

The shame of the game

Games are bad only when the line between entertainment and obsession is breached.

TAKE a peek at the iPad, iPhone or any smartphone that belongs to a parent, and chances are you'll find screen upon screen of game apps. A lot of these apps were downloaded onto the device by their tech-savvy kids. And most of these parents may tell you that their children and teenagers are hooked on mobile, computer or interactive games – at home, out in the malls or during outings with family or friends.

Apart from these downloadable ones, there are also multi-player video games at home and an array of free games on social networking websites like Facebook, which is frequented by the kids as well. The gamers are indeed spoiled for choice.

Parents may be resigned to such widespread availability of games as an inevitable part of modern life, but when play becomes extreme, the obsession will undoubtedly be detrimental to the development and well-being of the child. It's therefore absolutely essential for parents to monitor the young ones' gaming activities before the situation gets out of hand.



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To be sure, gaming itself is entertaining and harmless if it's done within limits, and controlled. Being addicted to video or online games, however, is a serious matter.

Keith Woo should know. It stole a huge chunk of his youth until one day when he was 24, a near-death experience jolted him into reassessing his life.

Getting off the game wasn't easy; he had spent seven years playing a text-based multi-player online role-playing game called MUD (Multi-User Dungeon).

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That aside, Woo had done it all – everything from first person shooter games like Team Fortress and Call Of Duty to massively multi-player online role-playing games like World Of Warcraft.

The years of relentless MUD gameplay culminated in Woo's online character being at the top of the virtual food chain. To maintain his leading status the lad would neglect his studies for a psychology degree and spend an average of 14 hours per day slaying fictional monsters in his student accommodation in Subang Jaya, Selangor.

"I really messed up college ... I skipped classes and handed in late submissions," he confesses in a recent interview in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.



Game for it: Nick Foong (left) and Keith Woo from Generasi Gemilang often help youth and their parents tackle gaming issues. — FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

Woo's experience is every modern parent's nightmare.

"My parents would get upset and make a lot of fuss and noise about me gaming both at home and outside," admits Woo. But for him, it was the ultimate form of escapism. As a sanctuary of high adrenaline and excitement, the realm gave Woo a skill and prowess – and respect – amongst the online gaming community that he reckoned was more than he could ever achieve in the real world.

Today, Woo, 28, has turned his life around. Escaping serious injury in a car accident early one morning after a gaming session at a cyber cafe with his friends, the young man had asked himself: what has gaming ever really done for me?

For years he had been running from personal problems – in study, financially and with regard to his relationship with his family.

"I realised, you know, my parents weren't going to be around forever, and what would happen then?" he recalls.

Getting on the wagon, so to speak, was a difficult process. He received a great deal of flak from the game's online administrators when he requested to delete his character and block him from playing. They asked him: "Why don't you just cut down on your play time?"

"I said to them, 'That's the problem, I can't. I keep coming back, I keep playing, I can't stop; you guys have to help me stop.'"

Red flags

The former gaming addict now works full time with Generasi Gemilang, a non-profit social welfare organisation, where he is a leader for its cyber wellness programme. Part of his job is to reach out to both youth and their parents through workshops, talks, courses and counselling. He teaches parents about

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video games, and even how to play them, and educates young people about cyber wellness.

He doesn't blame video games for his past addiction. He hasn't even stopped playing them. The difference is that, he has a balanced life.

"Gaming is recreational for me now," he explains, adding that important things like work and having a non-virtual social life take precedence, which is what "cyber wellness" is all about.

"It's about the positive use of the Internet and having a healthy, balanced life," concurs Nick Foong, Generasi Gemilang's head of cyber wellness. "The Internet and games are here to stay. We all love our social media, it's there to enhance our lives but it should never be the centre of it."

Though Foong, 42, can't say for sure how serious the scourge of gaming addiction is in Malaysia, he has encountered enough cases in his line of work to know that it's cause for concern.

The definition of being addicted to gaming, he says, doesn't depend on the number of hours spent playing, it relates to whether the habit is disrupting a person's normal life.

Neglecting important things like school, work, and personal hygiene are some of the signs. Disturbances in the sleep cycle, reclusive behaviour, self-isolation and uncharacteristic behavioural changes are also major alarm bells.

Woo recounts a typical scenario where things have begun to go downhill.

"Shouting at my parents, for example, or throwing a huge tantrum when asked to stop playing, skipping meals, or lying about my video game usage.

"One or two such incidents here and there are probably normal. But if you notice them happening with uncharacteristic frequency, there may be a problem."

Dealing with it

Before you throw your child's console out the window, take a deep breath and resist the urge.

"The thing we recommend not to do is to just turn off the game and get the child all excited and angry," says Foong.

There is usually a lot more to a gaming addiction than the game itself, he stresses.

"Games are not inherently bad, it's how the individual uses (or abuses) them."

Aside from being "fun", research suggests that some people get hooked because games offer a source of self-validation or positive reinforcement for things lacking in other areas of their lives. Rewards, personal freedom, a sense of control and a connection to other players, to name a few.

