



Hooked on video games

The onset of video game addiction is insidious. It creeps up and grabs hold of the victim before they may even recognize the symptoms. Symptoms include: agitation, anxiety, loss of friends, loss of alternative activities, diminished self-care and limited attendance to everyday responsibilities.

With the advent of modern technology and the availability of the Internet, children, youth and young adults are the first generation raised on a diet of electric media where alternate realities run like water. Therein gamers not only find virtual friends, stories and plot lines, but real sentient beings; other gamers with whom to collaborate in an on-line maze of intrigue, death, destruction and counter culture activities.

Together, real gamers come to rely on each other in a virtual world as they encounter situations designed to form group cohesion and mutual dependency. Particularly enticing to many are games of war and destruction. Here, the death of a colleague translates into really losing that player. The player is off-line. Death is dreaded because you go from insider to nothing... in a heartbeat.

Like being picked last when choosing teams for a game of pick-up basketball or football, no one wants to be in that despised position and certainly no one wants to die first. The game is on and the players develop a sense of loyalty to each other in order to survive and thus they are hooked.

These are often games without end and so to leave the game is tantamount to letting down the team, breaking the chain and undermining the participation of everyone involved. You will be responsible for the death of your collaborators. A group consciousness develops and no player wants to be blamed for letting the others down or in this reality, killing them off. The gamer letting down the team is a pariah, a traitor, someone to avoid in future games. The gamer who lets down the team is someone to be shunned. The one who blinks first by going to dinner or doing homework becomes the one to be avoided by this group. You lose real

friends, social connections and your on-line identity. Concurrent to the game, gamers relate to each other; they discuss everything from strategy to how to keep real life from intruding on their play. They support each other's dependency and participation.

As the grip of the group development and co-dependence strengthens; grades, sleep, friends and self-care slip away.

As a society we prize loyalty, determination and honour. These qualities are perverted to hook players deeper. The uninitiated just doesn't understand. These virtues hold gamers hostage to the play.

From the outside, as parents, family or friends attempt to withdraw the gamer from on-line life to the activities and demands of everyday life, the gamer resists, feeling increasingly anxious in view of the tugs and pulls away from the game. Conflict ensues between the gamer and loved ones. Attendance to non-gaming life deteriorates. The gamer looks more and more like a crack addict.

Parents and loved ones are well advised to seek professional help and intervention in view of the above scenario. The gamer is hooked to gaming with a ferociousness as seen in any other kind of behavioural addiction. Withdrawal will be a hard fought endeavour and supports will have to be in place to manage anxiety, depression and threats of harm to self or others. For help, speak with your family physician, local community counselling agency or addiction services provider.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.