that played video games. So I started kind of interviewing them I was doing focus groups before I even knew what a focus group was. And it was then that I started finding out you know some of my friends that are playing video games know others, or there is one in particular actually, that the way they were playing a lot of similarities with a substance use disorder. And that of course we know what the signs and symptoms look like of a substance use disorder, an addiction for substance, because we've studied it and we've seen it for so many years. But since video gaming was a relatively new behavior, right, we didn't really quite know what to call it. And when I say we I mean the research community and clinicians. And so that's when I started saying you know this could actually be something that can affect a lot of people. And so I want to look into this and see how I can help.

[00:04:23] You mentioned that you were looking at this initially from like a substance use disorder kind of lens. How did that move for you? Because obviously it's not a substance. How did that move for you to begin to look at and think about this as in that kind of relationship or that kind of manner?

[00:04:39] Well I think the main difference is that of course is not a substance, that physiological dependence is different. A substance is something we inject, we use in some sort of way whether it's through inhalation, injection, right, orally, and the videogame is not like that. But there are other behaviors that are similar. So the first one that I looked into, and lot of researchers have done this before me but I see similarities, was with gambling. Right?

[00:05:05] Yes.

[00:05:06] And so gambling is a behavior that's also known to be addictive, as we've known for many many years, right, it's been documented for centuries that gambling can be problematic and addictive. So video games share a lot of commonalities with gambling. In fact if you've seen any of the modern day video games, especially puzzle games, right, we're kind of matching shapes. It's very similar to it when you walk into a casino and you pull a lever and you match up the shapes, right? It's essentially the same as pulling a dopamine lever. So you're flooding your brain with this good sensation. I'm pulling the lever and I might win when you're gambling I'm pulling the lever and maybe these coins are going to come out. Well when you're pushing a button and you're playing a video game maybe you're going to win. The same kind of reward behavior is being reinforced with a videogame you're pressing a button and you're getting high points or gaining more experience so you can go to the next level. And so this possibility of achieving something is kind of the sensation of chasing a high, right, and that's how substance abuse can be looked at as well. They say that with substance of the is the first time that you use a substance you're then chasing the high.

[00:06:19] It's a high, you're trying to recreate that experience. Yeah.

[00:06:22] Right. But it can never be replicated in the exact same way. And so that's also similar to how tolerance can begin. So with video games I see that developing in a different sense and through anecdotal, you know, information and then also through what we've been seeing especially in the last decade of research, it's really starting to mimic that association with substance uses and with video gaming, that they both are someone who's chasing that initial high or they're just chasing that feeling of increasing getting better feeling better.

[00:06:54] It's interesting your analogy with the lever like a casino. I was in Las Vegas a number of years ago and I put some money in the one-arm bandit thing and I pulled the lever down and all of a sudden these lights came on and the sounds were blinking, and about a dollar came out.

[00:07:09] Right. Right. All of this reinforcement for one dollar, right?

[00:07:13] Yeah. But I realized at that point that I could see how this could be a problem for someone. Kind of reinforcement or that kind of thing happened to them. So it's very interesting when you describe where you tie those two together.

[00:07:25] It's very stimulating, right?

[00:07:28] Oh, it was very. I got my dollar and I left. So the DSM is always updating and I'm wondering as we start talking about this as a disorder has the DSM the DSM-5, the most recent edition, has that caught up with this disorder and how do they categorize it?

[00:07:44] Right. Well, so in 2013 the criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder was included in the DSM 5. Now it was actually included in Section 3 of the DSM 5 which is a new section they included in this version since it took so many years to go from the DSM 4 TR to the DSM 5. They had a lot of diagnoses that they essentially, the AP stated "We know that these are disorders. We have evidence, we have research that shows that their problem. However were asking for further study to consider them in the formal diagnostic portion of the DSM." And that's where the gaming disorder fits for the DSM 5. But most recently on June 18th of 2018 the World Health Organization released the ICD 11 and that does include Internet Gaming Disorder as a clinical diagnosis and the current APA criteria for the ICD 11's Internet Gaming Disorder are similar. They both are limited to video gaming. They don't include other potentially addictive internet driven behaviors such as social media use which is also been examined in the past decade extensively. And the APA really outlines nine criteria that do also search for similarities with substance use disorders. The first of which is a preoccupation with video gaming. The second condition would be withdrawal symptoms when internet gaming is taken away. Tolerance, meaning you have to play more and more of the game to get the same desired effect, right that's that feeling we're talking about, and video game company are actually very good at increasing tolerance because game developers know how to incentivize players to continue to play to get the previous desired effect, right and they make it more challenging as levels increase. Unsuccessful attempts to control or reduce internet gaming is also part of the criteria. A loss of interest in other hobbies continued excessive use despite the psychosocial problems that are associated with Internet Gaming Disorder. The individual would under-report or deceive others regarding their internet gaming use. They've used games as a form of escapism or they've jeopardize social relationships, occupation or their occasion because of videogaming. So those are really the nine current proposed criteria.

