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Video-game addiction seen as growing threat
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The Sun (San Bernardino, CA)
Dec. 5, 2004

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Lee-Ping Wang and Shawn Woolley never met. But they shared the same prison. And neither of them wanted to leave.

Their jail was an online video game called “EverQuest.” Both found things in this fantasy realm of creatures and magic that the real world couldn't give them, and it consumed them.

At one point, they both thought about killing themselves.

Wang didn't. He's now a junior at UC Berkeley.

Woolley is buried in Wisconsin.

“I came pretty close to doing it,” Wang, a 21-year-old physics major, said of wanting to jump off a building. “I guess I just chickened out.”

These two gamers represent a dark corner of the interactive entertainment industry -- extreme online video game addiction.

Hard-core playing is far from a foreign concept to gaming America, which is about 50 percent of the country, according to the Entertainment Software Association. It's an accepted part of the culture. But many fear that tales such as Wang’s and Woolley’s will become more common as society increasingly plugs in to online gaming communities.

Two types of games are hugely popular online.

In first-person-perspective action games with online capability, players can challenge each other over the Internet. Microsoft's “Halo 2,” which is Xbox Live compatible, pulled in more money than “The Incredibles” movie during its opening weekend.

Much more elaborate are games similar to “EverQuest,” a massive multiplayer online role-playing game, known as MMORPG in the industry.

“I have friends who are gamers,” said Conie Noriega, 21, of Montclair, after shopping at the Victoria Gardens' EB Games store in Rancho Cucamonga. “They don't even eat.”

Nick Yee, a Stanford graduate student who has researched online gaming behavior, surveyed more than 3,000 gamers for his report, “Ariadne: Understanding MMORPG Addiction.”

Almost half of players ages 23 to 28 said they were addicted.

“EverQuest,” one of the most popular RPGs, has more than 400,000 monthly subscribers in the United States. In January, Sega will release “The Matrix Online,” which already has about 225,000 people signed up to test it.

“These games allow people to create their own world,” said Jerry Watson, owner of DreamLAN Gaming Center in Yucaipa. “In the real world, you're just some guy, but in a game, you're the man.”

In the world of "EverQuest,” Shawn Woolley became “iluvyou.”

REJECTED

Think of “EverQuest” as a virtual Renaissance Faire. Players create their own characters and assume their roles in a medieval fantasy setting. There are elves, wizards and adventurers. People organize everything from raids to giant-slayings. For many, it's all about building up their character or earning “money.” Most MMORPGs follow the same principles.

Because of the open-ended nature of "EverQuest,” it's been suggested that there's no ending. Wang said that's partially true.

“No one ever gets to it,” he said. “By the time they get close, they've already unlocked another extension.'

Dave Greenfield, founder of the Center for Internet Studies in West Hartford, Conn., and author of the book “Virtual Addiction,” opts to look at the situations surrounding the players.

“We need to look at why,” he said. “What are they getting out of these games that they're not getting out of the real world?”

Yee's “Ariadne” study details low self-esteem, poor self-image and relationship issues as some of the real-life factors that could influence a player’s use of a game.

“Eventually, there comes a point when the world around you starts to shrink,” Greenfield said.

For Woolley, who battled emotional problems and learning disabilities in the past, “EverQuest” looked like a godsend.

“He really wanted to be liked by people,” said his mother, Liz Woolley, a software engineer who moved to Harrisburg, Pa., after her son's death.

Shawn Woolley lived in front of the screen.

He quit his job at a pizza restaurant. He let his once-tidy apartment disappear under mounds of untended laundry, pots and pans. One time, his mother found him at her home, awake at 2 a.m., with “EverQuest” running on the screen.

“I told him, ‘Shawn, those aren't real people they're figments,’ Liz Woolley said. “He told me, ‘They ARE real. They're my friends. They're my family.”

She said her son actually formed a close friendship with someone in “EverQuest.”

“The two of them would just hang out and hold each other’s stuff because they didn't trust the ‘banks’ there.”

One day in June 2000, Shawn logged onto the game. His friend disappeared, taking with him the money and items Shawn's character entrusted him to hold.

“He was so hurt,” his mother said. “He thought he had found the answer to life, but instead he learned that you can't trust anyone. Just like in the real world.”

That betrayal actually forced Shawn to quit playing for a couple of weeks. His mother was excited, hoping that he would put the game away for good.

“But then he was back in less than a month,” she said.

Liz Woolley believes her son's last moments had to do with a character he named “iluvyou.”

“I guess he tried to propose to someone, and something happened,” she said. “He never went back to that server after that.”

On Thanksgiving Day in 2001, Liz Woolley found her son dead in front of his computer. “EverQuest' was still on the screen.”

He shot himself with a .22-caliber rifle two days earlier, on Nov. 20.

He was 21.

Wang remembers Shawn Woolley's story. He saw a story about him on “48 Hours” a few years ago.

“I remember watching it,” he said. “And then I remember going to the message boards and talking with people about how different we were from him.”

“RASCARCAPAC”

Keith Robinson, president of Intellivision, one of the oldest game companies in the industry, said games are built to keep people playing.

“The well-crafted games hold that carrot just out of your reach,” he said. “They appeal to our sense of achievement.”

From summer 2001 to winter 2002, Lee-Ping Wang kept reaching, often from 9 a.m. to midnight or later.

He estimated that he spent about 5,000 hours or 200 days playing online, mostly as the magician-class character he named “Rascarcapac” after a cursed mummy from "The Adventures of Tintin” comics.

