THE DARK SIDE OF ONLINE GAMING

Katherine Albrecht,
CASPIAN
kma@post.harvard.edu

Katina Michael,
University of Wollongong, Australia
katina@uow.edu.au

MG Michael,
University of Wollongong, Australia
mgm@uow.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Horror stories in the media abound in relation to online gaming addiction—of parents disregarding their kids to the point of starvation spouses quarreling or divorcing, students flunking out of school, young men and women dying from heart attacks, even kids poisoning their parents to get online in order to play their favorite game spending copious time away from their family responsibilities. We shake our heads at these previously unimaginable stories of excess, but lately they've begun hitting closer to home. How many readers have seen close friends, even family members seduced away from their meaningful relationships by the promise of a Second Life or a tryst in World of Warcraft? It's the elephant in the room, the skeleton in the closet, the emperor parading naked down the street. Clearly something is going on. This paper aims to describe the link between online gaming and internet addiction. It also points to the gradual evolution of gaming content toward ever-increasingly darker more violent themes, and the effect that excessive play in these online environments can have to the individual spirit. The paper concludes with a call to action by all members of society.

Keyword: Online Gaming, Internet Addiction, Social Implications of Technology

1. GIVING OVER CONTROL

What is it with us today? We are giving over control to the machine and losing touch with the physical world around us [1]. We are witnessing the decay of our meaningful relationships—sucked into electronic vectors of nothingness—right before our very eyes [2]. Sometimes we are at a loss to describe this phenomenon, reflecting on how members of our own family have been duped by the promise of a Second Life.

It is true that some people are predisposed to different types of addictions—drugs, alcohol, gambling—all of which act to curb an underlying condition usually going by the name of obsessive compulsive disorder and/or depression. But we are now confident that a compulsion towards excessive playing of video games will be added to that suite of newly-defined behavioral addictions that need our urgent attention.
This paper is dedicated to video game addiction given its widespread reach, although we would be the first to admit that this is simply one of a dozen types of computer applications that can trigger deep-seated dependencies [3]. Despite that video game addiction was not included in the U.S. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) for 2012, there was an appendix on further research into internet use disorder [4]. In contrast the Chinese have gone ahead and defined the disorder and some studies have claimed that as many as one third of mentally ill patients who stay at home are addicted to the Internet [5].

We can categorically point to the increasing number of video game and online Internet detoxification clinics around the world that have been in existence since at least 2005, especially in China [6], South Korea and Taiwan [7]. From PSs and DSS to Wiis and zappers, from iPods and iPads to Xboxs- our high-tech gaming toys are enslaving children and grandchildren, nephews and nieces, partners and friends, parents and teachers [8].

2. ARE YOU ADDICTED TO VIDEO GAMES?

If you don’t wish to admit to the possibility that there is such a thing as video game addiction, then you can just log back into one of your online selves in your favorite massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), and while your terminal is booting ask yourself a few of the following questions.

1. How long do you spend on your favorite MMOG each day? [9]
2. Are you infatuated by your favorite video game when you are not playing? Is it all you can think about, even at the expense of your closest relationships?
3. Over the last 12 months have you put on weight as a result of your gaming habits?
4. Do you have any friends outside those connected to your online avatar(s)?
5. Are your grades at school slipping or employment suffering as a result of playing games all day and all night? Are you suffering from sleep deprivation as a result?
6. When you are on the computer engrossed in a session of play, do you lose track of time and forget about basic needs like eating, sleeping or going to the restroom?

