Online Game Playing Can Be Addictive

"Online gaming is an emotionally draining and time-consuming activity. To create more time for the computer, gaming addicts neglect sleep, diet, exercise, hobbies, and socializing."

In the following viewpoint, Kimberly Young maintains that online gaming is a fast growing form of addiction, especially among children and teenagers. Young explains that classic signs of addiction include a preoccupation with gaming, a loss of interest in other activities, and withdrawal from family and friends. Kimberly Young is a psychologist and the founder of the Center for Internet Addiction. She is also the author of Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction—and a Winning Strategy for Recovery.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Kimberly Young, what problem can result when young people spend hours pretending to be a character in an online game?
2. What are two physical health problems that gaming addicts can develop, according to Young?
3. What damage can occur as multiuser gamers form intimate bonds with one another, according to Young?

Over the last decade [since the late 1990s], the concept of Internet addiction has grown in terms of its acceptance as a legitimate clinical disorder often requiring treatment. Hospitals and clinics have emerged with outpatient treatment services for Internet addiction, addiction rehabilitation centers have admitted new cases of Internet addicts, and college campuses have started support groups to help students who are addicted.

Excessive Gaming

The Internet is a new technology that has impacted the world and provided many benefits to its users. At the same time the Internet has had negative ramifications. Some people are becoming preoccupied with the Internet, are unable to control their use, and are jeopardizing employment and relationships. The concept of "Internet addiction" has been proposed as an explanation for uncontrollable, damaging use of this technology.

Studies on Internet addiction originated in the United States. More recently, studies have documented Internet addiction in a growing number of countries such as Italy, Pakistan, and Czech Republic. Reports also indicate that Internet addiction, especially to online games has become a serious public health concern in China, Korea, and Taiwan. About 10 percent of China's more than 30 million Internet gamers were said to be addicted. To battle what has been called an epidemic, Chinese authorities regularly shut down Internet cafes and instituted laws to limit the number of hours adolescents can play online games.
Excessive gaming has been identified as a specific subtype of Internet addiction. It is difficult to estimate how widespread the problem is, but according to the American Medical Association, up to 90 percent of American youngsters play video games and as many as 15 percent of them—more than 5 million children—may be addicted. Problems stemming from online games have become so serious that the first Detox Center for Video Game Addiction opened in the Netherlands. "Video games may look innocent, but they can be as addictive as gambling or drugs and just as hard to kick," explained Keith Bakker, director of Amsterdam-based Smith&Jones Addiction Consultants and founder of the center.

Virtual Worlds

To understand online gaming addiction, it is important to understand how the addiction stems from the creation of virtual worlds. New studies have shown that immersion into online games allows users to become addicted.

In the 1980s, games such as Centipede, Space Invaders, Pac Man, and Donkey Kong were popularized. These were single-player games against the machine and getting good at the game only meant a high score and improvement of the gamers' eye-hand coordination. By the 1990s, gaming evolved from single-player games to gaming experiences. Gamers could become immersed in a virtual world that they helped to create. Games such as Doom and Quake were introduced that allowed players to create new rooms, customize their characters, and specify the kinds of weapons used. As the gaming revolution evolved, players could create rich, malleable environments from designer-generated fantasies to complex Hollywood movie themes. By the late 1990s, the gaming industry exploded. Manufacturers such as Sony and Microsoft have developed more sophisticated and interactive features into their games and the technology has become much more portable and mobile making online games accessible anytime and anywhere.

Online games evolved into more than games but rather they are living, self-contained three-dimensional societies. Each game has its own scenery from forests, prairies, beaches, mountains, and towns. Players can immerse themselves and collectively evolve in these virtual worlds. Each game has its own currency to buy goods and services. Gold, coins, jewels, bears, or pelts may be used to buy weapons, armor, or magical potions, depending upon the economics and currency of the game. To play, players first create a "character," or a virtual version of themselves. The player must decide a character's race, its species, history, heritage, and philosophy. The genres and themes vary, as a player could be a greedy business type in one game, a strong warrior in another game, or an elf with magical powers in another.