[00:10:05] I see. You've mentioned withdrawal. And I think most people can see the other criterion and can see them pretty clearly. But could you speak a little bit to what internet gaming withdrawal might look like?

[00:10:16] Sure absolutely. So withdrawal can be physiological and psychological. when it comes to substance use disorders we know that the two substances that need medical detoxification every time are alcohol and opiates. However other substances also do cause withdrawal symptoms and that can look like irritability. It can look like aggression. It can look physiological as well. There can be seizures, sweating, nausea and those sensations from videogaming such as also with other substances that aren't alcohol or opiates are more psychosomatic. But your brain tells your body how to react. And so these are withdrawal symptoms that we've seen with video game addiction with Internet Gaming Disorder and there's actually a treatment facility that it's a partial hospitalization facility that takes individuals with video game disorder and Internet Gaming Disorder and other co-occurring issues. They're located in Washington, the state of Washington, it's Heartland Hospital and they have a 14 semi-private bed facility there where they do treat individuals that are going through Internet Gaming Disorder withdrawal.

[00:11:22] I see. If I were a clinician is there a tool or is there a way to measure or to evaluate or assess for Internet Gaming Disorder?

[00:11:32] Yes there are several tools that exist and before we discuss those I think it's also worth mentioning that the proposed criteria by the APA for this disorder does bear the similarity to substance use disorders and I believe that much of this is due to the literature on Errant Gaming Disorder which spans across many disciplines and has been examined as a category of Internet addiction and Internet addiction was categorised or can be categorised as an impulse control disorder or a behavioral addiction. And so when you look at the current measures for Internet Gaming Disorder many of them are built off of these assessment tools and measures for Internet

Addiction. The most famous of which was developed by Dr Kimberly Young and she is a psychologist, a clinical psychologist. She has a website which is netaddiction.com that anyone's free to go to. And there she includes her Internet Addiction Test, the IAT, where it's 20 questions on a Lichert scale that you can ask if you believe someone is experiencing symptoms of Internet Addiction. The questions can be easily molded and have been molded to change the word of the Internet used to video game use and a lot of researchers have done this throughout the years to measure or quantify Internet Gaming Disorder. And so that's one potential resource. The most recent measure that is in line with the DSM 5's criteria is called the Internet Gaming Disorder 20. It's also a 20 item measure on a Lichert scale that can be found online and was developed specifically based off the criteria for the DSM 5. So that's the one that I recommend the most, the IGT20 for short.

[00:13:16] So there's been a lot of discussion in recent years about compulsive behaviors around gaming and I'm wondering, you've talked a little bit about some of the background for yourself and some of the background for understanding how we look at Internet Gaming Disorder. I'm wondering do you think that there are some areas for research going forward to help us understand and be able to make some headway into assessing and treating Internet Gaming Addiction? I guess I'm asking do we need to do more research and where do you think that might be?

[00:13:46] Yes I do believe that we need to do more research and I think where one of the problems lie is that most of the research on Internet Gaming Disorder has been done internationally and we don't have a lot of information on what Internet Gaming Disorder in the US looks like. And this is for a number of reasons. You know in other countries, right, let's take China for example, right? The other country with a very large GDP. China considers Internet Gaming Disorder as one of the nation's top public health concerns to the extent that their government has actually created laws so that no Internet cafes or gaming labs which are where you would go to use the Internet or a high speed computer in the area. These laws don't permit the Internet cafes or gaming labs to operate within 200 metres around schools. If you were to open one of these companies, one of these businesses, you would have strict licensing procedures to follow. There's a control for business hours and restrictions of minors entry into the Internet cafes. They also install what they call anti addiction's software. Essentially the software will shut down the computer after about four hours of game play and force the user to log off for half an hour before they can return.

[00:15:07] Wow.

[00:15:07] Right. So China's taken this other point because there's a number of reasons why it became a public health concern. The main reason is they saw a lot of the youth playing Internet games and not going to school, not meeting their requirements at home, not seeking employment so they weren't contributing back to their communities, back to society. And it's such a big problem in China that the government also created treatment facilities. The boot camp style treatment facilities is where if parents feel their children have this problem and they are assessed for Internet Gaming Disorder and meet the criteria they're sent to these boot camps for free the government will pay for it to help them recover or treat them or this issue. And they're not the only ones. So China is just one of the first countries to do this but in South Korea it's also a very big problem. Currently South Korea has what they call an Internet Addiction Prevention Program in place and that's in Every single public school so it's a national model where children are taught how to prevent Internet Gaming Disorder or Internet Addiction if you will there's an overlap there. So that when they have more autonomy, when they're not in schools that she during the summer months, they're able to find alternatives or know how to spend their free time instead of just playing video games or spending time online. And in 2014, so about four years ago, over 20 countries gathered together at the first ever International Congress on Internet Addiction Disorders and that's when government delegates discussed national and government initiatives to address the topic of Internet Gaming Disorder or

