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Virtual addiction is no fun and games

By Chua Hian Hou

PSYCHOLOGIST Angeline Khoo had heard a lot about video game addiction while working with parents concerned about protecting children from the ills of the Internet.

To find out what made the activity so compelling, she started playing the online game World Of Warcraft last December.

Before long, she was hooked, playing more than two hours on weekdays, longer on weekends.

'It started as research, but I really enjoy it too. So it's become difficult to separate what's work and what's play,' she said wryly.

Her verdict, from first-hand experience: 'Yes, games are definitely addictive.'

As video games grow in popularity - a 2004 report by research firm IDC put the number of gamers here at over a million - the issue of game addiction and its potentially averse impact has come under increasing scrutiny.

The American Psychological Association classifies video game addiction as 'behavioural abuse' just like gambling.

Addicts - mostly males in their teens and 20s - display symptoms that hurt them socially and professionally: pre-occupation with games, needing more and more time playing before feeling satisfied, being restless when not playing, displaying anti-social behaviour like lying to loved ones or skipping school to get their fix.

The ultimate sign: the addict knows he is playing too much and wants to or has tried to stop - but cannot.

How bad can it get?

One Singaporean father who did not want to be identified told The Straits Times how his teenage son changed drastically after getting obsessed with the online game MapleStory.

The once-studious boy would lock himself in his room playing, and did not do his homework, study, or even care when he failed his examinations.

Parents and the school tried to counsel the teenager, to no avail - he would even turn aggressive and abusive if asked to play less.

When the father threatened to disconnect the Internet line, the teenager packed up and left home.

'The maid told me that he returned once a few days later, in the afternoon when I was working, to take the computer,' the father said.

That was a year ago. The boy, now 16, is staying with a relative but has rebuffed all attempts to contact him.

Dr Daniel Fung, a consultant psychiatrist with the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) child guidance clinic, said he has seen a few extreme cases each year of child addicts who become so aggressive and uncontrollable they have to be admitted for treatment.

With his other 200-plus patients, something he hears regularly is: 'Oh, by the way, he plays a lot of games.'

And unlike drug or glue addicts who typically come from lower-income or broken homes, most game addicts are from financially stable families, he noted.

A search online turned up heated discussion of the issue: hundreds of articles from the international medical community on game addiction and its impact on families and loved ones.

Last month, Amsterdam-based addiction clinic Smith & Jones became the first in Europe to specialise in game addiction.

Over the telephone, director Keith Bakker told The Straits Times that the clinic opened its gaming unit after seeing more and more 'pure game addiction cases'. The clinic is now treating 15 in-patient game addicts and has received numerous inquiries, including some from Malaysia, Hong Kong and South Korea.

One major challenge with video game addiction, experts say, is identifying it.

'It is a very quiet addiction - you don't fall down drunk, you don't chalk up gambling debts, you don't have needle tracks, and if you can control it somewhat you can still pass exams or keep a job,' said Mr Bakker.

It is also less known than drugs, gambling or sex addiction.

Mr Hyke Van Der Heijden, 28, who is undergoing treatment at the Dutch centre, said in a phone interview: 'I played for 14 hours or more every day for years, only leaving home to buy toilet paper - but everybody just thought I was at home doing other stuff.'

He said he sold his technology company during the dot.com boom in 2000 and had 'too much money, too much time' on his hands

Family members and friends finally forced him to confront his addiction and seek help. Admitting he was

addicted was the first step towards recovery.

At the IMH, which also operates a community addiction management programme, treatment usually begins with counselling to help the addict realise the impact of his addiction. This is followed by encouragement and advice on how to manage it.

If counselling fails, the addict is warded and barred from playing games.

Dr Fung said it is possible for someone who is hooked to reduce the time spent gaming or to go cold turkey on his own.

It means staying away from computers and gaming centres. It calls for willpower and self-control.

For now, Dr Fung expects that video game addiction is here to stay, and could even get worse as computers become more accessible and games, more compelling.

More help will soon be available. Welfare group Touch Community Services is opening a 'cyber-wellness' centre tomorrow for those hooked on gaming.

The issue was a top worry of teachers and parents here when Touch ran talks at 160 schools in the past two years.

Its manager for cyber-wellness and sports, Mr Poh Yeang Cherng, said that since March, he has worked with almost 600 cases of youngsters in trouble because they spent too much time gaming.

The decision to open a centre followed from that. 'We had to turn away so many requests for help previously as we did not have the facilities to do counselling and rehabilitation for game addicts,' he said.

As for Dr Khoo and her fondness for the World Of Warcraft, she makes a face when asked if she is on the verge of addiction herself.

'I won't have a problem stopping,' she said.

'But I will miss it, a lot.'

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