It was 6AM, and my father had long since gone to work for the day. My back hurt, my wrist was aching, and my eyes begged to be shut just for a little while. But I still had more to do before I could log off. I still had to farm animals for their leather, gather some elemental orbs, craft my armor, and cook up some of the animal meat for tomorrow’s raid. Maybe then I could sleep, even if just for a couple hours before I had to wake up for even more farming and the daily quests for money. I stopped typing on my keyboard as my mother walked past the door to go get her morning coffee. I didn’t want to have to explain why I had not slept in well over 16 hours and I didn’t want to be lectured on my terrible sleep schedule again.

I was seriously addicted to World of Warcraft. My schedule and life revolved around the next raid, the next instance, the next piece of gear I could get. I was always on ventrillo, a program that allowed me to talk to my guild mates, and I was always doing something. No matter how much I would complete, even once I hit the highest level possible, there was always more to do to make my character better. I never accepted I had a problem signing off of the game, and I never believed in video game addictions. I felt like I could simply log off whenever I felt I was finished. Needless to say, I couldn’t. Why would I have? It wasn’t hurting anyone, and
I had nothing to do the next day, or the next, or the next.

Currently there are many different types of addictive behavior in the world with drinking, drugs, and gambling being the most well-known out of all of them. And with those addictions, there are also many ways to try to stop the addiction, from self-help books to meetings such as Alcoholics Anonymous. But as we become even more devoted to our ever expanding technological collection, a new sort of addiction has been cropping up in the recent years: An addiction to video games.

Addiction, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is the “compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance (as heroin, nicotine, or alcohol) characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal; persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be harmful” (2010). Admittedly it is difficult to think of any sort of game as a habit-forming or a harmful substance, but video games have become an addictive substance as defined if played excessively. Initially it may not have any negative physical side effects such as heroin or excessive alcohol consumption, but as time progresses continuous video game playing will have a negative physical effect.

Yet many people still do not want to label excessive video game playing as an addiction. In 2007, addiction experts at the American Medical Association's annual meeting were firmly against calling video games an addiction. Dr. Stuart Gitlow, a member of the American Society of Addiction Medicine, said that “There is nothing here to suggest that this is a complex physiological disease state akin to alcoholism or other substance abuse disorders, and it doesn't get to have the word addiction attached to it” (as cited in Steenhuiysen, 2007). Yet on the flip side of that argument, Dr. Thomas Allen, from the Osler Medical Centre in Maryland, said,"Working
with this problem is no different than working with alcoholic patients. The same denial, the same rationalization, the same inability to give it up” (as cited in Steenhuysen, 2010). So what keeps video game addiction from being called an addiction? Lack of solid, conclusive scientific research is what the addiction experts say. Lack of research keeps video game addiction off of the mainstream radar for the most part, as it is difficult to take seriously (Steenhuysen, 2010).

Currently, studying video game addiction is not exactly booming, but studies have been done. A 2008 study focused on people in guilds playing the World of Warcraft MMO. The study was done with 196 people, 173 which were males and 23 females, ranging in age from 18 to 43, with the average time spent playing a week was 29.11 hours. The research done concluded a few different things. One was that the more time spent playing World of Warcraft, the more likely they were to develop problems in their day-to-day lives. But it also has to do with personality, as not every person in the study who played often experienced any difficulty in their offline lives (Peters, 2008).

Along with difficulty in their offline lives, some players may gravitate towards guilds in World of Warcraft, as it is a much emotionally safer place. The research suggests that:

Based on these results, it is logical to suggest that one reason some individuals spend more time playing the game is to avoid face-to-face social situations in which they may lack the proper skills to foster good relationships. Furthermore, if the individual were rejected in these situations, it would likely cause them distress due to their difficulty in dealing with stressful events. However, because extraversion is only weakly negatively correlated, it is probable that the individuals desire at least some amount of social contact. Therefore, the individuals may seek social connections in a safer environment: the
environment of MMORPG guilds. This is evident when players become better friends with their online guild mates than with their “real-life” friends. These results suggest that it is not playing the game alone that leads to problems in individuals’ lives (Peters, 2008).

This statement I find is true from personal experience. It was a lot easier for me to sign off of the game before I started playing with a guild and formed bonds with those people. The better I felt I knew them, the harder it was to say no to play more than what I had planned on.

The researcher goes on to point out the large amount of defensiveness in the gamer community.

(…) as exhibited by one guild leader who declined to allow his guild to participate: ‘I don’t want any of you <expletive> researchers creating problems with things where there is nothing wrong. Gaming does not need any more restrictions than there already are’. Thus, based on this and similar statements, it appears there may be concern among some gamers that research in the area could result in restrictions being made to online games (Peters, 2008).

