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When games stop being fun

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Dennis Bennett was failing his college classes, his marriage was in trouble, and he wasn't being much of a father to his 1-year-old son. But he had progressed to Level 58 as Madrid, the Great Shaman of the North, his character in the online role-playing game "EverQuest," and that was all that mattered at the time.

Bennett, whose family life and grades in school have recovered nicely since he stopped playing the game about a year ago, considers himself a recovered "EverQuest" addict, now able to control his desire to immerse himself in the game's rich fantasy world.

"The game almost ruined my life," said the network engineer in southern Indiana. "It was my life. I ceased being me; I became Madrid, the Great Shaman of the North. Thinking of it now, I almost cringe; it's so sad."

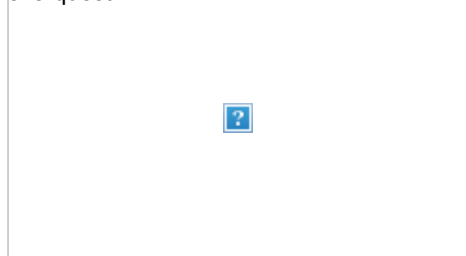
Long a subject of half-serious jokes among devotees of computer and video games, game addiction is receiving serious attention lately as fantasy games such as "EverQuest"--nicknamed "EverCrack" by many players--proliferate.

A Wisconsin woman has **blamed** "EverQuest" in the suicide late last month of her 21-year-old son, who had a history of mental health problems and was an obsessive "EverQuest" player. The game was also implicated in the death last year of a Tampa, Fla., infant, whose father allegedly was so devoted to the game he fatally neglected the child.

While such cases are rare, mental-health professionals say the fantasy worlds offered by computer and video games can become the stuff of very real addictions that destroy marriages and careers.

"It's a huge and growing problem with older teenage males and young adult males," said Dr. Timothy Miller, a Stockton, Calif., clinical psychologist. "I've seen a number of cases with 17- or 18-year-old males where they have a broadband (Internet) connection and they basically haven't left the house for years.

everquest



"I had one young man who was trying to get on Social Security disability for agoraphobia," he said. "He didn't have a mental disorder; he just didn't want to leave 'EverQuest' or instant messaging."

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Some have suggested that warning labels be placed on "EverQuest," which has more than 400,000 paying subscribers. Scott McDaniel, vice president of marketing for "EverQuest" publisher Sony Online Entertainment, said the company relies on players to employ good judgment.

"I guess our standpoint is the same as all kinds of products--you have to be responsible in using it," he said. "You don't see disclaimers when you get in a car saying 'Don't run over people.' People have to exhibit their own good sense, and if they have kids, they need to pay attention to what they're doing."

Video games played on consoles such as Sony's PlayStation 2 can become the object of compulsive behavior, especially among children. But such problems are usually easily solved through modest parental intervention and the self-limiting nature of such games, which become repetitive and boring at some point.

The lure of "heroinware"

Online PC games such "EverQuest," the new "Dark Age of Camelot," or "Diablo II"--dubbed "heroinware" by some players--can pose much more complex problems. Extensive chat features give such games a social aspect missing from offline activities, and the collaborative/competitive nature of working with or against other players can make it hard to take a break.

Online titles account for a small portion of the overall games business, but research firm IDC **expects** online games to account for \$1.8 billion in annual revenue by 2005, as Microsoft, Sony and others **compete** to push gamers online.

Miller cites two defining characteristics of addiction: The person regularly engages in activity for much longer than originally planned and "(continues) doing it in spite of adverse consequences."

By those standards, most of the players described in online support groups such as Yahoo's "**EverQuest Widows**" qualify as addicts.

"I have a friend who's in the process of getting a divorce because of 'EverQuest,'" said Lea, a regular player of the game. "A guy I talk to has been through three girlfriends and even more jobs because of the game." Like other players, Lea declined to provide a last name.

Although Lea said she's been able to find a workable balance between "EverQuest" and real-world obligations, she often questions her devotion to the game.

"I think of quitting all the time," she said. "I'm sure there are a lot of departments I'm lacking in now, like I don't pay as much attention to my kids as I should."

