

On-Line Gaming: How Much is too Much?

By Suzan Myhre, MSSW, LICSW, LPC

Estimates show that the global game market will grow from \$42 billion in 2007 to \$68 billion in 2012. Games are gaining market share on other forms of media, which draws big investors. Because of this there is a dramatic rise in free games offered on the internet. Social gaming is spreading because children and adults find it great fun to play with their real friends, with real identities on social networks like facebook.

Online gaming offers some fun opportunities. First, you get to play without leaving home. There is a social feature that allows you to play with anyone in the world including the friends you work and go to school with. There is often a clear goal and a strategy to many of the games. The concept of levels of play and advancement can give one a sense of accomplishment and success. None of these things is evil in and of themselves.

So how does a parent know when to start to get concerned? Below are some signs of trouble. This is not a complete list, nor is it a diagnostic tool. It is compiled by a group called online gamers anonymous, and was created to help flag probable problems and possible addictive activity.

1. Unable to predict time spent gaming
2. Can't control gaming for an extended period of time
3. Sense of euphoria while playing
4. Craving more game time
5. Neglecting family and friends
6. Restless, irritable or discontent when not gaming
7. Lying about your gaming
8. Experiencing problems with school or job performance
9. Feeling guilt, shame, anxiety or depression resulting from gaming
10. Changing sleep patterns
11. Health issues: Carpel tunnel, eye strain, weight change, back ache, sore neck, arms
12. Denying, rationalizing, and minimizing bad consequences of gaming
13. Withdrawing from real life hobbies
14. Eating more and more meals at the computer while gaming
15. Increased free time surfing game-related websites
16. Constant conversation with uninterested friends/family/partner about the game
17. Attempts to get friends/family/partner to play
18. Purchasing in-game items for real life money
19. Feeling the need to "stand up for gamers" and proclaim your life is perfect by listing your life's achievements, and continue to play 4-6 hours or more a day

If you answer yes to three to five you could have a problem. If you answer yes to five or more, you could have an addiction.

What's a parent to do? Talk to close respected friends. Get their thoughts. Talk to your teen/young adult about their gaming habits. Look at the big picture (friends, family time, chores, schoolwork, respectful behavior in the home). Speak with a counselor if the dialogue and rules do not produce change.

Most of all, do not hit the panic button. There are many problems that sneak up on us all, for a variety of reasons. Instead of beating yourself or the other up about this, look to God for help and guidance and seek help from others.