

Games Men Play

Jennifer Steadham and Sean Prather* were like a lot of students on the Northwest Christian College campus: in love and excited about the future.

“We were both youth ministry majors,” Jennifer says. “It looked like we were heading in the same direction. We were talking about being in ministry together.”

The couple’s enthusiasm for each other and their vision of a life side by side in service to the church led to marriage after their junior year in August 1998. “I was a week from 21,” Jennifer recalls.

The young couple seemed destined for a joyful life of ministry together until their first Christmas. That’s when things started to derail.

Jennifer’s father gave the couple a computer that year. Until that time, though they’d had a Nintendo 64 in the house, Sean had been able to keep his video game playing within reasonable bounds. After the computer came into their home, however, the amount of time her husband spent playing video games grew until he was caught in an all-consuming video game addiction, Jennifer says.

Surprising Statistics

Sean isn’t the only one. Experts say video game addiction is real and increasingly becoming a problem for some men and their families.

David Walsh, president of the National Institute on Media and the Family, says about 9 percent of video game players “have all the traits of addiction. That means for about one out of 12, the game starts to take over their lives.”

According to a 2005 report by the Entertainment Software

Association, 75 percent of the heads of American households play video games. The report also revealed that about 42 percent of all gamers play online with other users. And here's a statistic that may shock you: The average gamer is actually a 30-year-old male who has been playing video games for 12 years—not a glassy-eyed teenager. In addition to the statistical data, Walsh says his own experience tells him how severe the problem can be.

"I get calls," he says. "So I know it has ruined marriages."

The number of addicted players has grown as ever-improving technology has made gaming even more popular.

Video games are "virtually all-pervasive among boys," says Kurt Bruner, pastor of spiritual formation at Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, Texas, and co-author with wife Olivia of *Playstation Nation: Protect Your Child From Video Game Addiction*. Bruner estimates that 90 percent of American homes now have some sort of gaming system.

Though many women play video games and enjoy them, true video game addiction strikes males more often than females.

This is in part because some games are designed to "satisfy in men what they are made to seek in real life," Bruner says.

Video games were certainly more attractive to Sean than they were to Jennifer, who says she played their Nintendo 64 alongside her husband early in their marriage but didn't really connect with any of the games. "I lost interest pretty quickly," Jennifer says.

Sean, however, was hooked. Once he began playing games on the couple's new computer, his involvement with them began to overshadow all his other interests, Jennifer says.

Sean's schoolwork started to suffer.

"I felt badly for him because I was having a lot of success

and he was slipping into the background,” Jennifer says.

On graduation day Sean was literally in the background. As Jennifer strode across the stage, he sat in the audience next to his mom, not able to receive a diploma because he didn’t fulfill the requirements for a degree.

The Illusion of Control

Part of the appeal of video games for men is that they supply the feeling of accomplishment without the struggle, says Stephen Arterburn, founder of New Life ministries and host of the daily radio program New Life Live.

Games that take players on complicated adventures appeal to “a man’s desire to develop competency. We love to master something,” Arterburn says.

The thrill of a dangerous virtual quest can compensate for a mundane work life. “In our little menial, mediocre lives, we love something where we can live out a fantasy of total control,” he says. P> An illusion of control can also make some games hard to put down, Arterburn says. Some games put players in a god-like position in which there are few limits on what they can do.

In these games players can say to themselves: “I have a weapon. I can kill. I can maim. Whatever I am too shy to do in real life, I can do in the game,” Arterburn says.

One thing Sean was definitely not able to do was control his gaming, Jennifer says. Though his playing was already interfering with their marriage, Sean’s addiction kicked into high gear when some friends introduced him to online play.

Two single male friends moved in across the hall from the couple, Jennifer says. Within a month they had networked their computers so they could play games between the two apartments.

During this time, Jennifer says, Sean’s friends introduced him

to an online game called EverQuest. "That was the turning point," Jennifer remembers.

EverQuest is one of several popular multiplayer online role-playing games that allows gamers to play with thousands of others through the Internet. Once Sean entered this world, he rarely wanted to leave.

"He would come home from work and sit down at the computer," Jennifer says. "I would cook his dinner and walk it to him at his computer. I'd go back and collect his plate and do his dishes. I felt like his maid and not his wife."

After a while, it became clear her strategy wasn't working. Jennifer decided to try a new approach.

Around the time of their second anniversary, Jennifer sat Sean down to talk about his game playing and how it was affecting their marriage.

She asked him how he thought their relationship was faring. "'We're fine' was basically his answer," Jennifer says.

Still, the talk seemed to do some good. "For a while, things got a little better," Jennifer says.

