Lost in an Online Fantasy World
As Virtual Universes Grow, So Do Ranks of the Game-Obsessed

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They are war heroes, leading legions into battle through intricately designed realms. They can be sorcerers or space pilots, their identities woven into a world so captivating, it is too incredible to ever leave. Unfortunately, some of them don't.

Video games have often been portrayed as violence-ridden vehicles for teen angst. But when several people in South Korea and other countries died after sitting hunched in Internet cafes, immersed in virtual worlds for hours on end without food or sleep, some began to see excessive online gaming as a new technological threat.

Participation in massively multiplayer online role-playing games, also called MMORPGs or MMOs, has skyrocketed from less than a million subscribers in the late 1990s to more than 13 million worldwide in 2006. With each new game boasting even more spectacular and immersive adventures, new ranks of gamers are drawn to their riveting story lines. Like gambling, pornography or any other psychological stimulant, these games have the potential to thrill, engross and completely overwhelm.

The most widely played MMO, Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft, has 6.5 million players worldwide, most of whom play 20 to 22 hours per week. Thousands can be logged in simultaneously to four different WoW servers (each its own self-contained "realm"), interacting with players across the globe in a vast virtual fantasy setting full of pitched battles and other violent adventures.

Brady Mapes, a 24-year-old computer programmer from Gaithersburg, Md., and an avid WoW fan, calls it a "highly addictive game -- it sucks the life out of you."

An MMO differs from an offline game in that the game world evolves constantly as each players' actions directly or indirectly influence the lives of other players' characters. In WoW, players can simply attack one another, interact with the environment, or role-play in more complex relationships. More time playing means greater virtual wealth and status, as well as access to higher game levels and more-exciting content.

In addition, online gamers can join teams or groups (called "guilds" in WoW) that tackle game challenges cooperatively. Fellow team members see membership as a commitment and expect participation in virtual raids and other joint activities. The constant interaction with other players can lead to friendships and personal connections.

'All I Could Think About Was Playing'

"The main reason people are playing is because there are other people out there," said Dmitri Williams, an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who has researched the social impacts of MMOs. "People know your name, they share your interests, they miss you when you leave."
As MMO fan sites filled with raving gamers proliferate, so have online-addiction help blogs, where desperate recluses and gamers' neglected spouses search for a way out.

"I don't want to do everything with [my husband], but it would be nice to have a meaningful conversation once in awhile," writes one pregnant wife on Everquest Daily Grind, a blog for those affected by excessive use of another popular fantasy MMO. "He does not have much interest in the baby so far, and I am worried that after it is born, he will remain the same while I am struggling to work and take care of the baby."

Another gamer writes that she was angry at her boyfriend for introducing her to online gaming, which began consuming her life at the expense of her personal and academic well-being.

"But I think deleting [your] character doesn't work, because the game haunts you," she said. "All I could think about was playing."

Kimberly Young, who has treated porn and chat-room addicts since 1994 at her Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, said that in the past year video game fixation has grown more than anything else.

"In MMOs, people lead wars and receive a lot of recognition," Young said. "It's hard to stop and go clean your room. Real life is much less interesting."

The trend echoes across the continents, with game-addiction treatment centers cropping up in China in 2005 and this summer in Amsterdam. In South Korea, where 70 percent of the population has broadband Internet access, the Korea Agency for Digital Opportunity offers government-funded counseling for the game-hooked.

'The Real World Gets Worse'

The games are set up to be lengthy, with a quest taking six hours or more to complete. The organization of players into cooperative teams creates a middle-school-esque atmosphere of constant peer pressure.

"You're letting other people down if you quit," Young said. "If you are good, the respect becomes directly reinforcing."

According to research performed by Nick Yee, a Stanford graduate student and creator of the Daedalus Project, an online survey of more than 40,000 MMO players, the average player is 26 years old; most hold full-time jobs. Seventy percent have played for 10 hours straight at some point, and about 45 percent would describe themselves as "addicted."

Yee believes escapism to be the best predictor of excessive gaming. A person who plays MMOs in order to avoid real-life problems, rather than simply for entertainment or socialization, is more likely to experience what he calls "problematic usage."

"People feel like they lack control in real life, and the game gives them a social status and value that they are less and less able to achieve in the real world," Yee said. "As a result, the real world gets worse and the virtual world gets better in comparison."