Internet Addictions. And so Germany, Netherlands and Australia were among the developed countries that had government funds allotted for the treatment of these Internet Addiction or Internet Gaming Disorders. So for any youth or adults who were suffering from Internet Gaming Addiction who met the criteria and who wanted to seek the treatment they were able to do so and their community mental health centers similar to what we have now for substance use disorders throughout our country. Now of course at this Congress the country that was missing or didn't have any government delegates was the U.S. We actually had Dr. Kimberly Young who I mentioned earlier developed the internet addiction test and represent and discuss what's going on in the U.S. from her clinical perspective.

[00:17:28] I am amazed. I guess I did not, it's not that I guessed. I did not know how much work is being done in this particular area. I'm just flabbergasted. Thank you for the least enlightening me in this area.

[00:17:38] Sure absolutely. I can speak a little more on that if you'd like.

[00:17:41] Well I know, or I understand that you're doing some research in this particular area. I'd be curious about the research you're doing. What are you trying to accomplish or what are you looking in if you've got some early feedback or some early findings, I was wondering if you could share those with our audience also.

[00:17:57] Oh sure absolutely. I'd love to. Personally as well as a clinician and a researcher throughout the years in my work with various communities here in where I live in Miami and also beyond. I've collaborated with many stakeholders such as the United Way and the Department of Children and Families to provide outreach education and prevention and behavioral health issues such as Internet Gaming Disorder in at-risk populations. When I was attaining my Master's degree in Social Work and continuing with this multifaceted community work, in discussion with all of these stakeholders we found that there is a big gap in resources and research and information on what Internet Gaming Disorder looks like and some of the clinicians who have really taken it upon themselves such as Dr. Kimberly Young who's in the U.S. focus on treatment. We also have Dr. Douglas Gentile who's at the Ohio State University and he looks more at the epidemiology on a larger scale of the disorder. But no one was really providing direct resources from what we know so far. And so I took it upon myself in 2013 to begin a nonprofit organization called Reboot and Recover. And we do devote ourselves to prevention research and treatment of this issue. So it's been through my community work with Reboot and Recover. We've had focus groups. We've talked about ways in which parents are currently dealing with this issue. It allowed me to build community infrastructure through collaboration and partnerships and that led to one of the first preliminary empirical studies looking at Internet Gaming Disorder among children in the South Florida area and from that study what we looked at were children from ages eight to 18 years old and among the three different age groups, we divided it by elementary, middle and high school students. And we hypothesized that the male high school students would have the highest score for Internet Gaming Disorder because that's what the literature showed us. However our results found that elementary school aged males have the highest score for Internet Gaming Disorder. So these young children have a higher score and are spending more time playing video games than high school adolescent males which are the population that usually most researchers are concerned with and looking at. So that could be for a number of reasons and that kind of makes you think where future research should go into. I mean a couple of questions that came into our mind immediately are why are these children playing for so many hours, what environments and mental factors are affecting this, how do they have access to the technology, things that you kind of consider, is social economic status a factor. And the sample of youth in this preliminary study was a community based sample. We were with children who were attending health fairs throughout South Florida area in mainly lower socioeconomic status neighborhoods.

[00:21:00] Wow. I'm an old child welfare worker so there's a number of things that popped into my head when you start talking about what we're in fact seeing is, are younger individuals who are much higher on that particular scale. So it'll be interesting to see your further research as you begin to drill down into this and take a long hard look at this. Given your research, do you have any thoughts about how that might be important for social work?

[00:21:22] Oh yes absolutely. So social workers, we are uniquely positioned in school systems, in hospitals, in community agencies. We're in the centers where people come for help when they're normally on their last leg. And so for social workers to be aware of what Internet Gaming Disorder looks like, of how it can affect children, families, society, is extremely important because they're at the frontline of what can either be primary prevention or intervention. So there's just various issues that arise from this disorder such as a decrease in academic or job performance. So if you were a school social worker and had a student come to your office because they are not being present, right, They have a lot of truancy and it seems like something might be occurring but they've checked all the environmental factors and it seems like nothing's in the home. Well another way to screen or to discuss with them is perhaps if they have any symptoms of Internet Gaming Disorder or if they are suffering or dealing with this issue, which is something that might have never crossed their minds before.