Fun and games or serious business?

Is your game playing a hobby or a pathological behavior pattern? Computer Addiction Services at Harvard University-affiliated McLean Hospital says psychological and physical symptoms of addiction include the following:

- Inability to stop the activity
- Neglect of family and friends
- Lying to employers and family about activities
- Problems with school or job
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Dry eyes
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Most online games include copious amounts of chats, allowing players to interact with each other in the guise of the characters they represent. Dr. Maressa Hecht Orzack, director of [Computer Addiction Services](#) at Harvard University-affiliated McLean Hospital, said the social aspect is a primary factor in many game addictions.

"Many of these people are lonely, have never felt like they belonged," she said. "People get a sense of belonging in the game. In some cases, it provides the only friends they interact with."

Such games also lure players with complex systems of goals and achievements. "EverQuest" players engage in activities to develop their characters from one level to the next and compete to find valuable in-game elements such as armor and weapons. Players can find themselves wrapped up in the game for hours as they struggle to gain one more skill or weapon.

"I'd say the most addictive part for me was definitely the gain of power and status," said Bennett. "The way in which as you progressively gain power you become more (of) an object of awe (to) the other players...each new skill isn't enough."

Miller, the Stockton psychologist, saw just how compelling such in-game goals can be when he tried playing "Diablo II," to see what the game was about. Before long, he found himself in all-night sessions with the game, a habit he broke by deleting the game from his PC and giving away the CD it came on.



"Each goal leads to another goal, and there are critical choices you make along the way," he said. "You invest a lot of time and thought into developing a

character. You feel like you've wasted your time unless you reach the next goal."

Such lures can be insidious, Miller said. "Here I was in a good position to understand the problem...and yet I really did have to struggle to beat this thing," Miller said of his game habit. "I can imagine that somebody with less knowledge of these kinds of issues would really have a hard time understanding what was happening to them."

Acknowledging the problem

Like most addictions, the toughest part of recovering from game addiction is often getting the addict to acknowledge there's a problem--a task made all the more difficult by the seemingly innocuous nature of games.

Angie said her live-in boyfriend spends at least 30 hours a week playing "EverQuest" as a female elf--a character choice she finds "weird and disturbing"--at the expense of housework, family obligations and sometimes work. "The saddest part of all is the fact that he doesn't admit that it's an addiction and seems oblivious to the damage his personal life is suffering due to the game," she said.

For players who do admit they have a problem, the most common response is a guilt-and-purge cycle common to many addictions. While Bennett was able to kill his character and delete the "EverQuest" software with no regrets, many game addicts aren't as successful.

"The people I've seen who quit the game and destroy their character...almost all come back and play addictively again," said Lea.

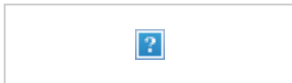
For most players, true recovery involves looking at the issues underlying the game habit, Orzack said. She uses a cognitive-therapy approach in which players examine the emotional motives that

prompt them to play a game excessively and look for alternate ways to satisfy those needs.

"Therapy takes the issue that there are a lot of other things going on," she said. "The goal is to get people to realize there is something going on and they need to be in charge of changing it."

Excessive game playing often reflects problems in the home environment, Orzack added.

"There's definitely an alienation in some fashion that's going on within the family structure or work structure," she said.



Nicolas Yee conducted extensive player research on "EverQuest" while earning a psychology degree from Hanford College. He found a direct correlation between the amount of time hardcore players spend in the game and a tendency toward neuroticism--"basically how easily a person gets depressed or goes into mood swings," he said.

Yee said that while he doesn't doubt games like "EverQuest" can become an addiction, they can also be a productive outlet for dealing with emotional and behavioral issues.

"Environments like 'EverQuest' can help a person if they're shy or have trouble forming social relationships," he said. "They have this environment where they can safely try new things out. They can experiment with being more vocal, or they can try out a leadership role, which may not be an opportunity they have in real life. Especially for teenagers, it lets them try out different roles and identities at a time when they may be really struggling with those kinds of issues."

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