We visited the Xbox homepage and were confronted with the following message: “A new generation has begun.” Yes, indeed it has. It is the generation drawn to the screen culture, like the moth is drawn to the light. But no sooner has the moth touched the artificial light, than it is no more. In metaphor we can say that humans are also prone to the ‘moth effect’. Like moths, humans are naturally drawn to the light during the day, as opposed to cockroaches that scurry into dark corners and crevices to avoid detection. We investigate what transforms the gamer- analogously from light to dark phototaxis- and what the ensuing social implications are for him/her and their close relationships [10]. How is it you ask, that the screen emits bright light but the gamer is enveloped in visual and persistent perceptive darkness? Curtains drawn and lights out, the gamer retreats to their bedroom to “play”, and if engaged in a First Person Shooter Massively Multiplayer Online Game (FPS) (MMOG) they continue to hide in the crevices to avoid being shot. There is a significant body of literature that needs to be studied in relation to target fixation [11] and video gaming. What is it that draws the gamer to the console, when the gamer knows that what they are being attracted to has no real tangible benefit?
And just to set the record straight, this generation is not really “new” as Xbox would have us believe but about 40 years in the making. It is little wonder that the average gamer is a 35 year old male [12].

3. IN THE BEGINNING WAS PONG THEN CAME MMOG

We started off with Atari’s launch of Pong in 1972. The graphics could not be simpler and on first viewing Pong is an innocuous game compared to today’s standards. The instructions were scarce: “Avoid missing ball for high score” [13]. But what was it about Pong that brought millions of players to the TV screen? Psychologists point to the feedback loop, the anticipation of the response from the terminal, a sense of achievement at gaining high scores, a mastery of sorts over the game, the chance to fill the void with some fun, and a momentary escape from the realities and responsibilities of life.

Then the arcade games permeated for ‘just’ a nickel a game, at the same time that video-based poker machines surfaced to draw gamblers [14]. It used to be that Space Invaders (1978), Pac-Man (1980), Donkey Kong (1981) and Mario Bros (1983) ruled- you used a laser canon to ward off the aliens, you got to eat the pellets and fight off the ghosts and monsters, you gathered ammunitions to defend yourself against anthropomorphic enemies, and as Mario you got to exterminate the pests threatening to rise from the sewers below New York. But something happened to the nature of the gaming industry after personal computers were introduced into homes. Space Invaders gave way to DOOM (1993), Pac-Man to Grand Theft Auto (1997), and Mario Bros to Manhunt (2003). Unsurprisingly, the promise of flight and car simulator games gave way to war and debauchery. And the impact of the rise of the Internet was no different to that which followed the printing press for the production of propaganda and porn [15].

The defining point in the history of video gaming however, came in 2003 with the introduction of Call of Duty when a cinematic experience was introduced, tending away from traditional robotic-like behaviour by personas. Call of Duty also provided the illusion of a more organic and dynamic game made possible by some clever programming, despite that it still relied on linear scripting. It was much less formulaic than what gamers had experienced with previous first person shooters (FPS). In the same year, massively multiplayer online gaming was touted as having well and truly arrived as the Financial Times measured the per-capita GDP in the EverQuest game to be equatable to the 77th wealthiest nation in the world. This was followed by large subscriptions in the millions with Happy Farm and hundreds of millions with World of Warcraft and more recently Minecraft.

4. ON THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

The video gaming scene really came of age when the social networking elements of instant messaging, chat, video conferencing features and presence information were added to the real-world-like online environment. All of a sudden gaming became a fusion of unified communications that if misused could easily appeal to the darker side of the human instinct. Again, we contend that this medium is no different to other entertainment- such as movies with dark themes, or music with dark lyrics, or even books with dark messages [16]. But there is something about MMOG’s that differs from books and music and movies [17]. The latter have a beginning and an end whereas MMOG’s seemingly go on forever- a little like the continuous pieces of music on each side of Pink Floyd’s famous album The Dark Side of the Moon (1973). Is there something in this distinction? The flesh is mortal, yet MMOG’s carry with them a seeming infinity. You can die a million times over and spawn back to life in a game like UberStrike (2010) but on earth you only have one life.
We contend that killing people in a game, no matter if the characters are just animations, cannot be good for the human spirit, which is, the spiritual and mental part of our humanity. That spending a great deal of time, many hours per day, transfixed to high impact violence (gross and unrelenting); high levels of gore (decapitations, dismemberments, and excessive blood-letting); offensive depictions of cruelty; and prostitution and heavy sexual themes means that we cannot break free from the endless loop. The same argument can be made for any video game that begins to impede our ability to be productive, or that affects our ability to take care of fundamental personal hygiene needs [18]. We should rather be focusing our time toward positive and constructive play with long-term benefits as opposed to spending copious time building a world which doesn’t exist when the power goes off.

