



REAL LIFE

MARCH 2015

SOLUTIONS

Candy Crushing: The Dangerous Mini-Casino in Your Pocket

We've all done it: sat in a meeting or in the office, at church or at a school function, staring at the screens of our smartphones. Sometimes it's to read e-mail or a text from a friend. But for many, it's because they're playing an online game.

We don't often associate those online games with gambling. But what happens when the lines start to blur, and real money becomes involved? Suddenly the cost of "free" games becomes expensive, and some individuals find themselves unable to control their use.

Is Mobile Gaming the Same as Gambling?

Gambling is intertwined with American culture. Take this year's Super Bowl: the American Gaming Association estimates that nearly \$4 billion was bet illegally on the game. Many people are shocked to learn that fantasy football is a felony offense in many states. Internet gambling is illegal, except in three states: Nevada, Delaware, and New Jersey. But online games are widely available and largely unregulated.

Gambling and playing games are thought to be relaxing leisure activities, in part because they can also stimulate dopamine, a brain chemical that makes us feel good. But this can lead us to associate gaming with escaping from stress, or to self-medicate to avoid emotional or physical pain. As we become increasingly dependent on our smartphones, the potential for accessing a feel-good burst of dopamine rests in our palms.

The Dangers of 'Freemium' Games – like Candy Crush Saga

The types of games many people play on their phones are "freemium" (a combination of "free" and "premium"). These are apps you can download or stream in platforms like Facebook, and they're free to play. You can also purchase virtual goods with real money. These virtual goods enable you to return to the game immediately if you fail a task, or buy tools that will enhance your gameplay and make you more successful at completing those tasks.

14% of social gamers play at work for at least one hour per day.

Problem Gambling Help for All Ages

Unlike casino or lottery requirements, users only have to be 13 years old to use Facebook or download freemium apps. It's important we start the conversation with youth about online gaming and gambling, just like we do with drugs and alcohol.

Problem gambling is a legitimate addiction. The more people are aware of the signs and symptoms, the sooner they can seek help. This is critical because less than 8% of those with symptoms of problem gambling seek treatment, due in part to a lack of awareness and understanding, fewer resources, and public perception that gambling addiction isn't a real problem.

There are healthy ways to enjoy games without letting your enjoyment become an issue in your life:

- Give yourself a time and/or money limit and stick to it.
- Don't let gaming, whether digitally or in a traditional casino, distract from living a full life.
- Understand that it's entertainment—you can take it, or leave it.
- Always hope to win, but expect to lose.

If it seems like any form of gambling or gaming is taking up greater amounts of your time; if you borrow money to play; or if you keep buying back in to maintain gameplay, these are signs that there may be a problem. Co-occurring mental health issues like alcohol or substance abuse and anxiety increase the likelihood of gambling addiction. Help is available, and treatment works.

Source: <http://www.goodtherapy.org/>
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March is National Problem Gambling Awareness Month, a campaign to educate the public about the warning signs of problem gambling and promote help and hope. If you or someone you know needs help with a gambling problem, visit the National Council on Problem Gambling at www.ncpgambling.org.

For related articles and support, visit your Better Living web resource at www.efr.org/myeap. To access EAP services, call 800.327.4692 or TTY 877.542.6488.



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