This brings up the possibility as to why there really is so little research: Is it the gamers preventing themselves from being researched? It is very possible. As with any fairly tightknit community, new people trying to promote change is most often not met with kindness (Peters, 2008).

But even without any extensive studies and research, there is a large amount of non-scientific proof in the news over the recent years. This November was the most recent case of addiction. A 15-year-old South Korean boy strangled his mother to death and then hung himself over a fight about the son’s excessive video game playing on the computer. The sister of
the boy told the police that they fought often over her brother’s excessive game playing (Costanza, 2010).

Another example would be from 2008, when 17-year-old Daniel Petric shot his parents over forbidding him to play Halo 3. Sixteen at the time of the murder, Daniel snuck out of the house to buy Halo 3 against his parent’s wishes. Upon discovering he had bought and smuggled the game into the house, his father took it and locked it away with his gun in a lockbox. A month later, Daniel broke into the lockbox and took out the game and gun. He then shot his parents and fled the house. Daniel’s lawyer claimed that the fact he was house bound with an injury, and thus could only watch TV and play video games, was the reason for the killing of his mother and wounding of his father (Staff, 2008).

An example of unintentional self-harm happened in 2005 when a 28-year-old South Korean man died in an internet café after a 50 hour marathon game of the highly popular game, Starcraft. The man apparently started playing Starcraft on August 5th, and then finally died from heart failure on the 10th. A police officer told reporters that the heart failure was likely brought on from not eating and exhaustion. In South Korea, professional gamers are treated and paid much like sports stars, so it is not hard to see why he would spend all his time gaming for his shot at fame and fortune. The man had also recently been fired from his job for missing work to continue to play video games (BBC News, 2005a).

Another event during the same year as the man above, a Shanghai man stabbed another in the chest over virtual property. Qiu Chengwei stabbed Zhu Caoyuan upon discovering he had sold his rare virtual sword for 7,200 Yuan. Apparently Qiu attempted to report the theft of the virtual sword to the police, but as no law was in place for such an event, Qiu took matters into
his own hands. For the murder, Qiu was sentenced to life in prison with a possibility of parole in 15 years with good behavior (BBC News, 2005b).

It is hard to imagine why someone would go to such an extreme over simple games, something most people can just put down and walk away from. It becomes much more difficult to simply put down a game when you have really nothing else going for you, or you have already invested a large amount of time into it. It can be difficult to disconnect from virtual reality when you can basically ignore the harsh reality of real life without drugs or alcohol.

Still, excessive video game playing is not labeled an addiction. But without being labeled as such, there are rehabs open for gamers. ReStart is one open in Fall City, Washington, that takes the gamer as far away from technology as possible: In the wilderness. No internet connection, no computer, nothing that can possibly be used to play games of any sort. It allows the gamer to reconnect with the real world instead of the virtual one, offering gamers the chance to learn things such as useful life skills and vocational coaching. It gives them their sense of time back, and their ability to function without their game of choice; much like a rehab clinic would do for a drug addict or an alcoholic. ReStart also offers things like 12-step meetings, medical and psychiatric assessments, and even nutritional education (Retreat Center, 2010).

So what does all this mean? It shows that there is a very strong possibility that video game rehabilitation centers may start becoming the norm as more and more people become connected with technology, and less connected with the physical people around them. It may even point out how easily we can form connections with strangers that we barely know about beyond their voice and an avatar. It may even just show how badly some people need to get up, go out and look at life. The real life they are missing out on, and not the virtual one that is much
Personally, my own addiction started when I felt like there was nothing going on in my life. I was depressed and isolated, so playing World of Warcraft became my socialization. All my time was poured into becoming the best of my class, and knowing the people I thought I was close friends with, whom I actually barely knew. I had enough self-awareness to know that I could not survive in the real world if all I did was allow myself to game day in and day out and never develop skills to help me survive. I stopped playing World of Warcraft over a year ago, August 2009, to go to college. I have not signed onto the game or ventrillo since, and have lost all contact to the people I thought were my friends. Yet even though I have lost connection with them, I still do think of some of them often and hope they are doing well in their real lives. My own non-virtual life has been going better than when I was attached to World of Warcraft. I am almost done with my first semester of my sophomore year, and have been holding over a 3.0GPA since I started at Mansfield. I do not deal very well with confrontation, but I have started to get over that hurdle and develop more self-confidence without hiding behind a virtual me.

Currently, I have a close friend who has struggled with the same addiction to her computer gaming habits, who has not been able to pull herself away. No matter what I do, nothing has been able to convince her to try reality for a while. All I can do is sit back and hope that eventually, video game addictions will be taken more seriously and researched, so maybe I can get my best friend back. Only a serious attempt to research this new addiction will make this a reality.


