

== THE ==
ANN ARBOR NEWS Exclusively On MLive.com
Ann Arbor, MI

Are video games taking over?

By Barbara F. Meltz

Ray Vossoughi of Canton, father of 14-year-old Navid and 12-year-old Saeed, is dreading the summer.

During the school year, there are rules his sons (mostly) follow: No gaming on school nights and only two 45-minute sessions each weekend day; if he finds out they've spent more than their allotted time, he takes the controller away for a week. The prospect of their having less structure and more free time, especially time when the boys are home while both parents are at work, has Vossoughi busily signing them up for soccer camps.

Navid and Saeed's current favorite is Halo 2, a game full of violence that Vossoughi is convinced makes children more aggressive and reduces attention span. But his biggest concern isn't content. It's that his sons become addicted.

This is not the case of a parent with an overactive imagination.

Manhattan psychologist Robert H. Reiner, director of Behavioral Associates, which specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy, says, "Five years ago, I used to see one addicted [video- or computer-game] teen every two or three months. Now I've got new patients coming in at the rate of one a week." Granted, he sees extremes: parents who bribe their son \$20 to stop playing video games long enough to take a shower; a teen who pulled a kitchen knife on his father because the dad threatened to rip the computer from the wall.

Clients today also are increasingly girls as well as boys, says Bradford, Pa., psychologist Kimberly Young, executive director of the Center for Online Addiction (netaddiction.com), and some are as young as 11, says **Maressa Hecht Orzack**, director of the Computer Addiction Studies Center at **McLean Hospital**.

"Summer is a time when they get hooked," Orzack says.

Canton High School guidance counselor Joanne Teliszewski particularly worries about incoming freshmen. In the past few years, she's seen a pattern where they get into gaming over the summer and then retreat further into it in September because they get overwhelmed by school. Before they know it, they're in a downward spiral and don't know how to stop.

"It's a bigger and bigger problem," says Teliszewski. "They aren't developing social skills or academic skills. It seriously affects their grades, which will affect their future where they apply to school, if they go to college at all."

Teens who are most susceptible tend to be depressed, shy, bored, bright, or overwhelmed, or suffering from attention difficulties, but no teen is immune, says Orzack.

"Gaming's initial appeal is the chance to escape your problems, whatever they are, because you get so engrossed, so wrapped up," says clinical psychologist Judith Tellerman, a professor at the University of Illinois Medical School and a specialist in adolescent development. She says the newest games are

multisensory so that you can be drawn in without realizing it. They're also more sophisticated. In the past, a skilled player could achieve the highest level in four or five hours; now it can take up to 40 or 50 hours, feeding into the typical teenager's need to master a challenge: "I can't quit until I get to the next level."

Paul Ng, a 17-year-old junior at Canton High who has a computer and PlayStation 2 in his bedroom, says he tries to limit his play to no more than one or two hours a day, after homework. But a few Mondays ago he got a new online, first-person shooter game, "Counter-Strike," and met up on a server site with 12 friends.

"At 10 [p.m.], I told my parents I was going to sleep in, like, 20 minutes. Next thing I know, it was, like, 1 o'clock. I was surprised. I was so into the game, it really felt like 20 minutes."

How can teens function after a night like that? Falling grades typically are the first sign of a problem. The second is a lack of balance in a teen's life. Tellerman tells parents that it's not bad if a teen gets wrapped up in a game now and then.

"What makes it a problem is when he isn't doing whatever it is that he used to do," from eating and sleeping regularly to spending time with friends. Most likely, the teen himself will not recognize that his life is awry.

"It's the people who are deprived of what they had from him before who begin to wonder, 'Where has my kid/friend gone?' " says Reiner. He suggests confronting a teen, but with these caveats:

Keep track of what the person is missing out on so you can be concrete: "You didn't go for pizza last Saturday; you didn't go to your prom; we had Celtics tickets and you stayed home."

Stick to "I" statements, such as, "I've noticed," "I'm wondering," "I miss you."

Avoid saying, "I think you're addicted to gaming." If the teen challenges you ("Are you telling me I'm addicted to the Internet?"), he would answer, "I'm not qualified to say that. I just think you've changed. I wish you would talk to someone about it."

Addictions, of course, begin somewhere. Young says the best antidote is to have clear boundaries and rules about video games, computer games, and even poker playing, from the moment they are introduced, no matter how young a child is. Orzack recommends Internet blocks if you have young children. With teens, many of whom can get around such software, it's better to come up together with a contract that details what games are played, when, and for how long. The best rules, agree Tellerman and Orzack, prohibit play on weeknights or allow it as a reward after homework is completed. The problem, of course, is that homework gets short-shrift by someone eager to play.

Orzack says even the weekly \$10 poker game that starts off more as entertainment than gambling has the potential to be addictive because a teen is so vulnerable to impulsive thinking and the need for immediate gratification. She's seen teens get into hundreds of dollars of debt from thinking that began innocently: "I can borrow another \$10, I'm due to win."

"The excitement overrides the good sense they might have to stop," she says. "That's what's so scary about it. They lose control of what they are doing and they don't even realize it."

That's perhaps even more true for online gaming, which worries Orzack most because teens can play in sites where they become part of an instant community of players, a huge draw for shy, awkward teens who

don't feel like they fit in in high school. Of the current popular games, she says, EverQuest and World of Warcraft are the most addictive.

Ryan Murrin is a sophomore at Canton High who enjoys a weekly, \$10-a-pot poker game; hooking up electronically with friends to play Halo 2 or Brothers in Arms; and sometimes, at home, playing a computer and video game at the same time: "I have a TV right next to the computer, so I could do a game on each, Halo on XBox and something from addictinggames.com on the computer."

He's looking forward to summer. "Video gaming, we'll do much more of that. It will get very intense, definitely," he says. He plans to keep his gaming under control by playing baseball and staying physically active.

"I think it's a much worse problem with younger kids," he says. "They're the ones I worry about developing addictions."