#5 Creepy Ways Video Games Are Trying to Get You Addicted

By David Wong | March 08, 2010 | 5,051,065 views

#2. Keeping You Pressing It... Forever

Now, the big difference between our Skinner box hamster and a real human is that we humans can get our pellets elsewhere. If a game really was just nothing but clicking a box for random rewards, we'd eventually drop it to play some other game. Humans need a long-term goal to keep us going, and the world of addictive gaming has got this down to a science. Techniques include...

**Easing Them In:**

First, set up the “pellets” so that they come fast at first, and then slower and slower as time goes on. This is why they make it very easy to earn rewards (or level up) in the beginning of an MMO, but then the time and effort between levels increases exponentially. Once the gamer has experienced the rush of leveling up early, the delayed gratification actually increases the pleasure of the later levels. That video game behavior expert at Microsoft found that gamers play more and more frenetically as they approach a new level.

**Eliminating Stopping Points:**

The easiest way is to just put save points far apart, or engage the player in long missions (like WoW) that, once started, are difficult to get out of without losing progress.

But that can be frustrating for gamers, so you can take the opposite approach of a game like New Super Mario Bros. Wii, where you make the levels really short so it's like eating potato chips. They're so small on their own that it doesn't take much convincing to get the player to grab another one, and soon they've eaten the whole bag.
Somewhere in that bag is an angry dinosaur and a kidnapped princess.

By the way, this is the same reason a person who wouldn't normally read a 3,000-word article on the Internet will happily read it if it's split up into list form. Are you ignoring boobies to read this? I've done my job!

Play It Or Lose it:

This is the real sick move. Why reward the hamster for pressing the lever? Why not simply set it up so that when he fails to press it, we punish him?

Behaviorists call this "avoidance." They set the cage up so that it gives the animal an electric shock every 30 seconds unless it hits the lever. It learns very very fast to stay on the lever, all the time, hitting it over and over. Forever.

"Get back to Excitebike!"

Why is your mom obsessively harvesting her crops in Farmville? Because they wither and rot if she doesn't. In Ultima Online, your house or castle would start to decay if you didn't return to it regularly. In Animal Crossing, the town grows over with weeds and your virtual house becomes infested with cockroaches if you don't log in often enough. It's the crown jewel of game programming douchebaggery--keep the player clicking and clicking and clicking just to avoid losing the stuff they worked so hard to get.

All Of The Above:

Each of those techniques has a downside and to get the ultimate addictive game, you combine as many as possible, along with the "random drop" gambling element mentioned before (count how many of these techniques are in WoW). They get the hamster running back and forth from one lever to another.

If the levers are far away, they may drive their adorable cars from one lever to another.

So What's The Problem?

We asked earlier if the item collection via obsessive clicking could be called a "game." So that raises the question: What is a game?

Well, we humans play games because there is a basic satisfaction in mastering a skill, even if it's a pointless one in terms of our overall life goals. It helps us develop our brains (especially as children) and to test ourselves without serious consequences (if you fail). This is why we humans reward us with:

Choosing to "Like" Cracked has no side effects, so what's the worst that could happen?
This is why I haven’t included games like Guitar Hero in this article. They’re addictive, sure, but in a way everybody understands. It’s perfectly natural to enjoy getting good at something. Likewise, competitive games like Modern Warfare 2 are just sports for people who lack athleticism. There’s no mystery there; everybody likes to win.

But these “hit the lever until you pass out from starvation” gaming elements stray into a different area completely. As others have pointed out, the point is to keep you playing long after you’ve mastered the skills, long after you’ve wrung the last real novel experience from it. You can’t come up with a definition of ‘fun’ that encompasses the activity of clicking a picture of a treasure chest with your mouse a thousand times.

This is why some writers blasted Blizzard when WoW introduced a new “achievement” system a couple of years ago. These are rewards tied to performing random pointless tasks, over and over again (such as, fishing until you catch a thousand fish). No new content, no element of practice, or discovery, or mastery was included. Just a virtual treadmill.

Of course, game developers (and various commenters, I’m sure) would correctly point out that nobody is making the players do it. Why would humans voluntarily put themselves in laboratory hamster mode? Well, it’s all about...

