

The Electronic Needle

By Sandy Calleja Portelli

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'IT is a wonderful thing but Sandy Calleja Portelli wonders whether gadgets should bear the warning: 'enjoy this product responsibly'

When I last played computer games, they only existed as consoles plugged into a monitor. Since those days of Super Mario and Donkey Kong, IT has evolved beyond recognition and games, like everything else, have gone online.

When I first heard about IT addiction I was nonplussed; the technology has become an integral part of life but an addiction? In reality the concept was first introduced in print by Nicholas Rushby in his 1979 book "An Introduction to Educational Computing."

Online gaming has changed from cartoons with a limited sequence of events to life-like graphics with unlimited possibilities. The new Playstation 3 is designed to ensure that no action is repeated leading to a completely new experience each time one plays the game.

Although there are no statistics about the number of IT addicts there countless anecdotes coming from youth workers and students about youngsters spending inordinate amounts of time at their computers.

Charles Tabone, (Peripathetic teacher with Sedqa's Prevention Programme), works with students from Form 1 to 5, teaching them about the dangers of addiction and techniques to avoid it. He includes IT addiction in his lessons to first formers as part of the syllabus focusing on what addiction is and uses a clip from the popular game 'World of Warcraft.' "The clip is only up for a couple of seconds before the students identify it," he says.

Mr Tabone cites a number of examples of children who are hooked to online gaming, especially Massively Multiuser Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) such as 'World of Warcraft' or 'EverQuest' where one may play with other gamers from across the globe: "I've spoken to students who see nothing wrong with sleeping all afternoon and playing throughout the night because their fellow gamers live in North America."

Somebody who is addicted to IT may repeatedly choose playing or chatting online to the exclusion of all else including eating and studying. Dr Maressa Hecht Orzack, a senior psychologist at McLean Hospital and lecturer at Harvard Medical School, published a study where she describes a patient who sometimes doesn't make it to the bathroom in time as she is reluctant to leave her pc.

According to Mr Tabone, children are starting to play these extremely realistic games earlier than ever. "One consequence of children playing certain games so young is that they become desensitized to the violence incorporated within them."

One American youth who had grown up playing Grand Theft Auto, had been given a stolen car. When the police tried to impound the vehicle, he killed three police officers and wreaked havoc in his bid to keep the car. When he was finally caught, he reportedly asked: "Is the game over now?"

Of course gaming is not restricted to online gaming, especially with the advent of portable game consoles. "Students in higher education take their Play Station Portables to school and spend free periods playing together via infrared. Time that would have previously been used for chatting, sport or research is now spent playing in near silence."

"In my experience, boys are most likely to spend their time playing MMORPG and shoot em' ups whilst girls tend to prefer online communities like HI5 and MSN. Some prefer socialising over the internet rather than in the real world which can bring danger to their desktop" says Mr Tabone.

Users of online communities such as HI5 and Facebook set up personal profiles detailing their likes and dislikes; host blogs and upload photos to their 'page'.

This information is then available to anyone who accesses the profile, including potential abusers who can pose as teenagers to gain the child's trust.

"We all have a responsibility to stop this problem snowballing. The licensed games on sale are censored but uncensored pirate copies may be more violent than their legal counterparts – and piracy is rife here" says Mr Tabone. He also believes that more information needs to be disseminated to parents and students alike.

"Parents should check online reviews before purchasing a game for their child. They also need to know that one can download 'cracks' to add to a game's violence and foul language."

"Students tell us they sometimes spend up to 8 hours a day playing online games whilst we dedicate less than an hour on this subject in Form 1 so how can we compare? Our influence is drowned out by the messages the children are getting from these games."

Parents whose adolescents choose to spend their evenings at their computer rather than going out, are initially unlikely to sense trouble. What parent wouldn't prefer having their teenager safely ensconced at home rather than out at Paceville? Unfortunately countless evenings spent at the computer can eventually lead to seclusion as users choose their games over friends and other hobbies.

Physical symptoms of overuse can include sleep disturbance, back and neck aches, and migraines or dry eyes resulting from a failure to blink often enough.

With computers becoming an ubiquitous part of everyday life, quantifying 'overuse' is difficult but alarm bells should start ringing if someone is:

- spending most of their free time on the computer or playing video games,
- Falling asleep in school or at work
- Falling behind in work causing grades or work performance to deteriorate
- Lying about computer or video game use
- Choosing IT over other activities previously enjoyed
- Irritable when not playing

Parents who are concerned about their children's overuse of IT can approach Sedqa for assistance. Remona Cuschieri, (Team Leader within Sedqa's Teen Support Services) confirms that the unit has already seen a number of gamers seeking help for IT addiction.

"We treat the problem of IT addiction just as we do other dependencies" she says adding "we believe that for addicts to overcome their difficulties, they must come to terms with the underlying causes of their addiction."

Working with youth workers or social workers, clients are encouraged to understand why they are addicted. “Whether an addict needs a drink before going out or the anonymity of an online community to chat is irrelevant, what is important is why they feel this way” explains Ms Cuschieri.

“We aim help the client solve their underlying problems rather than simply cure the addiction. A substance abuser who doesn’t deal with the cause of his addiction is likely to substitute one addiction for another; thus an alcoholic may become a workaholic.”

As IT continues to expand into every area of life, we are likely to spend more, not less, time at our pc, mobile phone or game console so it's worth remembering the old adage that too much of a good thing is bad for you.

For more information call Sedqa’s Supportline 179

Sedqa and Kummissjoni Djocesana Zaghzagh are organising a seminar about computer addiction for youth workers, teachers and team leaders on Saturday 24th May. For registration and further information, send an email to: segreteria@kdz.org.mt