We know what some of you are thinking… not all video games are bad for you. Support your positions with real evidence and scientific studies. Just because I maim and kill online, virtually, it doesn't mean I'll do it in the real world, and if I have virtual sex every so often or even rape a prostitute in a game, it's not like committing a real physical act, it's all just make believe….Okay, who are you fooling? We are building games today in our society that are not only distasteful but are extolling what are generally labelled in the legal domain as cyber crimes against the person [19]. The worrying part is that these violent depictions of everyday life are becoming more and more callous and entering the mainstream. Are you going to tell us that when you perform these vile acts online that you are actually feeling true love, peace and joy? Whatever happened to extolling morals and values in our society, and to ethical codes of conduct in the game development industry? It is not even a question of traditional ethics anymore, but of plain old common sense.

“Yes, yes, having an online affair has naught to do with the real world, and has no real world repercussions.” Poof! Smokescreen! What is your heart telling you? What is your body saying to you? Are these acts just our imagination or are they real with real-world repercussions? When I spend more time online, than with the person in the physical world whom I share a bed with- isn’t there something wrong with this? [20] When your first thought when you awake is to make contact with your favorite gaming community, so that you can go out on another mission and pick off a few more fraggers, you need to reassess your behavior [21]. Things and people around you will start to suffer- how can they not if you are spending between 10-15 hours glued behind the screen playing? [22] Something gives [23].

Consider the Korean couple who in 2010 let their three month old baby girl die from starvation as they spent hours devoted to raising a virtual character of a young girl named Anima in the game Prius Online [24]. Of a young Korean man who collapsed at an Internet café in 2005 and went into cardiac arrest after playing Starcraft (1998) for 50 hours straight, of a young Chinese man in 2007 who suffered a heart attack after spending almost seven straight days behind a computer screen (save for restroom breaks) [25] and of two Taiwanese men in separate incidences during 2012 that also collapsed in Internet cafes playing Diabalo (1996) and League of Legends (2008) without a break for 40 hours and 23 hours respectively [26]. Consider the number of wives (and husbands) who have divorced their spouses over their gaming behaviors [27], especially for misconduct in Second Life and World of Warcraft [28]. And the number of people who have lost their jobs because they cannot work and play video games simultaneously, later having to move in with their parents as a result of losing their income [29], [30].
Yes, we know what you’re thinking yet again, that these are just one-off tragic stories and they’ll never happen to you or your kids [31]. To this we say, really? It is not difficult to come to the same conclusions we hold. Do your own field observations on your way to work, the next time you are at a coffee shop or on a campus- how many people, young and old, are absorbed by their mobile phone- immersed in the screen [32]? Parents, it’s time to admit it -- there’s a problem with how technology has taken over your family, your workplace, and your headspace. And so what are you going to do about it? Keep believing that resistance is futile? That you cannot change because you fear that little Johnny will make life hell for you if he doesn’t get his eight or nine hours online?

Don’t we realize as a technology-reliant community that we are keeping these gaming companies alive by logging in for our kids on 17+ games when they are barely 10 years of age? What are we willingly exposing them to? We shudder in horror when African dictators enlist ten year olds to fight in wars, but turn around and buy our ten year olds the experience of killing far more virtual people than any real war would ever make possible. When we give in to the demands of our children for yet another video game, we are feeding the darkness in their imaginations and sullying their spirits [33]. What happens when we ourselves get so entangled and lost in this virtual world that we don’t even see what is happening to our household?

