

# Addiction: Compulsive Behavior, Obsession

By Marc "Biggs" Quesnel

The above is the definition from the dictionary. The following two examples are classic cases of addictive behavior.

*A young man with few friends and no other social life sits at a computer playing EverQuest. He's been at this game for a while now, and plays it more and more. Things are not going well for him right now. There have been problems that have resulted in his removal from his guild. Distraught over the situation, he goes out and kills himself.*

*Across town another young man is playing a similar game. Strewed around the computer are food wrappers and drink cans. Just by looking at him you can tell he's been playing for a long, long time. In fact he's in his 110<sup>th</sup> hour of straight playing. He's trying to get the Whatchamacallit of the Gods, the ultimate item that will give his secondary character an edge against foes. At this rate, he figures he'll have it in only a few more days ...*

In the pure sense of the term, game addiction is the deep, driving need to play as much as you can. The desire to achieve as much and as fast as your friends do, even if they're veterans of the game and you're a novice. The need to keep playing for hours and hours on end, even if it takes you away from everything else you hold dear.

There are over one million active game accounts in the various MOGs that are currently available. Most of these players are enrolled in the games I have experience with (*Asheron's Call*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*), but many also play various smaller games on the net. It is estimated that by 2005, there is going to be \$1.8 billion dollars generated annually from online game accounts. By using simple math and a monthly account cost of \$10, that is about 15 million accounts.

Nick Yee, an avid *EQ* player, has been collecting demographic information on *EQ* and other online games for some time. He has established that about 60% of the *EQ* community exhibits addictive behavior, based on answers like the following:

*"I worry that my friends will level faster than me."*

*"I continue to play the game even when I am upset or frustrated with it and not really enjoying it."*

*"I feel better about myself when I am playing the game."*

These numbers can probably be translated to other games as well, though this is difficult to prove due to the lack of concrete research at the current time. Game addiction isn't a heavily researched topic, so there is little solid data at this point. It has been calculated that the average player spends about thirty hours a week playing his or her choice

of game — almost another fulltime job.

The games I've mentioned so far are of the fantasy genre — dragons and dungeons, swords and sorcery. People can escape to worlds that have very little to do with everyday life. Once there they take on the role, persona or avatar in the game world and begin to adventure. Over time, the characters they use to represent themselves will grow in the game world, both socially and economically, becoming both famous and wealthy. Of course, to achieve such results one has to sacrifice something, and that something is usually time. As a player becomes more and more absorbed into the game, real life issues such as eating, bathing and socializing with friends or family can become less important. In short, an addiction is born. This doesn't happen with everyone, but for a good majority of people (according to Yee's figures) it's the start of something that can be a time-consuming journey, and might result in a serious problem.

Internet journalist David Becker gives an excellent example of this in his ZDnet story, "Games Junkies — Hooked on 'Heroinware'?" He cites the example of Dennis Bennett, who started playing *EQ*, and his life proceeded to fall apart. He was failing his college courses and stopped being a father figure to his young son; but he did get into the upper echelon of *EQ* character development as a great and powerful shaman, thanks to about a year's investment of time. When he finally quit *EQ*, his grades started returning and his social life resumed.

The concept of suing someone when a piece of entertainment they created may be taken too far by fans isn't new. Take, for example, the parents of a California teen who sued Ozzy Osbourne over a song he wrote, "Suicide Solution," that their son allegedly listened to over and over again before eventually committing suicide. While the parents missed some classic symptoms of depression in their child, they still decided to sue the songwriter/artist in the hopes of having warning labels placed on that "type" of music in the future. Osbourne successfully defended himself against this lawsuit, using his own resources. (Osbourne won primarily on First Amendment grounds, but it may have helped that the song "Suicide Solution" was not about suicide at all, but was instead an impassioned denouncement of alcoholism.)

This is remarkably similar to a current case against Sony Entertainment. The person in question was Shawn Wolley, an obsessive, compulsive *EQ* player who would routinely play for up to twelve hours at a sitting — a veritable marathon for most players. Even when his parents banned him from the house in an attempt to make Shawn find a

## OTHER PERSPECTIVES

*When we at MOG received this column, we knew that its topic would get readers thinking. When we showed it to our panel of advisors, we got a couple of responses that got us thinking, and decided to share them with you.*

Most people play the game for enjoyment and escape from real world pressures. Most hobbies, you can walk up to people on the street and have at least a small chit chat, if not a full discussion. But it's hard to find people to strike up a conversation about computer gaming and have people follow, if it is something they, themselves, are not into.

As friends are made and you feel like you're making progress in the game, it reinforces human natural desires to be successful and have friends to talk with about things that are of mutual interest. If real life is not nearly as successful as the in-game endeavors, it is all too easy for even a casual gamer to build self esteem on the successes and friendships in the game instead of reality.

Here is my personal account of addiction, if it helps ...

I lost my job last September. I have always been an avid gamer, so *EQ* became a way for me to pass the day. I still avidly look for work, but my self confidence was blown by the crummy job market. My success in my guild and *EQ* helped to rebuild some of my confidence, but my recent involvement well exceeded a healthy commitment.

In life, we have character-building events like relationship breakups, deaths of family/friends, job loss, etc. The same thing can happen in a game through guild problems, not getting the things we have worked so hard for, etc. Some of these events even stretch our sanity, but most people survive them and become stronger for it.

What started out as an innocent hobby and a way to pass the time became an incredibly tough addiction to break. Lucky for me, I have gone through many difficult times in my life and have learned that it does get better and I will be stronger for it. However, when a person escapes real world pressures, becomes addicted to gaming, and in turn builds their self image based on the game, you have an extremely dangerous situation.

