Study highlights need for more social responsibility by online gaming industry

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Online game companies need to be more socially responsible for over-addictive use of their products to avoid government intervention, according to a new study by Cardiff, Derby and Nottingham Trent universities.

The study, in the journal *Addiction Research and Theory*, was led by Dr Shumaila Yousafzai of Cardiff Business School with psychologists Dr Zaheer Hussain and Professor Mark Griffiths from the University of Derby and Nottingham Trent University respectively.

While conventional videogames have an ending, or may become boring and repetitive, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) are an inexhaustible system of goals and success, in which the character becomes stronger and richer by moving to new levels while accumulating treasures, power and weaponry.

In recent years, the problematic use of online videogames has received increased attention not only from the media, but also from psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health organisations and gamers themselves.

A number of studies from different cultures are providing evidence that around seven to 11% of gamers seem to be having real problems to the point that they are considered pathological gamers. Some are reported to have been playing for 40, 60, and even near 90 hours in a gaming session.

Dr Yousafzai said: "The warning messages on the loading screens of popular online videogames raise the question of why the online videogame industry warns its players not to overuse their product. Does the videogame industry really believe that their products have addictive features that can lead to negative consequences and the functional impairment of gamers' lives? These warning messages also suggest that the online videogame industry might know how high the percentage of over-users is, how much time gamers' spend playing, and what specific features makes a particular game more engrossing and addictive than others. While they do not directly admit this, by showing the warning messages, they do take some responsibility into their own hands."

Dr Hussain said: "Online game developers are already working on bringing Online Role Playing games to consoles. This type of game is most often implicated in cases of online game overuse and, as console systems have more market share than PCs, the number of 'videogame addicts' will increase in the coming time.

"Our study found that although warning messages about risk of overuse have recently started to appear on the loading screens of popular MMORPGs, this is not enough.

"Previous research has suggested that responsible game operators can try to help gamers improve control over their own behaviour by following a three-step strategy of combining good game design with effective gamers' care polices, and referral services.

"As a first step, online game developers and publishers need to look into the structural features of the game design; for example the character development, rapid absorption rate, and multi-player features which could make them addictive and/or problematic for some gamers. One idea could be to shorten long quests to minimise the time spent in the game obtaining a certain prized item".

The universities' study warns that if game companies refuse to create restraints for players and their games grow in greater popularity, then Western governments may have no choice but to follow in the steps of their Asian counterparts, who have already taken steps to reduce the potentially problematic effects of game play by limiting usage.

Professor Mark Griffiths added: "The proportion of gamers who develop problems and/or become addicts may stay roughly constant but as online games get better and better, and increasing numbers of people discover them, the number of addicts is most probably going to rise.

"We therefore propose to proactively approach the main online game publishers and explore options for collaboration between academics, healthcare, and the video game industry in order to provide proper referral, customer care, and information to the general public."

More information: informahealthcare.com/doi/abs/ … 16066359.2013.812203

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