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Addiction to Video Games a Growing Concern

Many parents are wondering where online and video-game play becomes obsession

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Ollie Morelli, 7, logs on to the family laptop before sunup to make sure his pet lion, Cedric, is set for the day. The character in the online game Webkinz would appear to be: His house, furnished by Ollie, boasts a football-shaped refrigerator, a football-helmet coffee table, a couch, and a flat-screen TV. Cedric requires hours of after-school attention, too—and sometimes inspires an outburst when Mom and Dad say, "Enough!" Like many parents these days, Ollie's have wondered uneasily where childish pastime begins to edge toward obsession. "The issue is not the amount of time," says Brian Morelli. "We can control that. It's the fact that he gets up before everyone else and sneaks onto the computer. It's like he sets his internal clock so he can play Webkinz."



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Concern is spreading among parents and mental-health professionals that the exploding popularity of computer and video games has a deeper dark side than simple couch-potatohood. Software sales jumped 28 percent last year to \$9.5 billion; an average of nine games were sold every second of the year, according to the Entertainment Software Association. Studies show that 92 percent of children under age 18 play regularly. According to the Media Research Lab at

Iowa State University, about 8.5 percent of 8-to-18-year-old gamers can be considered pathologically addicted, and nearly one quarter of young people—more males than females—admit they've felt addicted. Little wonder: In February, a team at Stanford University School of Medicine showed that areas of the brain responsible for generating feelings of addiction and reward are activated during game play. "We are seeing it over and over again," says Liz Woolley, founder of [On-Line Gamers Anonymous](#), a virtual 12-step program for gaming addicts. "We're losing [kids] into the games, and it's turning their brains to mush."

Saying when. How can parents know when a lot is too much? Media experts are quick to point out that computer and video games are not inherently bad for kids; indeed, most players find a balance, says David Walsh, founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family in Minneapolis: "They play their video games; they do their homework; they keep up with their responsibilities and have other interests. No problem."

But when the other areas of a child's life begin to suffer, parents may have cause to take corrective action. Kimberly Young, director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery in Bradford, Pa., points to several common warning signs of pathological behavior: fantasizing or talking about game characters or missions when offline; lying about or hiding how much time is spent playing or disobeying parental limits; losing interest in sports and hobbies; choosing the game over time with friends; and continuing to play despite plummeting grades, loss of a scholarship, a breakup with a partner. An addicted gamer's physical appearance may also change as he loses sleep, neglects to shower, and skips meals.

Team first. The games most apt to be overplayed are what people in the industry call MMORPGS, or "massively multiplayer online role-playing games." Games of this type—World of Warcraft and Call of Duty are two popular examples—connect players in cyberspace who then form "guilds" or "clans" that participate in raids against opposing squads. Generally, each player is represented by an avatar—usually a three-dimensional character that either the game or the player creates—and has a role to play, such as defender or strategist. Guild members may be from all over the world, and the missions can go on for days. "Let's say I'm a ninth grader, with teammates in Japan and Bulgaria, and Mom says it's time to do homework," says Walsh. "I E-mail my teammates I need to stop, and their response is: 'Are you nuts?' The membership on the teams becomes very important to these kids. Dropping out of a mission is not ok." The longer you play, says Young, "the more you begin to identify with this make-believe world."

One mother and physician in the Midwest, who asked for anonymity to protect her son, is all too familiar with the siren call of the game. Her son, now 21, started playing computer games as a young child, graduated to World of Warcraft in high school, and spent so much time online as a college freshman that he got mostly F's and was forced to withdraw. His mom says that the progression from great kid and student to self-destructive abuser stupefied the family. "I didn't understand this was a whole different thing," she says of the

game. "I'd call him to dinner, and he couldn't come," she says. "'We're in the middle of a raid!' he'd say. 'They need me!'"

Once he left college, he had to make a choice: either find somewhere else to live and play the game, at his expense, or quit the game, start working, and go back to school part time. He chose the latter and is now finishing up an associate's degree. "We determined there would be no computer games allowed in our house when we saw how destructive they could be," says his mother. The family even locked up the computers. "The longer he spends away from this, the more he'll realize how destructive and what a fantasy world it was," she says. "But I don't know what will happen when he goes out on his own."

Therapy wasn't an option, since the young man was an adult and refused to go. But even when age or willingness isn't an issue, finding effective professional help can be a challenge. For now, game addiction is not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, which means that there are no national guidelines for what therapy should entail. Whether this will change in 2012, the date a new apa handbook on mental disorders is scheduled to come out, is still up for discussion. Pathological video and computer game play would now be considered one of a broad group of "behavioral addictions" that also includes compulsive shopping and addiction to online pornography, for example. The only behavioral addiction now specifically listed in the handbook is pathological gambling. To treat these disorders, cognitive behavioral therapy is often used to identify the thought processes that lead to the compulsion and to change the destructive thinking. Families seeking help may need to pay out of their own pockets, because insurance typically doesn't cover addictions that don't officially exist. That said, many young gamers are diagnosed with other conditions such as depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Elsewhere in the world, the problem is recognized as huge. Governments in China and South Korea have helped fund treatment centers and hotlines for electronic game addicts. Keith Bakker, director of the Smith and Jones Center in Amsterdam, a residential detox center that treats video game addicts from around the world, compares their poison to crack cocaine. But "it's easier to treat a coke addict than it is a gamer," he says. "The gamer's denial is so great, and it's compounded by family and community," he says. "Who in the world thinks gaming is a problem?" At first, the center kept gamers physically apart from other addicts, but results were much better when the kids took group therapy with residents troubled by eating disorders, marijuana, or cocaine. "They began to see the

similarities between themselves," Bakker says. After they stop denying they have an addiction and the damage it's causing, he notes, many young people never pick up a game again.

Outside help. In this country, some families are turning to wilderness therapy. The Aspen Education Group, a California-based organization that treats underachievers from around the country, provides young people ages 11 to 18 with a back-to-nature approach to ending their gaming obsessions. "At home when they have frustrations, they go to their video games," says therapist Aaron Shaw. "Here they have cold weather, hiking." By being away from their screens for seven to nine weeks, he says, "they learn some healthier coping mechanisms." Shaw first tries to discover kids' reasons for playing; often, he finds, it's to find freedom and fun and out of a need for greater acceptance from their parents. (If Mom is always nagging that games are a waste of time, notes Shaw, "they say: 'Screw you, my friends online love me, and I'll hang out with them.'")

To that point, Young advises parents who want to head off serious trouble to find ways to limit play without blaming or criticizing. Better to set—and enforce—time restrictions, as the Morellis do, put electronics in a well-trafficked area, and make it easy for a child to choose clubs or sports. Games should never be a child's main focus, cautions Woolley. Her wisdom is hard won. Several years ago, Woolley's son committed suicide in front of his computer with his favorite game on the screen.

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