5. ASK THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Stop right now! Ask yourself where your kids are. What activity are they engaged in? Are they outside or inside, sleeping or awake? Chances are that every single one of them is behind a console of one form or another, and for one reason or another. Now go and do a physical reconnaissance- how many of them are playing ‘games’? That has to say something about what we’ve become! And what we hope to become is a question for an entirely different conference.

There’s an epidemic of parents failing to care for their kids, to feed them when they are hungry, to change their diapers, make sure they’ve brushed their teeth and gotten enough sleep for the day ahead. And there’s an epidemic of people failing to take care of themselves because they are addicted to electronic gaming. Why is everyone so bent on walking around and deceiving themselves that technology has not pervaded their life with a whole lot of ugly negatives! [34] Why are we all so scared to death to admit that what we are potentially creating is a road to nowhere? [35] That for some, gaming has become a pathological addiction and they cannot break free from the screen. Is the problem that we too are so engrossed by the screen that we cannot lend a hand otherwise?

Enter locked in syndrome (LiS), a medical term used to describe: “a condition in which a patient is aware and awake but cannot move or communicate verbally due to complete paralysis of nearly all voluntary muscles in the body except for the eyes.” [36] Similarly being in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) is defined as “a wakeful unconscious state that lasts longer than a few weeks.” [37] We borrow the terms here to question whether society at large is presently undergoing some kind of locked-in technology scenario. In our analysis addicted gamers go into a comatose state of affairs, where their heart is pumping blood, they are clinically alive, but they are barely conscious. Only their fingers around the console are moving spasmodically showing us the bystanders, signs of life in the form of a reflex action.
Have you noticed when you try to talk to an addicted gamer that their gaze does not leave the screen, remaining transfixed? And if they happen to make a mistake while you are trying to talk to them that you get blamed for their error in the most extreme way? [38] And in the end, that is what the creators of these games want from us… a mind-numbing sense that what they are feeding us is good for our spirit [39]. Albeit many of us would not wish to believe that the primary driver of the game development companies is to get us addicted from the start because it means more revenue for them [40]. These games have a spirit behind them, but it's not one that lifts our souls or causes us to reach for greater things. It is the spirit of the times, that pervasive, uneasy feeling that things are not going so well towards the goodness and natural inclination of life.

This spirit of anarchy or nihilism, is succumbing gamers of violent virtual realities to see and to dream of hells in the games they play as opposed to goodness, to be influenced by the images they see in strange visitations called nightmares, and to ponder on demonic thoughts. We do not need to provide you with our evidence which would only act to pollute your minds. Token, almost every player of these abhorrent games will not go out and conduct a massacre in the physical space, [41] but surely there are other ways to spend one’s time? Outside playing games with the children? Admiring natural beauty with a sense of awe? Going for a surf or a hike? Why do we choose instead a psychological prison, trapped not only inside but within ourselves? Those versed in the writings of Carl Jung can take much from here in the context of the “shadow aspect” of our personalities.

The next time you walk past your child’s door (whether they are a teenager or an adult living in your home), why don’t you spend ten full minutes with them looking at how they are interacting with the outside world through their computer device. In addition, ask them about the music they listen to and the movies they get a buzz from. It is all one and the same: lyrics (auditory), multimedia (visual), consoles (touch and feel) enveloping the faculties of the human body. Immersing oneself in a whole lot of bad stuff is like immersing oneself in a cesspool. The problem with our life today is that we are swimming in the cesspool, surrounded by soft e-waste, and cannot see it for what it is. It is enveloping us on all sides and suffocating our freedom. We can only see things clearer if we ourselves decide to get out of it, wash afresh, and then look with open eyes at what is before us. And yes this does mean limiting our screen time.