### #1. Getting You To Call the Skinner Box Home

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Notice that pants are not necessary for job satisfaction.

Do you like your job?

Considering half of you are reading this at work, I’m going to guess no. And that brings us to the one thing that makes gaming addiction—and addiction in general—so incredibly hard to beat.

As shocking as this sounds, a whole lot of the “guys who failed all of his classes because he was playing WoW all the time” horror stories are really just about a dude who simply didn’t like his classes very much. This was never some dystopian mind control scheme by Blizzard. The games just filled a void.

Why do so many of us have that void? Because according to *everything* expert Malcolm Gladwell, to be satisfied with your job you need three things, and I bet most of you don’t even have two of them:

**Autonomy (that is, you have some say in what you do day to day);**

**Complexity (so it’s not mind-numbing repetition);**

**Connection Between Effort and Reward (i.e. you actually see the awesome results of your hard work).**

Most people, particularly in the young gamer demographics, don’t have this in their jobs or in any aspect of their everyday lives. But the most addictive video games are specifically geared to give us all three—or at least the illusion of all three.

**Autonomy:**

You pick your quests, or which Farmville crops to plant. Hell, you even pick your own body, species and talents.

**Complexity:**

Players will do monotonous grinding specifically because it doesn’t feel like grinding. Remember the complicated Tier Armor/Frost Emblem dance that kept our gamer clicking earlier?

**Connection Between Effort and Reward:**

This is the hit rate. When you level up in WoW amousemove mouse of random limit shoots out of

Choosing to “Like” Cracked has no side effects, so what’s the worst that could happen?
Wait, what was I saying again?

Heroin: It's pretty much WoW in a syringe.

This is what most of us don't get in everyday life—quick, tangible rewards. It's less about instant gratification and more about a freaking sense of accomplishment. How much harder would we work at the office if we got this, and could measure our progress toward it? And if the right shot from our crutch?

The beauty of it is it lets games use the lectium to their advantage. As we discussed elsewhere, there's a "work to earn the right to play" aspect of World of Warcraft, where you grind or "farm" for gold for the right to do the cool stuff later. The tedious nature of the farming actually adds to the sense of accomplishment. And it also helps squish any sense of guilt you might have had about neglecting school, work or household chores to play the game. After all, you did your chores—the 12 hours you spent farming for gold last Tuesday was less fun than mowing the fucking lawn. Now it's time for fun.

So What's The Problem?

Video game designer Erin Hoffman said it perfectly: 'Addiction is not about what you DO, but what you DON'T DO because of the replacement of the addictive behavior.' She was talking about how the attraction of a simple flash game like Bejeweled depends entirely on how badly you want to avoid doing the work you have open in the other window.

The terrible truth is that a whole lot of us begged for a Skinner Box we could crawl into, because the real world's system of rewards is so much more slow and cruel than we expected it to be. In that, gaming is no different from other forms of mental escape, from sports fandom to moonshine.

Choosing to "Like" Cracked has no side effects, so what's the worst that could happen?
And let's face it; if you think WoW is addictive, wait until you see the games they're making 10 years from now. They're only getting better at what they do.

David Wong is the Editor of Cracked.com and the author of the comedy horror novel John Dies at the End, currently banned in 72 countries.
Want to write articles like this for Cracked? Just go here and say you want in. No experience necessary, just the ability to write things people like to read.

Wong wasn't kidding about his love for video games. Check out more of his exhaustive research into the subject in The 7 Commandments All Video Games Should Obey and The Next 25 Years of Video Games.

And stop by our Top Picks (Updated Today! Shit!) to see why people are addicted to booties.

And don't forget to follow us on Facebook and Twitter to get dick jokes sent straight to your news feed.
SkunkWerks
08-09-2013 10:48 AM
"You can't come up with a definition of "fun" that encompasses the activity of clicking a picture of a treasure chest with your mouse a thousand times."

Evidently you can.