As online gaming evolved so have the forms that characters can take, so that players can select more detailed representations for their characters. For instance, for human characters, players can select skin color, hair color, height, weight, and gender. They also can decide on a character's profession, ranging from a banker, lawyer, dancer, engineer, thief, bounty hunter, elf, or gnome, depending upon the game. Each player must choose a name for the character. Some take great care and pride in determining just the right name. In fact, in some strange way, a character's name seeps into the player over time. They spend hours living as this "other person" and begin to identify with a character that feels more real and less fictional the longer they play.
[Research scientist Nick] Yee ... suggested that hardcore players tend to be younger players who may suffer from emotional problems or low self worth and esteem. He suggested that individuals who have other emotional problems may be more at risk to develop an addiction to interactive gaming. In the game, these interactive environments allow individuals to experiment with parts of their personality, they can be more vocal, try out leadership roles, and new identities. The problem becomes when these younger players rely upon these new online personas and the distinction between what is real and what is a fantasy becomes blurred.

Playing for Hours

In one of the most dramatic stories of online gaming addiction, in August 2005, a 28-year-old South Korean man died—not by committing suicide, but after playing the game Starcraft at an Internet cafe for 50 hours straight. By all reports, the man had not slept properly and had eaten very little in that time. While no autopsy was performed, he was believed to have died from heart failure stemming from exhaustion.

An addiction to online games can cause a tremendous amount of consequences to the gamer. Gaming addicts willingly forgo sleep, food, and real human contact just to experience more time in the virtual world. Gaming addicts sometimes play for ten, fifteen, or twenty hours straight in a single gaming session, every day. Because of the complexity of the game, players are constantly stimulated in an ever-changing virtual environment. "Just a few more minutes" can turn into hours as the gaming addict searches for the next conquest or challenge. Gaming addicts must play for long periods of time in order to excel at the game. Online games, especially MMORPGs [massive multiuser online role-playing games] are persistent worlds. That is, like the real world, they continue to exist whether players are in them or not. Characters who log out of a world simply enter a state of suspended animation and reappear in the same place again [when] they log back in. No one freezes his games into a save state when they depart, the way they do in a traditional video game.

Like the real world, MMORPG characters can grow indefinitely, becoming stronger, smarter, and more powerful over time. In order for them to grow, they must dedicate significant amounts of time playing the game. In doing so, they acquire more knowledge, advancement, and strength in the game. This propels gaming addicts to play for significant periods of time, justifying their need to stay online and play. Health problems or potential health problems pale in comparison to having the character grow.

Health Risks

Online gaming is an emotionally draining and time-consuming activity. To create more time for the computer, gaming addicts neglect sleep, diet, exercise, hobbies, and socializing. They let their own health go as they do not get the proper rest and nutrition they need. They may suffer a number of health problems from back strain, eye strain, carpel tunnel syndrome, and repetitive stress injury. As one gaming addict explained, "I stopped bathing. I didn't eat unless it was a quick snack I could eat in front of my computer. I lost weight. My skin was pasty and pale. I didn't shave or comb my hair. I did
nothing. I looked so bad that my mother told me I looked more like a heroin addict."

MMORPGs are inherently social environments created by multiple users. A study conducted by the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom has examined the social interactions that occur both within and outside of MMORPGs. In one of the most comprehensive studies to date, the sample consisted of 912 self-selected MMORPG players from 45 countries. MMORPGs were found to be highly socially interactive environments providing the opportunity to create strong friendships and emotional relationships. The study demonstrated that the social interactions in online gaming form a considerable element in the enjoyment of playing. The study showed MMORPGs can be extremely social games, with high percentages of gamers making life-long friends and partners. It was concluded that virtual gaming may allow players to express themselves in ways they may not feel comfortable doing in real life because of their appearance, gender, sexuality, and/or age.

