

# The good, the bad & the gamer

One way to understand and tackle problematic internet use is for “the oldies” to get online and have a go.

By **Jocelyn Brewer**.

**T**he behaviour of teens over recent years has been changing, most would claim not for the better.

Teachers and parents bemoan the rise of problematic behaviours in the classroom, playground and in the home.

The “naughty” and disengaged boys show up across the state in welfare and discipline meetings, as the system struggles to find appropriate ways of engaging them in learning, while providing discipline structures that support this engagement in the school community rather than excluding them from it.

While much has been written on problematic externalising behaviours such as conduct disorder and oppositional defiance disorder, and many strategies and programs written to cater for the support needs of these students, there are a range of students just as disengaged quietly lurking in classrooms – gamers.

By gamer I don’t mean spending a few hours mastering *Angry Birds* or the 97 per cent of young people who use a variety of consoles to play a range of strategy and educational games. Serious gamers are a new web-subculture who take the online realm of game playing more seriously than reality. They inhabit the immersive environment more frequently and energetically than in real life (IRL).

While game playing is a pursuit that is several thousand years old, the specific language and culture of the internet is only a few decades old; the nexus of these two form the online computer gaming realm which has emerged as this decade’s freshest area of debate and investigation.

The real interest is building not just on the phenomenon of internet “addiction” or problematic internet use (PIU), but on the way games can be harnessed to engage us in solving real world problems, while simultaneously providing a psychological experience that is positive, enhances relationships and builds confidence and self-efficacy in overcoming challenges within the game.

It is easy to dismiss gaming as time wasting, and unproductive. Just as in the early 1960s it was easy to denounce the Beatles for their poppish



music and moppish hairdos. Gaming is today’s Beatles, a phenomenon that generally younger people will fervently embrace, while older folks will stand back looking confused.

There is no stereotypical gamer, in that gaming is becoming so widespread, and the games so diverse and ubiquitous that there is no longer a single profile that accurately describes the population. The kids we see with PIU in schools tend to be those who have become betrothed to a particular type of role playing or shooter game that is played online with massive numbers of people, all in the same game, playing in the same realm, continuously.

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are often maligned by superficial commentary on a pending epidemic of zombie kids hooked on these diversions like a drip (some have even drawn comparisons to heroin and crack cocaine).

In fact MMOG’s provide exactly the kind of positive psychological environment required to harness their strengths and develop skills in problem solving, strategic thinking, collaboration and even hard work! While we hand out laptops to year 9 students in NSW public schools, many teachers struggle to keep up with creating absorbing learning activities that compete with the epic challenges and adventures found within MMOG realms.

The gamer in today’s classroom is not a behavioural problem, he (most likely a boy, but increasingly girls) is probably asleep at his desk, having spent until the early morning “in game”, “levelling up” and advancing through infinite layers of the game’s architecture (which is being designed by developers as fast as gamers can play their way through it) in collaboration with gamers from around the world, forming alliances and friendships while projecting a

true sense of who they believe they can be.

At the very pointy end of gaming, is pathological and extreme overuse in which significant negative impacts are experienced when adolescents cannot function IRL, like withdrawing from a drug they experience increased anxiety, somatic disturbance and sometimes aggression and violence. These cases of PIU while rare are increasing, and require intervention from psychologists and counsellors with an experience and understanding of the gamer’s world.

Teaching 21st century learners also requires teaching 21st century skills in regulating their use of screen time. Much like with a balanced diet, determining what is a healthy amount of screen time for adolescents of

various ages is important in preventing an increase in extreme PIU cases.

Rather than outlawing gaming and gaming culture, consider what games have to teach us. Harnessing these lessons into curricula will turn a harbinger of a computer zombie epidemic into a tangible method for seeking solutions to some of the serious issues which face the planet.

If parents and teachers are feeling isolated and confused by the rapid advances in technology and “how it all works” then the best thing they could do is get online and “play”, embrace the essence of what playing a game is and feel free to learn, discover and enjoy.

If parents give their kids the technology, they need to be willing to sit side by side with them and join in the game. Just the same way they would kick a soccer ball around the yard with them. There is no turning the internet off so, if you can’t beat them, join them – online.

Further reading: Jane McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* or internet search “serious games movement”, “gamification”. n

Jocelyn Brewer is a provisional psychologist working as a school counsellor in South Western Sydney and a founding member of [www.niira.org.au](http://www.niira.org.au). Her 2009 psychology thesis studied the impact of online gaming on learning and leisure in a cohort of year 10 boys.

## Learning to flick a

The new three Rs of leadership are reacting, ranking and recommending, writes **Mark Sparvell**.

**W**hen I deliver professional learning for educators, I am sometimes asked about how I find the time to keep up with the exponential growth of information. I’m almost embarrassed to say, I probably don’t invest any more time than most other professional educators.

I do sample an extremely broad sweep of information very efficiently, though. One of the e-routines I have established for myself once a week is to engage in

a quick scan of information streams connected to educational issues both in Australia and overseas.

These e-sources are scheduled into my Google and Outlook calendars as recurring appointments and the various links are always in the appointment details. Each week I am reminded to invest in professional knowledge building and it doesn’t matter where in the world I may be or what device I may be using.

I flick through the Twitter feeds from key education influencers that are sent to my phone, scan the emailed one-page digest from [www.palnet.edu.au](http://www.palnet.edu.au) and skim read the five or six online sources of credible education journals ... much of this is achieved while walking the dog in the early morning or cool evening. My dog has yet to comment that it doesn’t have my full attention.