

# The Dark Side of Gaming

by Debbie Caudle and Erik Jones

Video games and online gaming are some of the most popular forms of entertainment, especially for young men.

## **But is there a dangerous dark side of gaming?**



It started innocently, like so many things do. Rob (name changed to protect identity) was just having a good time hanging out with friends. But what started off as just having fun turned into something far more serious.

### **Rob's experience with the dark side of gaming**

Rob's foray into online gaming started with first-person shooter games. He and his friends would get together, network their laptops and play multiplayer role-playing games for hours.

Then, in 2004, Rob was introduced to a new game: World of Warcraft (WoW). Up to that point, he had played games that had a set number of levels, making it possible to "win" the game. WoW was the first game that Rob played that one could never *win*.

That was because almost every other month the game makers would come out with new content for players to purchase. Rob had always been a highly motivated, goal-oriented and competitive person; so World of Warcraft presented an irresistible challenge.

## From hobby, to habit, to gaming addiction

WoW, like other massively multiplayer online games, is set up to create an alternate, fantasy life for the player. The avatar that each player creates has its own identity, profession and skill set. Players select a realm to play in and can join guilds with other players. It can be a very interactive and social game, involving the completion of quests. In fact, success in these games is often dependent on the amount of time a person puts into it. So they are designed to encourage hours of play time.

For Rob, World of Warcraft became an escape from his increasingly depressing life. A breakup with his girlfriend, his inability to keep up with the demands of his college classes - all could be pushed out of his mind while playing the game.

Rob created a completely different reality for himself through the game. In the game he was powerful and accomplished. It was only when he'd take a break from playing that his feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and depression would creep back in.

Rob found himself playing WoW more and more. The game was so in-depth that, if he didn't have to stop for real-life activities, he could play **all day**. *"I'd start playing when I woke up, and before I knew it, it was night time."* Gaming addiction began to consume him; he'd think about the game all day long, even when not playing. He'd even dream about it.

## Trying to kick the gaming addiction

Rob played WoW for three years. Twice he attempted to quit playing. *"You never want to think of yourself as an addict,"* he explained. Yet he knew the game was beginning to affect his life in negative ways. He was struggling to make his morning classes. He stopped working on his homework. **His real** social life suffered.

At one point he thought he'd kicked the gaming addiction. He stopped playing, focused on college and was doing better. He even got a summer job and was able to discipline himself throughout the summer in order to keep the job - playing the game only for limited periods of time.

When he returned to college that fall, he felt sure that he had the habit under control. It wasn't going to interfere with his life anymore.

But then, just as in the past, Rob found his way back to the game and started playing later and later, and it got harder to get up in the mornings. He'd wake up and realize he'd missed his classes again. Then, to combat the anxiety and stress of that choice, he'd turn to WoW.

Finally he chose to withdraw from all classes. He'd made a lot of money that summer, so he could still afford rent. He pretended to his family that all was well and played WoW for three months straight. *"I thought I'd love it. I got really good at it, but I had this crushing feeling at the same time. It wasn't fulfilling."*

What had begun as a hobby developed into a habit and now was a legitimate gaming addiction.

## Addiction and the brain: the chemistry of habits

What happened to Rob can happen to any of us. Knowing how habits develop and understanding brain chemistry are keys to unlocking the reasons why.

In his book, ***The Power of Habit***, Charles Duhigg writes about the ***habit loop***.

According to Duhigg, habits are formed because our brain is constantly looking to save effort, so it converts a sequence of actions into an automatic routine, called chunking. This is at the root of how all habits form. Left to its own devices, the brain will efficiently turn routines into habits (2012, pp. 17-19).

There are three components to the habit loop: the cue, the routine and the reward. The cue is anything that triggers the brain to know what pattern or routine to launch. The routine has been established by doing the same thing over and over. And the reward comes at the end. Over time, as the brain repeats this three-step loop, it becomes more automatic. The cue and the reward then become powerfully linked together, and a *craving* and sense of anticipation develops.

*“I’ve never wanted to do anything else in my life with such intensity. It was an extremely powerful compulsion,”* he admitted. Rob was a gaming addict. Rob discovered that firsthand after he thought he’d kicked gaming addiction for good. By this time he was married, had a job that paid well and hadn’t played WoW for years. Then, after an old friend visited, Rob was enticed back to the game. He played *one time*, and then decided he couldn’t go back down that path; he had too much to lose.

But to his dismay, the urge to keep playing was so strong that it became an obsession. He thought about the game constantly.

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You can find helpful information in our article [“Freedom From Addiction”](#) and related articles.

## Dangers of gaming

Rob is not alone in his struggle with excessive gaming. Anyone who works in a public school system with adolescents will tell you that many young people are affected by this problem - especially boys.

Males are lagging behind females in many areas today (see our blog post [“Why Real Men Are Becoming Extinct”](#) to view some of the statistics).

Though there are many factors that explain these statistics, one obvious factor is the overuse of gaming. According to an insightful **Psychology Today** article, some major problems associated with excessive gaming are:

- ◆ Impulsive behavior.
- ◆ Greater acceptance of violence.
- ◆ Stunted social skills.
- ◆ Difficulty paying attention.
- ◆ Difficulty dealing with stress and life issues.