**The Impact on Individuals and Relationships**

As gaming addicts form an important support group with each other and form intimate bonds, the damage is often done to marriages and real-life relationships. Couples break up because the gaming addict neglects the relationship. Young people break up in high school or college. Married couples end in separation and divorce. Family stability is disrupted. The gaming addict stops interacting, stops participating, and stops feeling that these real-life relationships are as important. These once-cherished family relationships and friendships only take time away from gaming friends. They only take time for being with the people that the gamer feels good about, creating the sense that real-life relationships are less fulfilling.

Gamers can join groups, guilds, lead battles, or win wars in a virtual fantasy world. A large part of gaming is about making social relationships. Gamers make friends with other gamers who help them learn the "ropes" of playing the game. Multi-user role-playing games often include interactive features and options such as chat rooms and places to virtually hangout with other gamers. The social aspect is a primary factor in many game addictions. Games often have trouble with social relationships and feel lonely as if they have never truly belonged. This feeling can be especially powerful among children and adolescents who haven't felt a sense of belonging in their real lives and often their only other friends are fellow gamers. Parents who try to put time limits on the game may find a child becomes angry, irrational, and even violent. Adolescents who cannot access the game experience a loss. They want to be on the game and miss playing the game. This feeling can become so intense that they become irritable, anxious, or depressed when they are forced to go without it. As their feelings intensify, they stop thinking rationally and begin to act out towards others, especially a parent or anyone who threatens taking the game away....

**The Intense Focus on Gaming**

The addiction process begins with a preoccupation with gaming. Gamers will think about the game when offline and often fantasize about playing the game when they should be concentrating on other things. Instead of thinking about the paper that needs to be completed for school, or going to class, or
studying at the library, the gamer becomes completely focused on playing the game. Gamers start to miss deadlines, neglect work or social activities as being online and playing the game becomes their main priority.

Some gamers spend days and nights online. They do not eat, sleep, or take a shower because of the game. They lie to family and friends about what they are really doing on the computer. Students tell their parents that they are doing their homework, spouses tell their family that they are using the computer for work, and friends will make up excuses for why they cannot go out—all to find more time to play the game.

As the addiction progresses, gamers become less interested in hobbies or activities that they used to enjoy and become more fascinated with living inside the game. As one mother explained, "My son loved baseball and played Varsity on his high school team until he discovered X-Box Live. His grades plummeted after he discovered the game, but it wasn't until he quit the baseball team that I knew that something was seriously wrong. He loved baseball too much. He won a baseball scholarship for college and dreamed about playing professionally. Now, nothing else matters to him except the game."

Some gamers experience personality changes the more addicted they become. A once outgoing and social husband or wife becomes withdrawn from their friends and family only to spend more time alone in front of the computer. A normally happy son or daughter becomes withdrawn only to prefer making friends in the game as the people that were once important in real life become less important. If the gamer does have real-life friends, they are usually fellow gamers. In some cases, gamers are introverts and have problems making social connections in real life and turn to the game for companionship and acceptance....

The Effect on Adolescents

Adolescence alone, regardless of the involvement in the Internet, is an extremely challenging and complex transition for young individuals. Exploring and attempting to discover one's identity as an adolescent can be an overwhelming stage in one's life. In the event that an adolescent is using online gaming as an escape, it is more than likely that many more obstacles will be encountered and as a result a teen will struggle with unmanageable physical and emotional consequences. Adolescents are a major target audience for gaming advertisers and appear to be the most at risk for developing an addiction to online games.

Peer pressure and environmental distresses are chief influences for an adolescent becoming involved with gaming. Friends are often gamers, and as discussed, family dynamics can play a role in the development of online gaming addiction. Furthermore, children of substance abusing parents are shown to have an increased risk of using gaming as means to cope with problems such as developmental issues, school problems, health problems, delinquency, sexual problems, mental issues, and family problems.

It is much harder for a teen to recover from gaming addiction, especially when the computer is often a
necessary component of their home and school environments.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


**Periodicals**

- Nicholas Grant Boeving, "Is Addiction Really a Disease? A Challenge to Twelve-Step Programs," *Tikkun*, vol. 26, no. 4, Fall 2011.


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