By the way, I am happy to say I have my addiction under control. It will no doubt be a constant battle.

— "Corene Treesinger"

job and make something better of himself, his first act after getting an apartment was to buy a computer so he could continue to play *EQ*. Unfortunately, Shawn committed suicide last Thanksgiving, supposedly after encountering problems in the *EQ* game world. According to his family, the young man had probably been playing *EverQuest* minutes before he suicided. His mother, Elizabeth Wolley, is currently suing Sony Entertainment in the hopes of getting the answers about why her son killed himself, and trying to get warning labels placed on the game itself.

There are many more examples of computer and *EverQuest* addiction available on the web, and each tends to be no less shocking than the case before it.

### Protect Yourself — Warning signs of computer addiction

Computer addiction itself is fairly sneaky. There are no alarms or whistles that tell you you're becoming addicted to the computer or the various games themselves. However, there are some warning signs that you can pick up on if you are observant. The following list, based on the work of Maressa Hecht Orzack, PhD, is offered as a guide, not definitive proof that something is wrong.

#### Physical Signs

- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Dry eyes
- Migraine headaches
- Eating irregularities, such as skipping meals
- Poor personal hygiene
- Changing sleep patterns

#### Psychological Signs

- A "mental high" or feeling of "wellness" while on the computer
- Feeling irritable or depressed while not on the computer
- Ignoring your immediate family and friends, preferring to be on the computer instead of being with them
- Problems with work/school, skipping work or school to play games
- Lying to family or employers about the problem when asked

### Warning Labels: An Incomplete Cure

The Entertainment Rating System is an independent organization that takes it upon itself to rate the games we play. So far they have rated over 7,000 products for the United States and Canada, and will continue to rate games in the coming years. The ESRB has about 7 different ratings for games, ranging from **E** (everyone) to **A** (adult). Their ratings for online games fall somewhere in the middle of the overall computer game ratings. All four of the online games mentioned at the

beginning of the article (*AC*, *DAoC*, *EQ* and *UO*) are rated as **13+**, with animated blood and violence being the top elements noted in each game. Since most MOGs are aimed at a teen-and-above market demographic, you will almost always see a 13+ label in the lower left corner of the boxes.

Currently there is no rating for addiction frequency or health hazards on games. There probably won't be in the near future.

One important thing to note about the online industry: most computer game retailers will not sell games rated **M** (mature) or higher to those under 18. Generally, you have to be an adult just to purchase the game and, with the additional monthly fees that are usually only paid by major credit cards, most children are not going to be playing. These types of games require a steady source of income for the account holder to continue participating each month. So while there may be the occasional unscrupulous dealer out there that will sell to just about anyone, the monthly fees probably tend to keep these games out of the hands of unsupervised minors.

In the case of adults who buy the product and can deal with the labels in place, history shows that we are very good at ignoring labels placed on many other products. Just look at the many products that are already under warning labels: motorized equipment, medication, cigarettes and alcohol — just to name a few — yet many people out there still go out and abuse such items to the point of severe health problems or even death itself. And still people sue the various manufacturers for the problems they encounter. Look at gambling addiction. Even the government warns people to spend responsibly when gambling, but that is about as much warning as you're going to get. If you get addicted, it is not the casino's fault for letting you get addicted, but rather your own fault for not recognizing the signs and acting upon them.

Will warning labels solve the problem?

In my opinion, no.

Being aware and being smart about the issue is probably the best advice anyone can give at this point.

### What will the future bring?

Well ... in the future we will probably be living in a society that has warning labels on everything. The computer you use will have labels on it, and the games you play will require you to be aware of whatever can possibly go wrong. You will probably have to agree not to sue them in the event that something does happen. Expect changes to occur to the various games' end-user licensing agreements (EULAs) and codes of conduct as well. Eventually, I can even see the game logging you off every couple of hours, to keep your health and sanity intact.

Computer/game addiction isn't an easy topic to deal with, but it will become an increasingly more important consideration as more and more people play the games we love. It is up to us to recognize the problem and try to come up with ways to treat and combat it before the solution is taken out of our hands.

### Further Reading and References

If you're interested in the material used in this article, you can go to these websites to learn more:

- Entertainment Software Rating Board <http://www.esrb.org/>
- "Codename Blue: An Ongoing Study of MMORPG Players" <http://www.nickyee.com/codeblue/home.html>
- David Becker's ZDnet story about gaming addiction: <http://zdnet.com.com/2100-1103-881813.html>
- The Shawn Wolley Lawsuit: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/State/mar02/31536.asp>
- A commentary on the Wolley case, with a skeptical, pro-gaming slant: <http://www.mobhunter.com/article.jsp?articleid=89786802>
- Dr. Maressa Hecht Orzack's computer addiction site: <http://www.computeraddiction.com/index.htm>

### OTHER PERSPECTIVES

Personally, I think anyone familiar with gaming (including who's played any MOG to midlevels), will come to the conclusion, "Hell, everyone I play with is a gaming addict then, including me!" Who hasn't stayed up late because something you were doing in a group took longer than expected? Or stayed up late/gotten up early so you could do something in game with someone who lives in a radically different timezone? Half an hour of tradeskills can make your hand hurt, and that new UI over on *EQ* is giving people migraines from the fade-out. A lot of people I know don't mention gaming to co-workers because it's just not worth the hassle of the stereotypes and explanations.

Basically, what worries me is that most readers could conclude, "You're telling me I'm an addict, and I know I'm not, so I'm going to ignore you." 95% of us could have some physical signs, or even a psychological sign, and not be a gaming addict. That other 5% won't think the warnings apply seriously to them, because they can see that obviously their friends are OK, so they must be OK too.

— Sherry Ann Menton