The lure of online video games can become an addiction for susceptible players

by Frank Radosevich II

"John" began thinking something was wrong when he glanced down at his desk clock one dreary November afternoon.

He had started his Saturday off from work like any other weekend, by hunkering down in front of his computer screen and losing himself in a world of fantasy computer games. John (not his real name) would play online video games allowing him to assume the identity of a fictional character, creating a new and different persona from his real life as a twenty-something student from Dunlap, Ill.

Sometimes during these daylong sessions, he would only pause to use the bathroom or snack on some junk food. And sometimes, he would even forgo those basic breaks altogether.

CAUGHT IN THE WEB - Online video games can be addictive. CNS Photo Illustration by Adam Gerik.

"I found myself just forgetting about everything else. I was sucked in, and it was like the rest of the world disappeared," he recalled several months later.

Having started playing about 9 a.m., he finally glanced down at the clock.

"I looked at it and noticed it was about 10 p.m.," he said. "That's when it hit me. I'd been at the computer playing games for over 12 hours. It wasn't a comforting thought."

As the Internet becomes faster, more ubiquitous and necessary for daily tasks, some users are finding themselves struggling with a growing attachment to Internet video games. Online role-playing games, like "World of Warcraft" or "Everquest," present gamers with a real-time virtual world inhabited by other users from all corners of the globe. The lure of fantasy and fast-paced action keeps people coming back for hours of carefree entertainment. Many games have become runaway successes, selling millions of copies and attracting hundreds of thousands of players. For most players, the games are relatively harmless.

For others, however, the online games become so entrenched in their lives, they can't live without them.

"A lot of what we've seen is that people with the Internet gaming addiction have more social anxiety and phobias, so this gives them an opportunity to be someone else without having the anxiety that they would have if they were out in public," said Tonya Comacho, a counselor with the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery at Proctor Hospital in Peoria, Ill. "One of the main things that I look at is when it's interfering and causing problems with family, work, social or legal aspects of their lives."

Comacho and other professionals point to the imaginary world produced by games as a main reason for triggering addictions. Typically, users wind up preferring to play the game instead of having any concrete personal contact.

SUBSTITUTE FOR INTERACTION

"It allows them to be whoever they want to be, and they can do that with people across the world. So, in their own sense they are being social, but they're not out meeting people face to face," Comacho said.

The games are also highly engaging, according to Doug Gentile, an assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State University. They give those who might normally shy away from social interaction a chance to let their guard down with little consequences.

"We are such social creatures, there is nothing more reinforcing than social interaction," said Gentile, who first began studying video game addiction in 1999.

The fixation can affect people of all ages.

"It is true that this last generation of kids did not give up their games when they went to college," Gentile said.

Yet, it's rare, Comacho added, for patients to openly confess their obsessions with online video games or for others to take notice. Whereas alcoholics can be arrested for drunken driving and compulsive gamblers can wipe out their life's savings in a night, hardcore gamers can go unnoticed for long periods of time with little outward signs of distress.

"I just don't think there is enough education out right now that this can be an addiction and people can have consequences and it's OK to come forward and ask for help or get information," said Coleen Moore, coordinator of resource development for the recovery institute at Proctor. Moore said the hospital regularly

assesses and admits patients who have jeopardized or damaged relationships, opportunities or jobs because of their preoccupation with games. Patients, who come from all over the world, can stay at the live-in clinic for up to three months and then attend meetings for a minimum of 28 weeks.

"Most of the people that we've seen in here come in under one diagnosis, like alcohol or drugs, and then during our screening process it indicates there is some other problem, and we do a further assessment for that," said Comacho, who's dealt with cases of Internet addiction for several years.

Another reason why the issue has stayed under the radar is, like most addictions, people are uncomfortable with acknowledging their problem.

"It's embarrassing in a way," said John, who never did seek help from professionals for his obsession. "I mean, people can see you being addicted to drugs or alcohol or gambling, but computer games? It just sounds a little ridiculous."

IMPULSE AND ENDORPHINS

Gentile, however, cautions that the term "addiction" is a loaded and complicated word. For him, the problem stems from an impulse-control disorder, similar to a gambling addiction. With each reinforcement, it becomes increasingly more difficult to stop, and some studies, Gentile said, show that the brain releases endorphins - chemicals that give a feeling of well-being - while a person plays video games.

"Washing your hands is a good thing, but not if you have to do it 50 times before you leave the house," Gentile said. "It moves beyond that healthy range to a pathologic problem. We need to help them manage that impulse. We need to understand that the word 'addiction' is kind of a colloquial word."

Though some dispute whether video game addiction even exists, most experts characterize the condition as a serious ailment.

"I would suggest it is a growing problem because of the increasing time we are spending on computers. They can even do games on phones now. Over time it can become worse without anyone knowing," said Dr. Tim Drew, a clinical counselor and coordinator of child and adolescent behavior health at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria. "I think we are increasingly sedentary and more detached from our neighborhoods and more dependent on videos and TVs for baby-sitting. I think it can be significantly problematic."

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