

Internet Addiction – Blog Comment

19 October 2006

The points made about addiction to the Internet experiences and online games are not too surprising. I seem to recall Nolen Bushnell saying years ago that his days in the carnival the crowd taught him similar things about what appeals to people in simple games that helped him create the successful Pong arcade game. The Internet allows that carnival environment to follow you around.

Given the growing pervasive nature and ongoing evolution of the Internet (fixed and mobile) we will have to learn to balance our lives as the virtual and the real share our time. Expect the virtual becoming a larger and larger fraction compared to what it is even today.

One thought I have had is as the virtual worlds become more natural (real) that we consider the growing desires of the 2.5 billion people in East Asia (and more elsewhere in the world) who are rising up the economic ladder. Some say technology will solve the problems of resource consumption and environmental impact as these consumers seek to raise their real-world status and life style. Let's see - there are roughly a billion developed world consumers stressing our environment today, 2.5+ billion striving to join us in the next 40 to 50 years, and more on the way this century - looks like a problem.

If we use Linden Labs' Second Life as an emerging model of virtual 3D environments that allow collaboration, entertainment, marketing, design, alternative identity, social interaction, creativity and innovation that parallels real world activity - perhaps, the future of our planet earth will be better preserved if people spent more on virtual experiences and less on real-world consumption. The earth's environment and resource preservation as we seem to like it will be better served if we learn to transfer a fair share of our consumption and social experiences to the virtual worlds. These worlds would seem to use fewer natural resources to satisfy many of the social and accomplishment needs of each of us.

Recall that real world design is often done with the formal tools of Computer Aided Design to create virtual machines and test their performance in simulations of our real world. Complexity has made this necessary and to not do this correctly can be expensive (e.g., the current Airbus A380 electrical wiring problems that have caused a year or more delay in production and some billion or so Euros in added cost).

So my take is that this Internet addiction is a byproduct of a changing world experience that is evolving where the virtual is becoming more important as well as necessary. Perhaps we just need to get on with it

When everyone has a strong virtual presence, these addictions may seem less of a clash or new threat to social stability. One colleague of mine (one of a team of CIS professionals who all were "online gamers") noted that the way he resolved the inevitable stress created by solo online experiences was to find one that his wife also enjoyed. This apparently resolved the social "disconnect" that would otherwise likely be created. I suppose a simple way to portray the road ahead is to predict that our social (and work) experiences are moving online and they will work best when a significant fraction of them are joined by our "real world" social (and work) companions (colleagues).

What will continue to drive us further along this path into the Internet future? Bandwidth, computing, storage, interfaces, sensors, etc. Fortunately, we have Moore's Law and similar trends for computing, the Network Laws (Sarnoff, Metcalfe and Reed) that relate the power of connectivity with others, Kurzweil's Law of Accelerating Opportunity and the industries of nanotechnology and biotechnology to sustain the ongoing improvements in downsizing electronics and further enabling better virtual experiences as man and machine converge.

Combine this with employment in virtual world environments that helps create real world funds to sustain the “necessary” real world consumption (which is beginning to happen as observed by Edward Castronova and others) and maybe that will provide a better path for preserving our environment while we are adjusting to new ways of dealing with Internet variations of old addiction problems.