## **Violent video games**

One of the most troubling aspects of gaming is the fact that today's most popular games are heavily based on violence. Games like Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty put the user behind a gun to kill sometimes hundreds of digital images of human beings - often with graphic depictions of blood and gore.

Scientific studies confirm that constantly bathing the mind in violent images leads to desensitization to violence. In other words, those who play violent video games have a reduced sympathy and sensitivity to real violence.

In 2000 a joint report was released by the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

*It said: "The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children. Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life. Preliminary studies indicate that the negative impact [of violent video games] may be significantly more severe than that wrought by television, movies, or music."*

In a 2006 study Iowa State University researchers found that exposure to violent video games *"increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and aggressive behaviors, and decreases helpful behaviors."*

The real question is not whether excessive gaming negatively affects young people's lives or whether violent video games turn young men into mass shooters. The real question is,

## **What positive purpose does gaming (especially when it's extreme) have?**

Those who perform massive acts of violence, such as public shootings, are overwhelmingly young men with a history of playing violent video games. Examples include Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Columbine High School, 1999), Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech, 2007), Jared Loughner (Tucson, Arizona, 2011), James Holmes (Aurora, Colorado, 2012), Adam Lanza (Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2012) and Elliot Rodger (Isla Vista, California, 2014).

Though obviously the majority of those who play violent games do not commit mass murders, yet many of those who have committed mass murders did play violent video games, and that correlation cannot be ignored.

## Dealing with the dark side of gaming

The real question is *not* whether excessive gaming negatively affects young people's lives or whether violent video games turn young men into mass shooters. The real question is,

- ❖ *What positive purpose does gaming (especially when it's extreme) have?*
- ❖ *Does spending hours playing electronic games enrich a person's life?*
- ❖ *Does playing violent video games make you (or your child) a better, more peace-loving person?*
- ❖ *Does it contribute to school or job success?*

It would be hard for anyone to answer yes to any of those questions.

To make wise decisions about dealing with the dark side of gaming, consider these factors:

- (a) Consider the time. Gamers often spend more than five hours a day gaming! These hours of nonproductive idleness in front of a screen accomplish nothing positive. The Bible teaches that we should strive to be active and productive (**Proverbs 10:4; Ecclesiastes 9:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:11**) and use our time wisely (**Ephesians 5:16**). The Bible warns that idleness is destructive (**Proverbs 12:11; 19:15; 31:27**).
- (b) Gaming can cause a person to live in a fantasy world and retreat from healthy social interaction with real people. Heavy gamers can even retreat into this antisocial behavior when they are with others by gaming on their phone or laptops instead of interacting with the people surrounding them. This is a telltale sign of gaming addiction.

The Bible teaches that our lives are to be based on love - outgoing concern - for others (Matthew 22:39; 1 Thessalonians 4:9). Love cannot be expressed when we retreat from human contact as a result of any kind of addiction.

- (c) Violent games are dangerous. God intends that we show love and concern for other people. The Sixth Commandment against murder (**Exodus 20:13**) teaches us to **value human life**. Committing acts of violence violates this law, as does thinking murderous and violent thoughts (**Matthew 5:21-22; Mark 7:20-23**).

If you are serious about living by God's standard of love toward others, violent video games that simulate killing should not be a part of your or your children's life.

## Avoiding or overcoming the dangers of gaming

This article has only skimmed the surface of a big issue. It seems that people only consider the negative consequences of gaming when a mass shooting occurs at the hands of a gamer. But once a few days pass, the issue fades from public thought.

This is an issue that we hope our readers will think deeply about.

If you are spending hours playing video games and recognize that it is negatively affecting your life, it is time to take action. The Bible teaches that one method of removing negatives from our lives is to cut them off at the source and avoid the temptations (**1 Corinthians 6:18; 2 Timothy 2:22**). Overcoming the misuse of gaming can require removing a video game console from your home, disabling the software on your computer or canceling your gaming subscription.

If you are a parent, monitor your children closely in this area. If you allow electronic games in your home, closely monitor their usage and whether or not the game is appropriate. Do not let your children waste hours of time being sedentary in front of a computer or TV screen. Also, be aware of smart phone games. If your children are withdrawing in social and family situations to play games, it may be time to take action.

## **Game over**

After weeks of struggle, Rob was finally able to let it go, thanks to the help of family and friends and reconnecting with his religious upbringing. He came to see that the game had become a type of idolatry for him, and he believes strongly that he was under spiritual attack. Others may find it necessary to seek professional help to break free from the gaming addiction. Though we naturally resist seeking help, the benefits can be worth it.

We hope Rob's story, and the other information in this article, will help others to avoid or overcome this serious problem.

## **5 Signs of Gaming Addiction**

### **Are you (or is someone you know) gaming way too much?**

Here are five warning signs of gaming addiction from Dr. Han Doug-hyun of Chung-Ang University Hospital:

1. A disruption in regular life patterns (like playing all night and sleeping during the day).
2. Slacking on responsibilities (such as work and school).
3. Needing a bigger fix (gaming longer to get the same level of enjoyment).
4. Withdrawal symptoms (such as anxiousness or irritability) when disconnected from the game.
5. Cravings (constant thoughts about the game when doing other things).