Rewinding the clock on Woo's addiction offers an insight into why he, and many other youths, are more likely to cross the line between a healthy amount of recreational game playing and obsession.

The first signs of his addiction appeared in secondary school when he would head straight for a cyber cafe after class, play until six or nine in the evening, and continue gaming into the early hours of the morning.

In school he would talk about the game at every opportunity, and he was usually so tired from playing the night before that he couldn't concentrate in class. Worse, at the time he was having a lot of problems

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at school; he wasn't doing well academically nor socially.

"But when I found out I was good at Counterstrike, I suddenly became a person that was really recognised."

For him, gaming was also an excellent way of running away from family issues.

"By immersing myself in the virtual world I could disassociate myself from reality. I could forget my problems, feel good about myself, and feel like I was achieving something," he remembers.

He made it to college but his problems persisted; he continued to avoid dealing with them. He would be so engrossed in the world inside his computer that sometimes days would merge into one another, and the only breaks he took were for food and going to the toilet.

In Woo's case, the reasons for developing a gaming addiction are evident.

But Foong points out that banning the game only deals with the immediate symptoms, and not the underlying causes. In today's technology-driven society, such a "solution" also poses practical problems.

He says there will come a time, in college, for example, where laptops are necessary. In most neighbourhoods, there are also cyber centres scattered in convenient locations.

In the end, he notes that "banning" video games may end up being counter-productive, and may increase the likelihood that, in order to feed their addiction, the person you are trying to help starts lying about their game usage.

In a bid to enforce their "ban", parents often ask how they can check on or monitor their child. The truth is, there is no easy solution to this.

The only real way of ensuring their children are spending as much time as they say they are is trust, which comes from having a healthy relationship with them.

"It won't be easy and the problem won't just go away overnight. You have to be committed to helping them and accept that it may take time."

It is interesting to note that some psychologists see "addiction" as a kind of attachment disorder, with humans being driven by an inherent need for pleasure and gratification. When people are unable to establish these things through interpersonal relationships, they hypothesise that we turn to substances and eventually become addicted.

Nurturing parenting, on the other hand, has been correlated to high self-esteem in children, which is said to reduce the risk of addictive behaviour.

In other words, if a long-term solution is what you're looking for, the objective should be about building trust with the child, so that you can help them with their problems.

Spending time with them is the first step, says Foong. In addition to building a bond, it serves to directly help cut down the number of hours spent gaming.

"Rules without relationships will always lead to rebellion. And when I say spending time, I'm not just talking about the token dinner." Quality time could be in the form of one-on-one sessions, watching a movie, doing sports, washing the car.

"Find out what the child is interested in doing; doing that regularly will help to break the routine habit of gaming," he advises.

Bonding sessions

Foong also suggests parents step into their child's shoes and learn about the game. This will help them understand what is so appealing about it, and also

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provide a common ground where they can connect and bond with their child.

He recounts how this really helped to build a relationship between a niece and her aunt after a family tragedy thrust them together.

“The aunt wanted to find out how to connect with the niece, who would usually come home after school and spend hours playing MapleStory, so we advised her to learn the game. Woo taught her the basics of the game.”

Foong asked the aunt to take her laptop into a public space, the living room, and play it.

“When the niece came in she said her usual ‘Hi’, and then ‘*Wah*, you play MapleStory!’ The niece sat down and they talked for almost 45 minutes, just about MapleStory.

“Eventually, they started talking about other things too, like school, her teachers and her friends.”

Bonding is an important exercise.

“It’s about earning trust, most often parents won’t approach the issue through conversation. It will be an interrogation, which, for teenagers especially, won’t work,” says Foong.

Once a bond has been established, the next step is to find out what motivates the person, so that a productive alternative to gaming can be found.

In the case of 17-year-old gamer Brian (not his real name), his mother discovered he had an interest in learning to play the guitar and bought him one, signing him up for classes.

It worked. Brian took to his new hobby and now spends fewer isolated hours at his computer while he practises his guitar and meets up with friends to jam.

Foong stresses that once the foundations of a relationship have been established, it becomes easier to address the gaming issue successfully.

“Boundaries and limitations to the number of gaming hours per day should be mutually agreed upon by both parties. If a child has had a say in setting their own rules, they will be more likely to stick to them.”

As much as most parents would love to hear it, however, there is no universal benchmark for how many hours of gaming per day is acceptable.

“The situation shouldn’t be judged on how many hours are spent playing, but whether they have managed to balance between gaming and other important activities.

“Each person’s time management skills may differ, but when a person finds time to play games, to study, to be with friends, to do sports, to be with family, that’s what we should be aiming for.”

If you suspect that you or someone you know has a gaming problem, there are a number of websites that offer advice: try www.video-game-addiction.org or On-line Gamers Anonymous at www.olganon.org.

How do you control your children’s gaming activities? Or, do you? E-mail us at star2@thestar.com.my.

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