[00:22:26] I see. Again, I am just amazed. You have done a great deal to enlighten me on this particular area of professional practice that I had not considered before and I was wondering as we start moving towards a close, is there something in particular that you would like our audience to know or to think about when considering Internet Gaming Addiction, either from a practice or research or even a policy issue, given some of the things you said earlier about other countries being significantly in front of us as far as policy is concerned how we might think about beginning to address this particular area.

[00:23:05] Absolutely. The Pew Research Center is an excellent resource and for the last decade and a half they have conducted an ongoing survey on the way Americans view the Internet and how they use the Internet. And they provide great data because they also look at adolescence. And I think America, we tend to view the impact of Internet and other digital technologies in largely positive ways, and they are largely positive. However most recently the Pew Research Center found earlier this year that although still a vast majority, about 85 percent, say the Internet is good, right, The Internet provides us with a lot of assistance. Fifteen percent are now starting to say "you know what I see a lot of bad in the Internet. I see a lot of bad in playing video games." So video game usage, Internet usage recreationally is not a behavior that should be demonized. However one should be aware of the potential for this behavior to become all encompassing, to become problematic. To see how it can affect individuals. One of the very first warning signs is a decrease in academic or school performance. Someone stopped showing up to school, their grades start to decline. And that has a lot to do with the preoccupation because now they're physically and emotionally preoccupied with video gaming behavior. It becomes the epicenter of their thought process and everything is either about planning or strategizing for video game playing, fantasizing about video game playing. Essentially every effort goes into figuring out how to spend more time and resources on video gaming and social workers, I think especially, and society in general, knows what addiction looks like. Addiction to substances, alcohol, drugs are very often shown in the media. We see it in movies we watch, we here in the news we have celebrities that are going through it. So if you can just reframe a little bit of that thought process and say "hey, you know this person can be addicted to a drug they can be addicted to alcohol they can also be addicted to Internet video gaming and it can affect families and societies especially with issues and social functioning." So if someone is spending less time with their family and friends and spending more time focusing on a video game or isolated, preoccupied with the Internet. This is an experience that

truly affects people. Historically males have played more video games and females but that's beginning to switch. So it's also an issue that can happen to women and it's actually been an issue that's happened so often for men that they have gotten into marital issues because of excessive video game playing because they have internet gaming disorder that the phrase "Gamer Widow" has emerged. And Gamer Widow is this nomenclature for someone whose partner is so absorbed by video gaming that they leave their spouses. It's total abandonment both physically and emotionally. And that phrase of Gamer Widow is often used within the culture of self-help support groups, which there are self-help support groups for people who have Internet Gaming Disorder. They are effective and they are free. Both conveniently and ironically however you want to see it. The support groups are online. It's called Online Gamers Anonymous, or OGAnon, and it's a 12 step based self-help support group modeled off the foundations from Alcoholics Anonymous. And the group was founded in 2002. They have the same purpose as most support groups, which is to share their experience, strength and hope, to help and support each other's recovery and to heal from problems resulting from excessive video gaming. Whether it's computer video or console, any kind of gaming. So it's important to know that help exists, not just free clinical help but there is information out there and there's a lot we don't know. There's a lot of research that we have to see how environmental factors can affect video gaming, how continued use of the Internet will affect us as adults and whether the behaviors continue into adulthood. Now there was a national longitudinal study that looked at the effects of screen time on children. And this is a 30 year old study, so it didn't necessary look at video gaming because it wasn't such a prevalent issue 30 years ago. But it looked at screen time and as the waves continued with longitudinal research they began to include measures from video gaming and what they found was that video gaming behaviors that begin with children followed them into adulthood. So if they're playing five, six, seven, eight hours a day as children they're more than likely going to continue these behaviors into adulthood. And we know that if you're playing five to six, seven hours a day you might have interpersonal relationships, Yes. You're also more than likely being sedentary because video gaming is a sedentary behavior and although there are some video games where you're physically active, research has also shown that these video games don't have a higher potential for addiction. The ones have a higher potential for addiction are massive multiplayer online roleplaying games, the first person shooter games or puzzle games, and all these games are played while being sedentary which of course increases the risk for obesity and all the related health risks that come with it, in a nation that is plagued by obesity.

[00:28:18] This has been fascinating. This discussion has been fascinating. I have learned so much I'm sure many of our listeners who have not considered this before are just as enlightened by our discussion today. Stephanie Diez, I look forward to hearing more from you as your work in this area continues to progress, as you move forward in your career and studying and looking at Internet Gaming Disorder.

[00:28:41] Excellent thank you so much Charles.

[00:28:43] Thank you for your time.

[00:28:44] Thank you.

[00:28:44] You've been listening to Stephanie Diez's discussion on Internet Gaming Disorder among youth. I'm Louanne Bakk, your host for this episode. Please join us again at inSocialWork.

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