Reply

Theseus138
07-25-2013 9:37 PM
I think I will be restating a common response to this article by saying this, but...Life in all it's facets is something that can quickly become monotonous. Whether it be traveling the world (or) know I wish I could become bored of this or having all the riotous and filthy sex you ever wanted (as a veteran porn star). This article is more about the sneak theftery of the corporations and the unethical products they are marketing. I believe or hope at least that everyone knows that you can literally become addicted to anything. I have no guilt about playing video games, but of course you do have to moderate yourself. Video gamers on the whole cannot be generalised because they are not one type of person (at least not anymore). There are so many genres of game out there that the typical "gamer" literally can come from any social stratum. What is s***y is the fact that people are more interested in pointing the flaws of other people while completely missing the point that it's not just gaming companies operating with this kind of population subverting mentality. It is sad that we would rather say everyone else around us sucks and it's their fault and they are bad people/dots blah blah blah etc.... Whilst corporations (as I said it "**", THE MAN) are completely taking over us psychologically. Maybe that's just another flaw or the human psyche as well... Anyways done with rant... Just remember... at least you don't have to deal with the Mongois... yeeesh... Back that noise.

Reply

_overwritten
07-25-2013 9:43 PM
"Now, there's no way they can create enough exploration or story to keep you playing for thousands of hours."

This article, of course, was written roughly a year-and-a-half before Skyrim was released. Roughly a year and a half after Skyrim was released, I'm still playing the frickin' thing.

Reply

ElectricPancake
07-04-2013 3:50 PM
Most of the games shown here were purposely built to be addictive. (WoW, Borderlands, Farmville), I can see where the author is going with this but I do consider there to be a big difference between games that are designed to be games and games that are designed to be money machines or addictive on purpose.

Reply

Donarsson
06-28-2013 11:09 PM
It's funny how all 5 of these ways are really all the same, explained slightly different each time.

Reply

Choosing to "Like" Cracked has no side effects, so what's the worst that could happen?
It's called self control. I use to be addicted to buying guns... which, in terms of expense, is between illegal drugs and cars. I eventually sold all of them except the first handgun I ever bought and one shotgun, but by then I had 3 maxed out credit cards and nothing in my savings. Didn't blame anyone for it of course, and I learned to better control myself. I am wondering though if the firearms industry use similar tactics.

Microsoft and their Skin-enigmas

"Play it or lose it." Exactly what Microsoft was thinking with the Xbox One.

The human mind is a complex thing, but in the end your base desires can cause you to spend time on pointless pursuits. It's like watching pornography, it may feel good, but is it worth it?

"And it gets worse" worse add with ridiculously hot off chick displayed right below. That's about as simple as manipulation can get. Because apparently hot chick + creepy game = good game.

Is there a "Skinners Box" simulation game out there? I want to play it.

I've been playing games since Atari. While I spend all my time on a computer, I am also a developer by trade and hobby. I've never had that gaming addiction myself but can see how others might. I also am more the type to just go have some drinks at the bar when I go to the casino with friends. Gambling is addictive and it's sad that most games try to follow this formula to make up for a lack of gripping content. Psychological exploitation at its most evil. I like how they say, "we don't make em play it". That's similar to a drug dealer saying," I don't make him take the drugs." Yes, you do, it's called enabling and it's a horrible thing to have in the entertainment industry. What ever happened to making fun games, no matter how short?

Choosing to "Like" Cracked has no side effects, so what's the worst that could happen?
BigLunchMoney
04-01-2013 6:41 PM

Whatever I needed to procrastinate in high school, I would usually drink beer and play video games. I’m in college now and to burn time I usually smoke weed and read cracked articles. I’m guessing that when I’m 40 I’ll be tripping acid whilst masturbating to hard-core interracial porn (just a guess). Point being, pick your poison and embrace your fantasy because it’s better to pursue and endless want than to die in denial.

Reply

pocketemo
03-26-2013 1:17 PM

This is nothing new and we all need goals even if the rewards for said goals are pixelated. I play Runescape been a member for years but also have other interests. sure I can get caught up in all the games I play but you can do that with any form of entertainment. Video games at least make sense as you do get some form of reward. TV and Movies offer no such reward and more people spend hours watching them then they do playing games. And since gaming can earn you profits these days, trying to be the best at it is not that bad a thing.

Addiction is always bad but if you miss out on a couple hours of sleep or decide to stay home one weekend to get a few quests done, there is nothing wrong with it.