**6. ENACTING CHANGE**

When was the last time you embraced your child? Told them you love them in the real world, not just over SMS or email! So there’s your challenge- get up off your chair right now, let go of that iPad, and go searching in the physical space to reach out to that family member right now who is absorbed by their favorite high-tech gadget. It won’t be easy to get them to stop, and to make eye contact with you, but that’s just the first step [41]. Be patient. It may take several weeks, or even months, but try detoxing the whole family from the dreaded technology that has bound them hand, foot and mouth [42]. At first, try taking the family away to a location that is a complete dead zone- not even mobile connectivity [43]. Go away for at least 2 weeks. And when you return tell yourself you will not go back to your old ways and will hold your ground [44].
The screen is coming closer and closer, and it now seeks entry into our insides. Consider it this way: the last 60 years we have seen the television, the computer, the Internet, the mobile phone, and now the wearable device that can distort and augment reality itself. What commeth next? A translucent contact lens that completely replaces our actual field of view with another in a pervasive gaming environment? When we cannot make the distinction between fantasy and reality are we really living? [45]

We've got to do better. There is still a chance to resist. We can recapture our human rights and our dignity, reaffirm the rights of our children to have undistracted parents, and get back to a time when our children looked us in the eye clearly and brightly when we spoke to them [47]. We still have time to reaffirm the value of reality! We can change. We can do better. We have to remain in charge of the “screen” that we might not only enjoy but also put to good use the great innovations of our incredible times.

7. CONCLUSION

There are indeed people out there that are not slaves to technology, and who are able to play games casually without any ill-effect to their health. We are not asking people to live the life of an Amish community [48], but to consider how technology is impacting their home life and start drawing some lines. Your children are especially vulnerable [49], but parents themselves are struggling with the same addiction, and the same detachment from the real world, staring into a screen instead of sharing real hugs, real smiles, real conversations, real activities, reality itself with their kids. And it's not just video games. Answering emails, talking on the mobile, texting, Facebook, websurfing, YouTube, all can be equally draining if misused [50].

As this conference is about cyberbehavior and society, we would be remiss not to point out the downsides that everyone around us are experiencing. It's the elephant in the room, the emperor parading naked down the street, the skeleton in nearly every family's closet. We are calling for people to wake up and admit that we collectively have a very big problem on our hands, and to begin a thoughtful discussion of how we want to handle it. And lest you think we speak from some lofty, technology-free form of purity, we assure you that one way or another we have been down the ugly road we are describing. If we were not challenged by these matters ourselves, we would not be able to speak of them with such passion.

8. REFERENCES

[4] D. Kupfer, “Dig deeper into the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the DSM-V, and you'll find an entry for "gaming disorder" in Section III, meaning the American Psychiatric Association believes the condition warrants further research
before it can be formally classified as a mental disorder.  
http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx
http://spectrum.ieee.org/telecom/internet/chinas-ejunkies-head-for-rehab
Game Addiction”, Center Street, 2006
adolescents”, Addiction, 97, 1601-1606.
self-control and narcissistic personality traits”, European Psychiatry, 23, 212-218,  
2008.
http://www.visualexpert.com/Resources/motheffect.html
http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2013-07/05/average-gamer
Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence”, Crown Publishers, NY,  
1999
http://health.usnews.com/health-news/articles/2008/05/07/addiction-to-video-game  
s-a-growing-concern
[23] A. Van Simper, “Internet addict tells how World of Warcraft gaming had become  
‘like crack cocaine’ after five week binge surrounded by filth”, Mirror News, 2013.  
8704#.Ut1STBB9KUk
[24] M. Tran, “Girl starved to death while parents raised virtual child in online game”,  
http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/05/korean-girl-starved-online-game
[25] R. Spencer, “Man dies after 7-day computer game session”, The Telegraph,  
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1544131/Man-dies-after-7-day-comp  
ter-game-session.html
[26] “Diablo 3 Death: Teen Dies After Playing Game For 40 Hours Straight”, The  
Huffington Post, 2012.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/18/diablo-3-death-chuang-taiwan-_n_1683036.html