

Computer game addiction and emotional dependence



He was addicted – as are nearly 2 million other U. S. College students. And if the computer game industry continues to succeed in its marketing strategy to hook youth on their products, its market success will trigger bigger avalanches of academic warning letters every December unless college leaders take action to address this worsening epidemic. For the past six years as an administrator at a large community college, Vie focused on developing workforce education programs that have helped hundreds of at-risk students succeed in college programs.

However, as a parent of a game-addicted college student living way from home on a college campus, I felt powerless to help my son succeed in his own college launch. As a young adult, he's responsible for his choices, and he chose games over college success. At the same time, the heart of addiction is a loss of control, and still-developing teenagers like my son are especially vulnerable to the instant gratification of games that can entrap them into addiction before they know what has hit them.

My hope is that our family story can help the higher education family grapple with this epidemic, so that other parents' sons and daughters don't experience the calamitous crash that my son did at college. Excessive Gaming Linked to Lower Academic Performance Because computer game-playing is legal, hidden away in dorm rooms, and doesn't result in obvious impairments like drug or alcohol addiction, the problem has stayed under the radar.

However, many studies have linked excessive computer game-playing to lower academic performance, as well as a variety of disorders often treated

at campus health centers, such as depression, anxiety, ADD, and social phobias. In one of the most authoritative studies, a longitudinal study of 3,000 third- through eighth-graders in Singapore, researchers from Iowa State university and elsewhere found 9 percent of gamers to be “pathological,” meaning that their gaming damaged multiple parts of their lives, including school performance. Just like my son, they TLD grow out of it on their own, either.

Two years later, 84 percent of the pathological gamers in this study were still experiencing similar bring these pathologies to college with them. Students who reported pathological impacts played an average of 31 hours every week. Gaming within this subculture of students is so prevalent that my son convinced himself that 5-8 hours of daily gaming when he started college was normal. Once these students arrive on campus, freed from the constraints of high school attendance monitors and parental oversight, students are more likely to binge on gaming, with results that can be as traumatic as my son's.

In the 2011 National Survey of Student Engagement, completed by 27,000 first-year students, over one-third of incoming males and nearly one-fourth of females reported playing computer games more than 16 hours per week. These students had lower SAT scores and lower high school grades, and completed fewer AP courses. So, they come to college less prepared to succeed, and are likely to fall further behind if their addiction takes root more deeply.

An older 2003 study of college students by The Pew Internet and American Life Project confirmed this crowding out effect, with nearly half (48 percent)

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of college student gamers reporting that gaming keeps them from studying. Perhaps the former Federal Communications Commissioner Deborah Taylor was ahead of her time in 2008, when she created a brief media firestorm with a speech in which she claimed that “ one of the top reasons for college dropouts in the U. S. Is online gaming addiction – such as World of Warrant. ” Emulating the Tobacco Industry Marketing Strategy This problem is poised to get much worse.

More and more online computer games are designed to profit by hooking addicts starting at a young age on their products, just as cigarette makers profited for decades by hooking young nicotine addicts for a lifetime. This Christmas, children being groomed by game-makers will find “ Halo” and “ World of Warrant”-themed Logo sets under the tree. At a 2010 conference, one industry executive admitted that “ we have to bring them in and keep them addicted and make them keep playing. ” After the computer game industry succeeded in getting and keeping my son addicted at college, he was hardly recognizable as the high school senior with a 3. GAP, 2100 SAT, and active participation as a high school athlete and trombonist in five bands. In a 2010 magazine article, an anonymous game designer described the creepy science of addiction that designers are engineering into their products. Game-makers’ profits increasingly rely on addiction. Consider the meteoric rise of the game that became an addiction as strong as crack for my son: Riot Games’ “ League of Legends. In 2009, Riot Games released “ League of Legends” as one of the first free-to-play online massive multilayer games, which require no upfront subscription payment.

They extract money from players later, after they get hooked. By the fall of 2012, Riot Games reported that “ League of Legends” had 70 million registered player names and 12 million “ daily active users” (likely addicts) worldwide. The company’s business model was attractive enough to score a massive \$400 million payoff for the company’s founders when they sold the company in 2011. Its phenomenal success has induced Bolivian response within the industry to design even more intense free-to-play games that seek to ensnare and addict its customers - with youth and college students directly in their corsairs.

This prospect should motivate every dean of student services into action to warn students, starting with the first day of freshman. Such warnings are rare, however. “ Given that college students are at the epicenter of America’s computer addiction epidemic, I’m shocked at how few colleges and universities are addressing this problem aggressively,” says Hillarie Cash, executive erector of Restart Internet Addiction Recovery Center, and author of Video Games and Your Kids.

One reason is that the problem of compulsive or pathological computer gaming is often hidden from college officials by addicted students. For example, when the dean of student services asked my son why he was withdrawing from college, he said “ because of depression” - without mentioning that he had spent nearly every waking hour in the last month of the semester compulsively playing a computer game while isolated his dorm room.

This kind of response is typical of many addicts, who feel a deep sense of shame about their out-of-control compulsion or gaming, and engage in elaborate self-deceptions and lies to protect their addiction and their self-image. My son thought he was the only student with this problem. Tracy Marble, Founder of Collegiate Coaching Services, has directly observed a chilling rise in pathological computer gaming among her young adult clients. When we conduct our initial assessments on new male clients, 75% have some level of computer gaming and/or Internet abuse issue that contributes to the original presenting problems such as poor academic performance, difficulty concentrating, and social anxieties. In addition to these reported problems, Marble points to other indicators of potential gaming addiction problems with college students, such as frequent absences from classes, roommate complaints, social isolation, and calls or e-mails from concerned parents.

Cash and Marble both encourage college and university leaders to provide in-service training to build awareness among staff – especially front-line leaders such as resident assistants, teaching assistants, and student health clinicians on how to recognize the warning signs of computer gaming. Colleges can also launch student awareness campaigns to ran students of these problems, and encourage affected students to seek help rather than to retreat into dangerous isolation.

If my son's college had trained its resident advisers to recognize that holing up in your dorm room all day, not emerging for classes, ordering delivery pizzas alone every night, and turning away friends at his doorway are all signs of a potential problem, he might have been steered to get help before

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he crashed so completely. Cash also encourages campus leaders to develop new campus resources, such as offering a 12-step group to address computer gaming, and building a referral network of local therapists who have experience with this unique form of addiction.