

Addiction to MMORPGs: Symptoms and Treatment

By Dr. Kimberly Young

There are an abundant online games in our internet-dependent society. The most common online games include gambling, which is also a prime candidate for addiction, massively multi-player online role playing games (MMORPGs) and multi-user domain games (MUDs). MMORPGs are networks of players, who interact with each other to achieve goals, go on missions, and reach high scores in a fantasy world, while MUDs combine elements of role-playing games, fighting, killing in social chat channels with limited graphics.

MMORPGs originated from Dungeons and Dragons, a role playing game played on pen and paper from the 1970s. Eventually, computers revolutionized role playing games; first with Ultima Online in 1997, then EverQuest and Asheron Call. These three pioneer MMORPGs were coined the "Big Three" that ultimately attracted Western players. Since the "Big Three," many other games of this genre have sprouted. Some of the most popular MMORPGs today are EverQuest, World of Warcraft, Asheron Call, Ultima Online, and City of Heroes. Most MMORPGs charge a one-month subscription fee of about \$15. South Korea boasts the highest number of online subscribers.

MUDs are very similar to MMORPGs. However, MUDs must be created by the players in the game, while MMORPGs only require you to create a character to start on a predetermined quest. MUDs require much more social interaction because they were originally chat-based. There are very few commercial MUDs due to the constantly growing market of free games.

Signs of MMORPG Addiction

Parents across the globe are increasingly concerned about their sons and daughters online gaming habits. They are sure that there is a problem but counselors unfamiliar with online gaming addiction don't understand how seductive they can be. One parent that I had worked with told me she had gone to talk to her son's guidance counselors, the school psychologist, and two local addiction rehabilitation centers. "No one had ever heard of someone getting addicted to X-Box. They all told me it was a phase and that I should try to limit my son's game playing. They didn't understand that I couldn't. He had lost touch with reality. My son lost interest in everything else. He didn't want to eat, sleep, or go to school, the game was the only thing that mattered to him. When I told him to get offline, he yelled, screamed, and once, he pushed me. This isn't my son. He's a quiet and loving boy. Now, I don't know who is."

Parents search for information and help of any kind as they helplessly watch their sons and daughters become more absorbed into the computer and begin to see the warning signs of a dangerous pattern. Gamers who become hooked show clear signs of addiction. Like a drug, gamers who play almost every day, play for extended periods of time (over 4 hours), get restless or irritable if they can't play, and sacrifice other social activities just to game are showing signs of addiction. Common warning signs include:

- A preoccupation with gaming
- Lying or hiding gaming use
- Disobedience at time limits
- Loss of interest in other activities
- Social withdrawal from family and friends
- Psychological withdrawal from the game
- Using gaming as an escape
- Continuing to game despite its consequences

Prevalence of MMORPG Addiction

Korea is perhaps the most wired country in the world and is suffering from a rapidly growing number of online game addicts, according to a public counseling agency. The Korea Agency for Digital Opportunity and Promotion (KADO), a specialized government agency aimed at bridging the digital divide, said yesterday the total number of officially reported cases by 40 game addiction counseling agencies in the country posted 6,271 during the first half of the year.

In the first six months of 2005, new cases of gaming addicts have already approached the total number of cases filed in 2004, an estimated 8,978 according to the KADO forecasts and they estimate that the prospective number of counseling cases in 2006 will exceed 10,000.

As the country has the largest market of Internet-based multi-user role playing games in the world, Korean online gamers may be more exposed to the risk of addiction compared to those of other countries. While these statistics are preliminary, they may be applicable to suggest estimates for other countries such as the US, the UK, or China as more data becomes available.

Treatment for MMORPG Addiction

Compulsive disorders can manifest themselves in many non-chemical means such as gaming, food, shopping, or high-risk sexual behavior, and the mental health field is just beginning to acknowledge the addictive potential of the Internet to the same extent. While research in the addiction field has not been conclusive, most researchers agree that a combination of neurochemical and behavioral bases explain addictive behavior and studies support that non-intoxicants are equally as habit-forming as substances. Despite these research findings, most Internet addicts deny that anyone can "get addicted to a machine" and it is the family and friends who first view the behavior as troublesome.

For players who do admit they have a problem, the most common response is a guilt-and-purge cycle common to many addictions. Many players who realize that they are addicted will kill their characters and delete the game software with no regrets; however, many game addicts aren't as successful.

For most players, true recovery involves looking at the issues underlying the game habit. Addicted players need to examine the emotional motives that prompt them to play a game excessively and look for alternate ways to satisfy those needs. For many, therapy is necessary for

recovery to take place because many need to realize that there is something else going on and they need to be in charge of changing it.

As in any treatment program, the primary step to take in the path to recovery is to accept and not refute “denial,” a defense mechanism that addicts frequently employ and that effectively stops them from accepting treatment. Once this obstacle is conquered, treatment can be performed more effectively than it would otherwise. It is important to understand that compulsive online gaming is a progressive illness that is treatable. It affects the gamer, their family, their school work or their employer, and their community. It is called “the hidden illness” since there is no smell on the breath nor stumbling of steps or speech. Nonetheless, it is as debilitating as alcoholism or drug addiction.

Often, gamers have other problems that are part of the reason they game. They also have problems that were produced by their gaming. These include relationship, work-related, legal, emotional problems such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse. It is not known whether one problem causes the other. It is more important to get a clear picture of your immediate concerns and treat them in a structured and systematic manner.

Residential care may be required when the effects of the game have become severe. Often gamers refuse treatment until they become deeply depressed, are kicked out of school, are terminated from a job, are threatened with divorce and separation, or are thinking about suicide. Once problems have become this severe, it is important to seek professional help for evaluation. Residential treatment programs often last for 4 to 6 weeks of intensive treatment. Some gamers may require more or less time, so recommendations will be made following an initial assessment.

*Bio: Dr. Kimberly Young is the executive director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery (www.netaddiction.com), a recovery service and consultation firm specializing in Internet-related conditions. She is also Professor of Management Sciences at St. Bonaventure University's School of Business and has written numerous articles on Internet addiction including two recovery books, *Caught in the Net* and *Tangled in the Web*.*