But it wasn't long before the old patterns reappeared. "That's when I really got serious because I started to feel like I didn't want to do this any more," Jennifer says.

Family Knows Best

Jennifer's frustration is not unusual for women whose husbands are consumed with video games.

As is the case with any addiction, family members are often the first to feel the consequences of the habit and realize there's a problem, Bruner says.

Gaming can be a way of disconnecting from family and spouse,

and a man whose family is complaining about the time he spends with video games, would do well to listen, Arterburn says. "You do not have the right to do anything that destroys intimacy in marriage," he says.

There are other signs that playing has crossed over into the area of addiction. One sign is feeling a compulsion to play, Arterburn says. A compulsive gamer plays even when part of him would rather not. He says to himself, "I don't want to go home and do that, but I do it anyway," Arterburn says.

Not everyone who enjoys playing is addicted, and there are some guidelines men can follow to keep video game playing part of a healthy, balanced life.

"Don't ignore your gut or your wife's gut" when it comes to how much time is OK to spend playing, Bruner says.

Bruner also recommends treating video games the way many families treat board games, as fun activities to enjoy together and for a limited time.

Some games have fewer addictive qualities, Bruner says, and encourages those who want to play to choose games such as Dance, Dance Revolution that require physical activity. Players have to stop after a while just because they get tired, Bruner says. It's a built-in safeguard against excessive play.

The most addictive games are online role-playing games, he says. "Those games aren't made for completion."

The Breaking Point

It was her husband's addiction to this kind of game that caused Jennifer to start taking action.

She had a few more emotional talks with Sean then "I started a Matthew 18-style process," she says.

When talking with her husband privately didn't do any good, she went to a friend—the man who had served as best man in the couple's wedding—and arranged for him to talk with Sean over coffee.

The friend told Sean that he should “take a look at how you're treating your wife,” Jennifer says.

Sean became so angry that he left the coffee shop.

Jennifer then appealed to the pastor who had married the couple. When the pastor sent Sean a letter asking him to get together, Sean refused to respond. Jennifer suggested the two go for counseling. Sean told her to go by herself.

“At that point,” she says, “I knew we were reaching an impasse.”

Jennifer resolved to take the next step. She told Sean she was moving out. She had no intention of seeking divorce, she says, but could not continue to enable him to indulge his addiction.

After spending her first night away from Sean at a friend's home, Jennifer returned to their place the next day to gather some things while Sean was at work.

As she was pulling some items together, she says, “I looked at the computer. I decided since my dad had sent it to us, I had a right to it.” Jennifer took the computer.

Sometime after 5 p.m. that day her phone rang.

It was Sean. “I want the computer back,” he said.

Jennifer didn't budge. “Well, that's too bad. You should want your wife back,” she said.

Sean became irate and said he was coming for the computer.

Jennifer was in the home of a female friend with whom she was staying. A male friend who'd been helping move her things was

also there when Sean arrived at the door.

“He would knock every minute or so,” Jennifer says. “We were inside praying.” Sean began to ring the doorbell incessantly. Jennifer had been standing near the door watching Sean through a peephole. As she moved away, she heard a terrible crash.

“He had kicked the door so hard, the deadbolt flew off into the middle of the room,” Jennifer says. Then she heard the sound of tires screeching away.

He didn’t get the computer, but the next day, Jennifer discovered he’d taken the money from the couple’s bank account. Nearly \$2,000 was missing.

“He went out and bought a new computer,” Jennifer says.

Jennifer feared further financial loss, so she filed for legal separation.

Before the separation became final, Jennifer asked to meet with Sean to determine if there was hope for their news wasn’t good. “He said: ‘You’ve been a wonderful wife. You’ve been nothing but great to me. I don’t know what happened, but I don’t want to be married any more,’” Jennifer says.

The couple’s divorce was finalized the day after Christmas 2001.

Looking back, Jennifer believes Sean’s gaming was responsible for the demise of their marriage.

“We didn’t have other marital problems,” she says. “All of that started and continued because that computer was there.”

Intervene Early

Video game addiction doesn’t have to be a terminal illness for a marriage, Arterburn says. And not every case needs to reach such a crisis. There is help for those who want to be free of

video game addiction, and it should begin long before they risk losing marriages and families.

Acknowledging the problem is the first step, Arterburn says. An addicted man must “admit this has gotten out of hand. It’s something I do too much.”

Next, Arterburn says addicted men “need to connect with someone and talk about it.” They may also need to seek forgiveness as they attempt to rebuild relationships with neglected family and friends, Arterburn says.

Undertaking such a process could have changed things for Sean and Jennifer. Others that may be susceptible should seek help early to avoid letting this destructive habit wreak havoc in their lives. {eo}

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