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# Games prey on your mind

By Christopher Caldwell

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Kim Yoo-chul and Choi Mi-sun had been on the run for months – allegedly for doing something unspeakable – when they were arrested last week in Gyeonggi province in South Korea. Mr Kim, 41, and Ms Choi, 25, were ardent internet users. They met online. They had a baby. But becoming parents did not temper their computer habit. They grew fascinated with an online game called Prius, which allowed them to raise a virtual “child” called Anima. In the interests of their virtual child they neglected their real one. Last September they returned from a 12-hour session at an internet café to find their baby dead of starvation.

Western readers have been irate over this story since it [broke in The Sun](#). The Daily Telegraph picked it up, and from there it has spread across the internet. Online readers of The Boston Globe were divided, with roughly half saying the couple should be starved to death and half that starvation was too good for them.

## EDITOR'S CHOICE

It is easy to say that only sociopaths would favour a virtual baby over a real one. But the alleged crime of Mr Kim and Ms Choi is an extreme version of a problem that is fairly general, at least in Korea. The government in Seoul opened its first treatment centre for computer-game addiction in 2002. According to The Korea Herald, a young man murdered his mother last month when she hounded him for wasting time playing on the computer. Then he returned to his game.

If we consider the matter neurologically, raising a virtual baby can in some ways be more “rewarding” than raising a real baby. You get points. You get to undo your mistakes. Like art, video games can seem better than life.

The problem is that, unlike art, video games are increasingly sophisticated and subtle. A lot of recent academic research has focused on how video gambling machines take advantage of the predictable vulnerabilities of problem gamblers. Many non-gambling games are built the same way. They are designed to trick the reward centres of the brain through a variety of techniques: “near misses”, delayed rewards, illusions of control. In other words, they induce the same sort of misjudgment of utility that leads a crack addict to neglect his job. Designing machines to be pleasurable or useful is one thing – designing them to be addictive is quite another.

Natasha Dow Schüll, an anthropologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has written a book, *Addiction by Design*, that will be published by Princeton in the autumn. Five years ago, Ms Schüll used [interviews with gambling machine designers](#) and compulsive gamblers to reveal the tricks the former use to manipulate the latter. Cashpoint technology, for example, has been

worked into the design of certain gambling machines so that players can transfer money directly from their bank accounts and gamble it away. In industry parlance, they can “play to extinction”, or until all their money is gone.

The goal of much design is to maximise “time on device”, and hence profits. But to this end designers seek to confuse users, to work on their brains, “to increase psychological and financial investment” so that people “disappear” into the games they are playing or “exit from time” (to cite some of the problem gamblers who spoke to Ms Schüll). One woman said: “You’re not playing for money; you’re playing for credit. Credit so you can sit there longer, which is the goal. It’s not about winning; it’s about continuing to play.” Separating gamblers from their earnings often involves misrepresenting choices in such a way as to separate them from their better judgment.

In 1980, 45 per cent of floor space in Nevada casinos was taken up by machines; today, it is 77 per cent. This is not, one assumes, to save money on labour costs, but because video gambling machines can now provide a more “satisfying” (addiction-inducing) gambling experience. The computer scientist (and former video games designer) Kevin Harrigan of the University of Waterloo in Ontario has shown how [artificially generated “near misses” can entice](#) susceptible gamblers to play on. And susceptible is the right word. In Ontario, according to Mr Harrigan, studies have shown that 60 per cent of slot machine revenue comes from problem gamblers.

The power of video games is not simply a new wrinkle on an old problem. There have always been people who could not tear themselves away from, say, cards. But cards are not constantly being worked on by the world’s most sophisticated engineers to make them more alluring. There have always been misgivings about video games. But most government studies bark up the wrong tree, focusing on whether they are too violent or sexual, or whether portrayals of terrorists are racially prejudiced. The problem with video games, machine gambling and other computer spectacles is not ideological but psychological.

It is the underside of behavioural economics. For describing the tendency of economic actors to misjudge the utility of their choices, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky won a Nobel prize in economics. The same insights produced a bestseller (*Nudge*) for Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler. The point is not that everyone makes mistakes. It is that certain kinds of misjudgment are predictable. Being predictable, they will be used to get people to part with their money. People choosing wrongly may be news to social scientists. But priests and marketing executives have long understood that people who claim to be “marching to the beat of their own drum” are often following a well-trodden path. And that no one is more potentially self-destructive than someone who claims to be pursuing his own self-interest.

*The writer is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard*

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