Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 7(7) – What will it take to WoW them? Does gaming addiction exist?

August 31, 2011

With more than 11 million subscribers, World of Warcraft (WoW) is a very popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) (Helgeson, 2011). Subscribers pay a fee to participate in an online environment called Azeroth where characters advance through levels by gaining experience points for performing quests (e.g., killing enemies, delivering items, raiding). Although it appears that most subscribers play WoW without any significant adverse consequences, for some, playing becomes excessive. Reports have attributed several deaths to excessive video game playing and online game playing. For instance, a New Mexico woman recently was sentenced to a prison term after her daughter died from malnutrition and dehydration while the mother played the game for hours (Foxnews.com, 2011). Perhaps that is why websites, like WoW Detox and Wowaholics are appearing. On these sites people can join an online community to discuss their "addiction" to WoW and steps to overcoming it.

DSM and gaming addiction

There has been significant debate as to whether video game "addiction" exists (Grusser, Thalemann, & Griffiths, 2007; Wood, 2008). Video game addiction was proposed as a subtype of Internet addiction for the upcoming publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Hartney, 2011). However, the American Psychological Association's upcoming fifth edition of DSM will not include video game "addiction" as a diagnostic category (American Psychological Association, 2007). DSM work group researchers are recommending including Internet addiction in the DSM-5 Appendix to stimulate more research (Cassels, 2010), but at this time, there is not enough scientific evidence to support the construct validity of gaming addiction.

Are online gaming addiction symptoms similar to substance abuse and behavioral addictions?

Research related to online gaming addiction is nascent. Although anecdotal, below are some symptoms from the TechAddiction website, followed by excerpts of people's anonymous stories on WoW Detox and Wowaholics. These personal experiences suggest that more research is warranted to evaluate these symptom patterns and determine if they relate to addiction or other mental disorders. Until future research provides some enlightenment, it is too early to say for sure.

- "Feelings of anger and frustration when not allowed access to the video game"
    - "When we as parents set limits on his playing, he became depressed and suicidal…we gave a 2nd chance but he broke his promise to stick to the "moderate" plan of playing once a week."
- "Decreased personal hygiene/Poor or irregular eating habits"
    - "I stuck to a diet of hot pockets and 2-liters, my room was my world, and I would spend nearly 24 hours on WoW. From the time I woke up until the time I went to bed, WoW was my one source of pleasure."
- "Decreased academic/work performance"
    - "In real life, I have forgotten how to act socially and have a 1 year gap of unemployment on resume."
    - "I lost my job. I played WoW non-stop and was only getting 2-3 hours of sleep a night, which made me tardy and absent a lot. A single parent with a huge mortgage and no job is depressing so I got more into WoW. About 5 months after I lost my job, my 4-year old son was removed from my custody because I would no longer cook for him, bath him, take him to appointments, etc. Then just 9 months after I lost my job, my house was foreclosed on. I really didn't care. Loosing my son let me play WoW uninterrupted. Loosing my home wasn't a concern as long as it didn't cut into my WoW time.
- "Frequently playing the game while neglecting important responsibilities"
    - "I ruined my life playing this game. I gave up a college education. A beautiful girlfriend. International travel. I have a tremendous amount of shame and guilt having played this game so much."
- "Occasional gaming 'binges' of 10 or more hours nonstop"
    - "I got a job at a restaurant one of the roomies worked at and

lasted part-time for a week. It was shortly after that when I found out that I could make more money than any of the roomies by working 1 night a week so I started working Saturday nights at a strip club (and I had always been modest prior to this). It was perfect, about $1000.00 a week, all the time in the world to play WoW. While stripping, I was introduced to cocaine! A drug that allowed me to play WoW even more! I was hooked. As cocaine became too expensive, I was turned onto meth, which was less expensive and kept me awake for up to 5 days at a time."

- "Declining social invitations so that game playing can continue"
    - "Finally after another night [playing] till 5:30am on a Friday night rather then spending it with a girl that I love. I went to sleep and in my dreams had dreams of Raids and thought of what I should be doing when I wake up in the game."
- "Less time spent with family and friends"
    - "My 15 yr old has played for a year and quickly became obsessed. Over the past 6 months he withdrew from sports, friends, and family, and his grades went straight downhill."
- "Marital/relationship difficulties resulting from excessive play"
    - "WOW cost me my marriage, I paid more attention to a game than I did my wife…"
    - "My son committed suicide Nov. 2010. His addiction to WoW had ruined his marriage. He cried because he could not stop. When his wife said she was leaving him he shot himself."

Wowaholics site offers addiction resources

WoW users have begun developing self-help tools for dealing with their excessive gaming. The Wowaholics site offers a 12-step program, screens for identifying problems, and other addiction resources, very similar to those that clinicians would use to help people with addiction-related problems.

Verdict…

Although the evidence appears to be compelling, and people report significant suffering, it is not clear whether excessive gaming is an expression of addiction or other mental disorder. Future research also will need to determine the causal relationship between games and excessive behavior (i.e., do games cause problems, or does having problems cause an attraction to games?). Finally, research also will need to consider the experience of excessive video gaming

within the context of overall mental health. Rather than a primary disorder, excessive gaming might be a symptom of other primary and co-occurring conditions, similar to gambling and other addictions.

-Tasha Chandler

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

References

American Psychological Association. (2007). Statement of the Americawn Psychological Association on "Video Game Addiction" Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://www.psych.org/MainMenu/Newsroom/NewsReleases/2007NewsReleases/07-47videogameaddiction_2_.aspx

Cassels, C. (2010). APA Releases Proposed Draft of the DSM-5. Medscape Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/716807

Foxnews.com. (2011). New Mexico mom gets 25 years for starving starving daughter. Fox News Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/06/03/new-mexico-mom-gets-25-years-for-starving-daughter/

Grusser, S. M., Thalemann, R., & Griffiths, M. D. (2007). Excessive computer game playing: Evidence for addiction and aggression? CyberPsychology & Behavior, 10(2), 290-292. doi: 10.1089/cpb.2006.9956

Hartney, E. (2011). Is video game addiction really an addiction? About.com Addictions Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://addictions.about.com/od/videogameaddiction/i/is_gaming_addiction_real.htm

Helgeson, M. (2011). World of Warcraft Subscriptions Fall Again. Gameinformer.com Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2011/08/06/world-of-warcraft-subscriptions-fall-again.aspx

Techaddiction.ca. Video Game Addiction Symptoms and Signs Retrieved Aug. 24,

2011, from http://www.techaddiction.ca/symptoms_of_video_game_addiction.html

Wood, R. T. A. (2008). Problems with the concept of video game "addiction": Some case study examples. International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 6(2), 196-178. doi: 10.1007/s11469-007-9118-0

Wowaholics.org. (2011). Wowaholics Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://www.wowaholics.org/

Wowdetox.com. (2011). WoW Detox: Tell the world your reasons for leaving the addicting game! wowdetox.com Retrieved Aug. 24, 2011, from http://www.wowdetox.com/