I say we could actually thank them for providing us the with sense of accomplishment we so crave, it’s not like anyone else is stopping up to gave us these things And sorry as stated here It has nothing to do with “getting a life I have 2 kids and a very active life a beautiful girlfriend and a few good friends but I love playing some games in my free time and maybe even my not so free time as in games unlike in life we can do anything and nothing is impossible.

I love my life and I love my games and it makes me happy that some one would make games suited to our needs, it is not a bad thing at all. weak minded people are weak minded, I would rather a kid be addicted to games then crack or rape.

Reply

BigLunchMoney
04-01-2013 6:01 PM

In a way, I feel like I wasted 2 years of my life on Runescape. I also feel like I had a lot of fun connecting with my friends as well. I guess Runescape is kind of like chatting with your friends on MSN messenger while playing a game. 2 birds 1 stone.

Reply

laid
03-18-2013 8:09 PM

It is just amazing how many RPG’s can get me hooked on them for hours on end without me noticing. If I ever decide to play a title such as Skyrim, I make sure to have my iHome nearby so I don’t lose track of time!

Reply

Titanium Knight
03-08-2013 1:15 PM

Okay now as I’m going to play the new sim city game, I will know how EA is brain washing me into playing the game, and while I am playing I will hate myself somewhere deep down for playing but damn it, my city hall is about to be upgraded.

Reply

Jazikian
03-23-2013 4:54 AM

Choosing to "Like" Cracked has no side effects, so what's the worst that could happen?
I feel most of these comments consist of people congratulating themselves for not liking video games or for kicking the addiction, never touching another game again. This is great, but I think there's a flip side to the dark side of video games too.

As someone who has gone from an admitted addiction with video games (one in particular), to banishing the addictive aspect, but still playing regularly, I look at the bright side. Everyone needs downtime, and there will always be time wasted - it's probably healthy not to be busy every second of the day. With the right video games I can find positive social interaction (finding the right people to play with is difficult in some games, but they are out there), improve my reflexes, use my problem solving skills and organizational skills, and improve my concentration and comprehension skills ... My TV never did that for me. People sing the praises of reading (and sure, I love it too), but it is a very solitary pursuit, and in some ways requires no more imagination than gaming. I never got my nose out of a book when I was young and I was lonely. I realize I sound a bit pathetic after reading this over, but that's alright, I make no apologies, and instead choose to embrace it.

Reply

Sorry, posted twice.

Reply

"Addiction is not about what you DO, but what you DON'T DO because of the replacement of the addictive behavior."
Wow - as in the actual word and not the acronym - that explains so much of what is wrong these days.
Thanks for this article, and thanks to my parents for bringing me into the world during the early seventies so I wouldn't have to grow up in a world so chock full of high end, well educated parasites - such as the people who create these "games." I'm sure it never crossed their minds, but sometimes you just get lucky.

Reply

Yes, we're all well-educated parasites. How many jobs does the game industry bring to the table so folks can support their families? Not all gamers are parasites as you just stated. 
Heil, I'm a gamer, and I served in the U.S. Air Force and have done tons of committing my time to charity.
It's interesting to read this. I went into WoW a couple years ago just to see what it was like; I got up to 8s and then halfway on a few characters, then stopped.

Console games, a regular pastime, went with my stoppage of playing WoW.

Now, whenever I begin to play a videogame, it's a bit ruined for me. My perspective is too changed. I always ask, "What am I receiving out of playing this?" and scold myself for wasting time.

- Dreadjaw

"Now, whenever I begin to play a videogame, it's a bit ruined for me. My perspective is too changed. I always ask, 'What am I receiving out of playing this?'"

Entertainment? Fun? Don't scoff at this as it somehow it's a bad thing to do. Yes, addiction is bad, but just playing videogames to pass time is a form of entertainment is not bad at all. In fact, it's a very good thing.

- kneesus

I was hooked on Everquest 2 for a while. I think I was the 6th or 7th best Berserker on the server I played on. One day I calculated that I was spending about 20 hours a week playing EQ2. That's a damned part time job. So I quit playing. I haven't even looked at online gaming since, a Lan Party is as close as I'll get. It is way too much fun.

- More Comments