

XBOX DETOX

SEATTLE NATIVE AARON STACKPOLE was about 7 or 8 years old when he first started playing video games. "My dad was an electronics guy," he says, "and computers were always lying around the house." His childhood game-playing continued to adulthood—but he never imagined it would cost him his relationship and his three children.

Now 33, Stackpole, a former senior system administrator for NEC Corporation of America, a leading technology provider, found himself spending about 60 hours a week playing the online fantasy role-playing game EverQuest—where players create characters (or avatars) to slay monsters for treasures. That habit led to the breakup with the mother of his children—one age 7 and a pair of twins, 8.

Stackpole's game habit isn't all that

unusual. Statistics released in 2005 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reveal that up to 90 percent of children in America play video games. And for a significant number of them—more than 5 million, according to a recent report from the American Medical Association's (AMA) Council on Science and Public Health—that game-playing habit has veered from a childhood diversion to an addiction: something that interferes with other aspects of their life. In Stackpole's case, playing video games left him little time for anything else, including his children.

Dr. Hilarie Cash, a Redmond-based therapist, is the co-founder of Internet/Computer Addiction Services (ICA Services). The resolute Cash worries that parents are downplaying the serious side

Those video games your kids are playing may not be the simple entertainment you imagine. Instead, for a significant number of gamers, what seems like child's play could morph into a serious online addiction

BY ELIZABETH M. ECONOMOU

of all types of video games, but especially massively multiplayer online role-playing games (also known as MMORPGs). "The attitude here," she says, "is that video games are mainstream cool, and game developers are big stars." That's not surprising, considering that the Pacific Northwest is home to Microsoft, Nintendo and companies such as Valve, maker of Counter-Strike, a wildly popular first-person shooter video game, and Sony Online Entertainment, a worldwide leader in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs, or simply MMOs) and a subsidiary of Sony Pictures Digital Inc.

More and more, video game-playing is being viewed by professionals as a serious health threat. Last June, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) debated whether to classify video game addiction as a mental disorder. Although they opted not to, Cash is optimistic that the APA will someday eventually include it in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the standard text used by psychiatrists worldwide. "It will legitimize the problem," she says.

In their new book, *Video Games and Kids: How Parents Can Stay In Control* (Issues Press; spring/summer 2008), co-authors Cash and Kim McDaniel—a Kirkland-based mental health counselor—emphasize the impact of video game addiction or overuse on child development. "If they



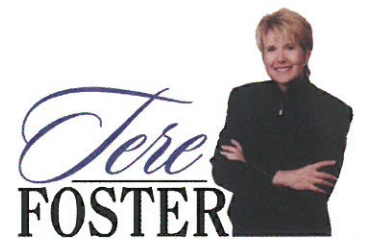
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