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Resident evil? Or not?

The video gamer stereotype, which says gamers are lonely nerds with low self-esteem, who are addicted to gaming because they are unable to socialise, has been contradicted by research by Victoria University Honours graduate Dan Loton.

In his Psychology Honours thesis, Loton explored the notion of video game addiction, and whether excessive gaming is related to social skills and self-esteem.

He said: "There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence about gaming addiction. Online forums abound with tales of people who can't get off the computer. But from a clinical point of view, an addiction is a mental illness with very serious consequences. In this context, we need to ask whether gaming is responsible for causing people's lives to fall apart in the same way we see with gambling, alcohol or drug addiction."

For the study, Loton developed an online questionnaire that included scales to measure social skills and self-esteem. There was also the Problem Video Game Playing Scale (PVP) used to determine 'problematic and dependence forming electronic game play'.

He said: "The characteristics that might define a 'problem gamer' would be things like an intrusive preoccupation with gaming, where the amount of time they spend playing is affecting their work, sleep, and close relationships; and they want to stop playing games but can't."

The gaming community responded well to Loton's questionnaire and he was able to analyse 621 completed surveys. Around 15 percent of respondents were identified as 'problem gamers' who spent more than 50 hours a week playing games.

He said: "We found that those who played Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as 'World of Warcraft', which currently has over 10 million fee-paying monthly subscribers, were more likely to exhibit problematic game play. But, what is important to note is that even 'problem gamers' did not exhibit significant signs of poor social skills or low self-esteem. Only one percent of those identified as 'problem gamers', appeared to have poor social skills, specifically shyness."

"We also looked at whether problematic play is impelled by social difficulties, by using a multiple regression analysis to see if high scores on the social skills and self esteem scales could predict problematic playing scores. Our findings strongly suggest that gaming doesn't cause social problems, and social problems are not driving people to gaming."

The findings contradict the widely reported statements made last year by the American Medical Association (AMA), which labelled MMORPG gamers as "somewhat marginalized socially, perhaps experiencing high levels of emotional loneliness and/or difficulty with real life social interactions".

Citing concerns "about the behavioural, health and societal effects of video game overuse" the AMA is likely to consider adding 'video game addiction' to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* at its next review in 2012.

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Loton said such views may have been prejudiced by outdated stereotypes.

He said: "I think it's an evolution of social and cultural stereotypes that suggest only nerds and geeks play computer games. The reality is that nowadays everyone is playing video games. A 2007 report by Bond University found that in Australia online gaming is more popular than downloading music and internet shopping."

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