“I had one meal a day,” he said. “That was breakfast.”

Wang said much of his time was spent “trade-skilling,” which is basically getting a job and getting good at it. Wang took to blacksmithing.

“I would just practice making complicated stuff, and the more I did it, the better my character got at it,” he said. “I reached the master level of blacksmithing, and once you're there, you become popular.”

But while Wang gained fame with online game players for his abilities to build items, things were falling apart in his real life. Weekend visits to his parents turned into marathon playing sessions.

“They saw it as a waste of time,” he said. “There was a lot of tension, and it almost came to blows sometimes.”

Then he stopped going to classes.

“At first, I'd think, “Well, I'll just skip this English class,” he said. “Then I started to miss my math classes. I'd make up excuses to my classmates as to why I didn't go.”

He got a letter from the school.

“It told me I got all F's. I was going to be on academic probation.”

Before Wang knew it, finals week came. If he didn't maintain a 2.0 grade-point average hat semester, he was done at Berkeley.

“I had to ace my math final,” he said. “I told myself, ‘OK, I'll just play for a little bit, and then I can concentrate on studying.'”

In Yee's “Ariadne” report, about 20 percent of his 18- to 22-year-old respondents (Wang was 19) admitted failure at trying to quit playing their game.

Wang ended up studying for his math final for the class he'd been skipping the night before.

The next day, Wang walked into the building to take the final that would decide his academic fate -- except he didn't know that the testing room had been moved to a different place.

“By the time the final started, I still didn't know where to go.”

He missed the final. Then he panicked.

“I felt like everything I'd worked for my whole life was over,” he said. “I didn't want to live anymore.”

He went to Evans Hall, “the building where people go to jump off the roof.” The doors to the balcony were locked.

“I guess I could have broken the window or something to get past it,” he said. “But I think when you're in that frame of mind, it just takes small things like that to stop you.”

Wang called his dad and told him everything.

“He took it pretty well, actually,” Wang said. “But then he told me, ‘You know the first thing drug addicts have to do: Quit.'”

After the call, Wang went back to his dorm to tell his friends he would be quitting school.

“They were shocked,” he said. “Nobody knew how far it had gone. But they made sure I never went back.”

Wang said life seemed a little “lackluster” after that. He'd watch his brother play video games, and he found a job at a comic book shop.

He also took classes at a community college, getting straight A's. Eventually, he was re-admitted to Berkeley.

Wang said he still plays games, just not during the school year. He also remembers where he once was.

“I don't know if I would have stopped playing if I didn't reach that point. I don't know if I would have stopped myself if those doors weren't locked.”

ON THE DEFENSIVE

While it appears Wang is winning his battle, Liz Woolley is fighting perceptions that she and others like her wish to eliminate video games from society.

When she first started Online Gamers Anonymous, she said she received "pretty nasty" messages from people saying that she was trying to "take games away."

"The funny thing is, most of the people who sent those messages had never experienced 'EverQuest,' or other games," she said. "But the gamers … most of them knew what I was talking about."

Indeed, credit can unofficially be given to the gamer world for christening "EverQuest" as "EverCrack."

Many in the industry are defensive when it comes to online gaming addiction, as it also has had years to deal with the perception of game makers as heartless corporate entities.

"The people I've met in the game industry are bright people and good guys," said Greenfield, of the Center for Internet Studies. "They just don't see the need to apologize for it. It's entertainment. That's the attitude."

Intellivision president Robinson also said most of the game makers he's met in the industry are fans, just like everyone else.

"It's not like we're in some room, rubbing our hands and saying, 'Oh, how do we make these people mindless drones?' We make games that we ourselves would want to play. We're the first line of testing."

No one at Sony, the makers of "EverQuest,' would comment for this story.

John Smedley, one of the original creators of "EverQuest," was interviewed for the story on CBS' "48 Hours" in 2002 that featured Shawn Woolley. He said, "I don't see the connection between a game and someone's tragic suicide."

Jon Simmons, owner of Netfragz, a gaming center in Fontana, echoed Smedley's take.

"You can't blame the game for someone else's issues," he said. "It's better than TV, where you just sit there and are force-fed everything."

Simmons, 35, also wants to debunk the myth that gamers are an uncaring, isolated group who spend too much time by themselves.

"It's a total social environment,' he said. "I've met a lot of good people and great friends here. My (gaming) team, they spend time here, but they also go to school and have other things in their life to do."

“EverQuest” puts on its own large social event: Fan Faire. It's the “EverQuest” equivalent to a “Star Trek” convention a massive gathering that can draw thousands of people, many in costume.

It features panel discussions, parties and a room full of machines so attendees can play together in an organized game event, which they can see on a giant screen.

But even in the face of all this interaction, Robinson said "there are some people who just don't have that ‘off’ switch.

“But that's for a lot of things,” he said. “For some it's games, for others it's messing around on eBay collecting gnomes.”

Liz Woolley maintains a watchful eye over the roughly 1,500 members of Online Gamers Anonymous, also known as Olganon. She's also fully aware of the release of “EverQuest II,” which came out in early November.

“They say it's more family-friendly, but I don't buy it,” she said. “They've improved the graphics and everything else, and now they have ‘prestige points.’ Kids have to buy new equipment just to run the game.”

Wang has also heard about other features.

“There's a timer that you can set. It goes off when you go past your set limit, but it doesn't shut the game off or anything,” he said. “I think that's just the company saying, ‘Hey, look, we did something.’ ”