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[parents] thought of it as an addictive substance they might really pause before allowing their kids to engage so full-heartedly and without restraint and limitations," says Cash.

Like drug and alcohol addiction, those addicted to video games pursue game-playing despite negative consequences. The addiction is characterized by compulsive behavior, feelings of euphoria, tolerance and withdrawal, cravings, mood changes and irritability. Disrupted sleep patterns, poor eating habits and physical symptoms such as backaches, carpal tunnel syndrome, strained eyes and deep vein thrombosis are present in addicted gamers. Unlike substance addiction, however, there is no physiological addiction.

Portland-based Dr. Jerald J. Block—who has a private psychology practice and teaches at Oregon Health and Science University, prefers the term "pathological computer use" (PCU) to "video game addiction." "The behavior is much like pathological gambling, compulsive shopping and pyromania," he says.

While anyone can become addicted to video games at any age, Cash—who's trained a half-dozen or so therapists in how to treat video game addiction—says children and teens with a poor self-image, limited social skills, attention-deficit disorder, Asperger's syndrome and painful family dynamics are most vulnerable. Adults who struggle with other addictions and those who are going through a major life transition, such as divorce or job loss, are also at high risk.

Meanwhile, Seattle-based clinical psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Wolf—who specializes in addiction medicine—suggests that the "pursuit and release of dopamine," one of the "natural feel-good chemicals in the brain," is what keeps gamers like Stackpole coming back for more.

Stackpole admits he still plays about 15 to 20 hours of World of Warcraft every week. Given the 60-plus hours per week he used to spend, he doesn't believe it's an excessive amount for him. While he has never been treated professionally for video game addiction, he says he was able to treat himself. "Even a cursory glance at my life at the time was more than enough to convince me that what I was doing was

harmful," he says.

These days, Stackpole also makes time for reading, working with horses, socializing with friends and watching movies and television. "My life is balanced. That is the simplest way to put it. Back then, it was chaotic, passionate and foolish," he says.

South Korea, meanwhile, offers another cautionary tale. In the world's most wired country, playing video games is a major public health issue. In that country, video games are played in public gaming rooms or parlors called "PC bangs." According to *The New York Times* (November 18, 2007), the South Korean government has created a network of 140 Internet-addiction counseling centers, in addition to treatment centers at hospitals and, most recently, an Internet rescue camp, started last summer. "They're seeing the next generation disengaged from real life. They're so addicted they're not doing well in school, and they're not developing normally," says Cash.

Of gamers, those who've moved to highly social—albeit not face-to-face—competitive MMOs appear to be more at risk. According to the AMA's Council on Science and Public Health, individuals who play MMOs are more successful in social relationships in virtual reality than in real relationships. Cash says the interactive nature of the games—such as World of Warcraft, sometimes dubbed "World of War Crack"—is what makes them highly addictive.

Gamers often collaborate online with other gamers—whom they never meet—to achieve goals and gain rewards within the virtual arena. Advancing, or "leveling up," in the game requires cooperation and dependence. And for only \$15 per month—the cost to subscribe—it's an undeniably cheap form of entertainment.

"MMOs are designed with addiction in mind," says mental health counselor McDaniel, who claims game manufacturers spend a lot of money researching addictive behavior. Scott Hartsman, a senior game producer with San Diego-based Sony Online Entertainment, says it's no more addictive than playing golf or reading a paperback. "People are just scared because it's a new [medium]." Block, meanwhile, estimates that about 9 million Americans are afflicted with PCU:


Students are dropping out of high school and college, not showing up for work and failing to learn critical social skills, he says. Compulsive gamers also tend to look at the world in absolute terms. "The inability to recognize personal limitations and a belief in a fair and just world...sets them up for rage when they learn otherwise," he says.

Perhaps it's time for parents to put video

game addiction (video game playing of all types) on their radar screens along with smoking, drugs and other potential addictions. They might also take a cue or two from Stackpole: "I believe the most important thing is to be involved in your children's lives ... If I have regrets, it's that I didn't learn those lessons when I was younger—I could have spared my children the pain of losing their father." **S**

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