Liz Woolley, a Wisconsin software analyst and veteran of Alcoholics Anonymous, founded Online Gamers Anonymous in May 2002 by adapting AA's 12-step addiction recovery model to help gamers quit cold-turkey. Woolley recommends getting professional help for underlying issues and finding other hobbies and real-world activities to replace gaming.

"Addicts want to live in a fantasy life because you can't do a 'do-over' in real life," she said. "It can be hard to accept. You have to let them know, 'Hey, this is real life. Learn to deal with it.'"
'Every Player Has a Choice'

"People are reluctant to point a finger at themselves," said Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developers Association. Excessive use "is a reflection of friction in that person's life. They shouldn't use the game as a scapegoat."

Casual gamers may find it difficult to advance to the game's highest levels in the face of more dedicated rivals, such as Mapes, the Gaithersburg WoW fan, whose highest-level warrior character is a force to be reckoned with. "If I go up against someone who only plays for one to two hours, I'll decimate them," he said. "There are other games out there if you only want to play a couple hours at a time."

That dedication sometimes pushes Mapes to see the game as more of a chore than a pastime. "Sometimes I realize that I'm not having any fun, but I just can't stop," he said.

Several of the MMO researchers interviewed for this story pointed out that many game companies employ psychologists who analyze the games and suggest ways to make them easier to play over long stretches of time.

Della Rocca argues that because online games' monthly subscription rates remain constant regardless of how many hours a subscriber spends on the network, developers profit less when gamers play more intensively.

The psychologists "monitor subjects playing the games in order to eliminate flaws and points of frustration," Della Rocca said. "The notion that we are trying to seduce gamers is a fabrication of people who don't understand how games are developed."

Since Blizzard Entertainment released WoW in 2004, calls to Online Gamers Anonymous have more than tripled, according to Woolley, who said the industry is directly at fault for the suffering of the people she tries to help.

"I think the game companies are nothing more than drug pushers," she said. "If I was a parent, I wouldn't let them in my house. It's like dropping your kids off at a bar and leaving them there."

The signs of excessive MMO use are similar to those of alcoholism or any other dependency -- tolerance, withdrawal, lying or covering up, to name a few. However, many in the industry are hesitant to call it an addiction because, in the case of MMOs, the nature of the problem is based on how it affects the user's life, not the amount of time spent playing.

According to tvturnoff.org, Americans spend an average of 28 hours a week watching television, a fact that has yet to spawn a bevy of dependence clinics.

"If a person was reading novels excessively, we'd be less likely to call that 'addiction' because we value reading as culture," said the University of Illinois's Williams. "We see game play as frivolous due to our Protestant work ethic. There's plenty of anecdotal evidence out there to suggest this is a problem, but it's not the role of science to guess or bet."

Mapes, who has played other engrossing titles such as Medal of Honor and Diablo and eventually set them aside, said the decision to control excessive gaming is one any player can make.

"Ultimately, every player has a choice to stop," he said. "I've stopped before, and I've seen other people stop if they get burned out."

'No One Was Talking About It'

Woolley disagrees, especially after witnessing the bitter outcome of her son's Everquest obsession.
Shawn had played online games before, so she didn't suspect anything different when he picked up the newest MMO from Sony. Within months, Woolley said, Shawn withdrew from society, losing his job and apartment and moving back home to live a virtual life he found more fulfilling.

After a number of game-induced grand mal seizures sent Shawn, who was epileptic, to the emergency room repeatedly, he chose to pay ambulance bills rather than stop playing. The medical professionals he saw treated his external symptoms but dismissed his gaming condition.

"They told me, 'Be glad he's not addicted to something worse, like drugs,' and sent him home," Woolley said.

On Thanksgiving Day 2001, Woolley found 21-year-old Shawn dead in front of his computer after having committed suicide. Everquest was on the screen.

Readers' responses to an article written about the incident in a local Wisconsin paper poured in, and the national attention Shawn's story subsequently received prompted Woolley to start up a self-help Web site. In the four years since its launch, Online Gamers Anonymous (http://www.olganon.org/) has had 125 million hits and registered more than 2,000 members, Woolley said.

"I realized that gaming addiction was an underground epidemic affecting thousands of people, but no one was talking about it," she said. "I wasn't worried about pressure from the gaming industry. I thought, 'You already took my kid, you can't take anything else.'"