

Data addiction won't kill you, but it might make you dead

Contributed by Debbie Smit
Sunday, 27 May 2007

In one of many horribly memorable scenes in the cult movie *Trainspotting*, a heroin addict called Tommy dies from toxoplasmosis, a disease which he contracts from sharing close and unhygienic quarters with a kitten. Because his immune system is compromised by HIV, the ordinarily minor illness overcomes him.

Hayes Reed describes his friend Tyson Smith's sorry state in an article discussing online game addiction: "At 24, he had seemingly given up. No job. No girlfriend. Filthy apartment. Ugliness." Smith, once Reed had managed to track him down after three months of self-imposed sequestration, confessed that he seldom ate and had infrequent bowel movements. ("I'm what you call a 'weekly poo-er.'") His space, like Tommy's, was dominated by the stench of cat faeces and urine. Reed called it a "Den of Cat Ass and Murdered Time".

Reed's article, *The Surreal World*, is cited as the source of a slang name for game addiction: *catassing*.

Catassing (also known as *poopsocking*, a reference to the desperate measures taken by gamers to stay in the game) is the most extreme form of computer game behaviour, where players shun all normal day-to-day activity to participate in a MMOG (a massively multiplayer online game). Addicts have also been known, like compulsive gamblers, to resort to wearing adult nappies.

Some die. In August 2005, South Korean boiler repairman Lee Seung Seop went into fatal cardiac arrest after playing the wildly popular MMOGs *World of Warcraft* and *Starcraft* for 50 hours non-stop. He was 28.

Smith's poison was *Ultima Online*, a fantasy game played out in a virtual world known as *Britannia*, a landscape populated by knights, sorcerers, swordsmen and murderous thieves. The goal of the game is to gain power and respect, and to wield influence over your fellow players.

Ironically, since in the real world Smith was unemployed, this demands that players get a job, although some less acquisitive players have been known to find themselves engaged in hours of virtual fishing.

The games have a strong capitalist bent. *Starcraft* is based on the acquisition of resources (minerals and *Vespene gas*) and *WoW*, although it is a role-playing game, rewards success with money, goods and experience, which in turn allow players to improve in skill and power.

For a bullied and depressed 17-year-old with no friends and a bad case of acne, the power, popularity and material wealth attainable in the virtual worlds of *Norrath*, *Azeroth* and the *Koprulu Sector* are hard to resist.

In a *Richmond News* article ("When the game gets serious"), Andrew Lee, a youth addiction counsellor, reports that 80 percent of his clients are young men and teens with Internet and gaming addiction problems, not the meth and crack addicts that one would expect in a big city.

A recent *Time* article (*The Hyperconnected*) by Lev Grossman unbundles a less aggressive form of addiction to technology broadly defined as "data addiction", a condition characterised by a "ceaseless craving for digital stimulation" which may label many more of us "addict". If you find yourself adeptly texting inane messages like: "What are you eating?" (when you don't belong to *Overeaters Anonymous*), you might be a victim.

Psychologists say that even the tiny dopamine fix gained from data-mining online bears a resemblance to the thrill of chance that draws us to gambling. An internet search may present us with thousands of results for one enquiry, but the frustration of "hunting" for the one we want – the reward – makes us continue. Let the stew burn!

Grossman maintains that although data addiction may not render us incompetent, the danger is that it alienates us from "that priceless stream of analog data that comes not from without but from within".