However, researchers from the University of Oxford, Cardiff University and the University of Reading argue that playing these games is unlikely to trigger compulsive behaviour. This is the way in which a person does something persistently and repetitively, despite not always getting a reward or pleasure from their actions. The researchers suggest that very few people who take part have symptoms that can be directly linked with internet gaming. They urge caution in creating a new behavioural addiction that is based on playing games online.

Some Asian countries already recognise addiction to computer gaming as an official disorder. The government of South Korea for example estimates that about 680,000 children between the ages of 10 and 18 play videogames compulsively.

Counsellors have been recruited to treat those at risk of internet gaming addiction, especially young men. In Hong Kong, gaming dependency is blamed for poor academic performance, family problems and mental health issues.

Studies carried out largely in these countries indicate that compulsive gaming affects pathways in the brain. These pathways are triggered when gamers are totally absorbed in what they are doing. Research has suggested that gaming changes how areas of the brain respond to outside influences. This has been likened to the impact of drugs on an addict's nervous system.

Internet-based games are widely popular among adults in parts of Europe, the US and Canada. Yet Western countries have been more cautious than those in Asia in how they respond to internet gaming. The issue is being investigated by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations agency tasked with improving international public health. The WHO has proposed that ‘gaming disorder’ is included in the next edition of its International Classification of Diseases. This is the global standard that countries consult when they report and categorise diseases.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has yet to identify internet gaming addiction as an official psychiatric condition. Instead, this leading authority on mental health has called for experts to carry out new and more thorough research. Any evidence submitted to the APA will help it decide whether to include the condition in its official information guide to mental disorders. The APA has also outlined a checklist of nine symptoms that could potentially be used to diagnose people. Social withdrawal, losing life opportunities as a result of gaming, and anxiety when gamers are unable to play for whatever reason, are among the
features on the APA’s list that was published in 2013. Anyone who has five of the symptoms would qualify for a diagnosis. But the APA says they must also feel distressed enough for psychiatrists to distinguish them from anyone just passionate about gaming.

There is still much uncertainty and disagreement among experts about overuse of online games, and how to measure symptoms. Generally two opposing viewpoints have been adopted. Some agree the disorder does potentially exist as defined by the APA’s checklist of symptoms. However, others argue that treating internet gaming as abnormal presents a problem. They say not enough is understood yet to know if it differs from other hobbies such as being a sports fan. The risk is that classifying internet gaming as a mental disease could lead to other activities being classified as mental diseases too.

The researchers from the University of Oxford, Cardiff University and the University of Reading set out to produce new evidence using the APA’s list of symptoms. They analysed data on 19,000 men and women living in the UK, the US, Canada and Germany. More than half of these people had played internet games recently.

The study is understood by the researchers to be the first large-scale project of its kind. It shows that links to physical, social and mental health issues were very mixed. Those who took part in the study were three times more likely to increase playtime to maintain their excitement levels than risk social relationships.

More than two out of three people who played games did not report any symptoms of internet gaming disorder. Only a small proportion of gamers detailed behaviour that could show a link between play and possible addiction. Indeed, only 1% of the 18 to 24-year-olds and a tiny proportion (0.5%) of those aged 18 and over showed signs of being hooked on internet games. This was less than half the reported rates for gambling, and indicates that internet-based games may be significantly less addictive than gambling.

The researchers conclude that people must be cautious in blaming internet gaming for addictive behaviours. They highlight that as many as one million American adults would in theory be classed as addicted. This is according to the symptoms on the proposed AHA checklist.

However, they found no evidence that suggested a clear link to changes in health or quality of life. Therefore including gaming addiction in the AHA’s official manual of mental disorders could do more harm than good.

They say more evidence for the effects of internet gaming on behaviour and health must first be produced. More high-quality studies and robust standards of research are also needed in this area.

The study authors point out that most of the evidence about gaming addiction to date in social and clinical sciences is exploratory. This means researchers present an idea, then test the reaction once they have collected the data. They
say that trials should instead be carried out on a confirmatory basis. This would involve experts stating in advance how they plan to collect and analyse the data before it is seen by the researchers.

They believe that more confirmatory studies should be carried out into the impact of internet gaming on players. Until then, it will be a challenge to get any accurate or conclusive answers.

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American Journal of Psychiatry. Published online: 4 November 2016.