

The dark side of video games: It can affect marriages, jobs and even hygiene

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Written by

Dana Hunsinger Benbow

The Atari 2600 was Jason Ramsey's first love. And they say you never forget your first love.

Ramsey certainly didn't. He became obsessed. He became consumed.

And like an old girlfriend that he long should have forgotten, the Atari started destroying his life.

You see, Ramsey didn't stop with Atari. There was Nintendo, Super Nintendo, PlayStation and Xbox. There was "Halo," "Call of Duty Black Ops," "Madden" and "Grand Theft Auto."

By the time he was in his 20s and married, Ramsey says his obsession had turned into a full-blown video game addiction — one that he says ultimately ended his marriage.

"I was real little when I got it (the Atari), and I was in love with it," said Ramsey, 38, Indianapolis. "It changed my life as a kid. And I hate to say it, but it changed me as an adult, too."

Ramsey is among an entire generation of boys who have grown up on video games. But, now they are men — husbands, fathers. They have jobs. And they can't give the video games up.

It's a new and growing phenomenon that experts predict affects millions of adults (Yes, women, too). And it's become prevalent enough that a handful of recovery and rehabilitation centers nationwide have actually added it as an official addiction.

Ramsey's fixation on video games manifested itself in what experts say are the typical ways.

He'd stay up all night playing, not even realizing how much time had passed until sunlight peeked through the window. He wouldn't go out with his wife. When she asked for sex, he turned her down.

"She wanted to be romantic," Ramsey said. "And I'm like, 'No. I'm playing a game.' "

After nearly four years, the marriage was over.

"I sure wasted a lot of time playing video games. It was stupid," said Ramsey, who is remarried and now plays in moderation with his sons. "I was like a little kid."

Kid, for sure. Some experts even call it perpetual adolescence.

The average video game enthusiast, after all, isn't a teenage boy. He is a 35-year-old man, according to research published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine in 2009. It also reported that addictions to the games are causing lower levels of sociability and assertiveness in those adults.

In some cases, it's causing withdrawal from society, said Shannon Chrismore, site manager at the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery, which has a treatment course devoted to video game addiction.

"They are playing hours and hours at a time at the expense of important life areas, jobs, relationships," she said. "They are skipping social engagements, hygiene has gone down the drain, they have not showered, have not moved and they're not eating appropriately."

What's made the addiction an easy one to develop is that video games are accessible — and legal. But the results are the same.

"It's the same as people who are addicted to alcohol or crack cocaine," Chrismore said. "Just because you are not ingesting a

chemical doesn't make it any better."

And the more you play, the more you need to play to get that gratification. Soon, it's never enough.

"That's when you see the loss of jobs, absenteeism," she said. "People are leaving work early to go gaming. They are coming in late."

Andy Williams has seen it time and time again as a retail manager and as a 35-year-old who has watched acquaintances' lives go down the drain due to video games. Ruined finances. Broken marriages. Missing out on their children's lives.

"I've seen so many things fall through for these people because of these stupid games," Williams said. "It blows my mind that people don't have that self control."

After all, the father of three daughters grew up much like Ramsey, getting an Atari at age 5 and then each Christmas receiving the latest and greatest video game console on the market. He even played through college.

"But I grew up," said Williams, Greenfield, who now just has a Wii that he plays with his girls. "These guys basically sit in fantasy land."

Which is exactly what an addiction does for people. It takes them out of reality, said Eric Davis, clinical director of Life Recovery Center in Indianapolis.

"Addiction is addiction is addiction," he said. "With video games, they escape into that alternate reality. With cocaine, they escape. And it's that instant gratification."

But, Davis said, as with most things in life, video games in moderation are fine.

And they get a bad rap, said Bill Sparks, Indianapolis

“They teach hand-eye coordination, they teach teamwork, and help (people) learn lessons,” he said.

Sparks says there is a difference between addicted and being an enthusiast, which he considers himself.

“If a new game comes out, most of us enthusiasts learned at a young age to enjoy the game and complete it,” he said. “Video games are good, but only in good hands.”

Heaven McClane agrees and said she’s managed to find a balance, though her friends often tease her about her love of video games.

Whether that’s because she does, in fact, play too much — shooting people down in “Resident Evil” and navigating “Assassin’s Creed” — or because she is a woman is unclear. She estimates she plays every day, about three to four hours.

“I’m the nut,” said McClane, Greenfield, a receptionist at a veterinary clinic. “But we all do love it.”

That includes McClane’s husband, James, and their 14-year-old daughter, Sara. She also has a 6-month-old son, Austin.

McClane sees it not as an obsession but as something to do as a family, just like families who sit down and watch TV together.

“They actually like watching me,” she said. “It’s like a movie for them.”

For her? It’s an escape.

“It takes out the stress,” she said. “I can kill things and blow things up, literally.”

For Stev Tony, Indianapolis, drinking a couple beers and flying an F-16 fighter jet somewhere overseas while taking out targets used to be a regular ritual. He grew up playing Pac-Man, Galaga and Tetris.

But in 2000, he said he stopped playing video games “religiously.”

“I just walked away from them because life has other demands,” said Tony, who works at Filmwave IMG.

It’s not that Tony considered himself an addict, but he does think video games can become all-consuming.

“Be it video games, gambling, playing the lottery and even sex, they all have a bright side and they all have a dark side,” he said. “Beware of the dark side.”

Follow Star reporter Dana Hunsinger Benbow on Twitter at twitter.com/IndyStarDana. Call her at (317) 444-6012.