

## Online Video Gaming: When Virtual Life Takes Over

By Edith Townsend

The image is not an uncommon one, an adolescent boy hunched over his computer in the middle of the night, his room in disarray, pale, and dishevelled, eyes red after staring at his computer screen for the past 10 hours. He had spent all this time in the world of Azeroth, battling orcs and trolls with his guild. This was his fantasy world, and it demonstrates the power of online video game addiction, an emerging problem that has been receiving attention in the media and the mental health field. In the U.S. alone, sales for video and computer games reached 11.7 billion dollars in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Video game play lets us take on new personas, do exciting things and enjoy a virtual reality very different from our own lives. But what happens when that recreational play turns to an obsession, and virtual life seems to take over real life? There is startling evidence of the effect that video gaming 'addiction' is having on its players. So much evidence in fact, that Bellwood Health Services has now included video gaming addiction in its treatment services.

### Addictive Games?

In the last decade, video game technology has opened up avenues for people to live a

virtual life, without ever needing to leave their homes. The most engaging of these are MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), which are being dubbed 'heroinware' for their addictive qualities. World of Warcraft, the most



popular, has a subscription list of 11.5 million people from around the world who play together in this fantasy game.<sup>2</sup> These video games are extremely seductive and engaging; they encourage real-time interaction among other people playing the game and developing groups (guilds) so players build a social network of 'friends' that depend on them to keep playing. Success in these games is highly dependent on the amount of time players put into them, and there are constant rewards for 'levelling up' and receiving new powers and rewards. One of the most powerfully addictive features of these games is that they never end - there is always something more to do and more progress to be made.

Research suggests that MMORPG players are usually people who experience high levels of emotional loneliness and/or difficulty with real life social interactions.<sup>3</sup> These games allow players to develop their own persona - a character created called an avatar - and allow a safe way to converse with people all over the world from the

comfort of one's own keyboard. As one player wrote on [www.wowdetox.com](http://www.wowdetox.com) (a volunteer-run website helping game players who want to stop playing World of Warcraft), "I am not a jock, I am not a smart guy, I don't have great looks, and I stutter when I am nervous. I have no chance with girls. But in World of Warcraft I was a muscular, tall, good-looking Human from Stormwind who didn't stutter at all. People liked me." For many, gaming is a good distraction from the problems in their own lives. Like other addictions, it allows an escape from anxiety, depression, and other problems, and propels the user into a world where all his or her fantasies can come true. Much of the game play produces adrenaline rushes as players fight in epic battles and duels. What also appears to be very compelling in the games is the

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### THE MANY FACES OF ADDICTION 2010: A Symposium Presented by Bellwood Health Services

Join us on September 23<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> at the Ontario Science Centre for Bellwood's 2<sup>nd</sup> annual addiction education symposium. See page 4 for agenda and registration details.

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## ... Online Video Gaming continued from P. 1

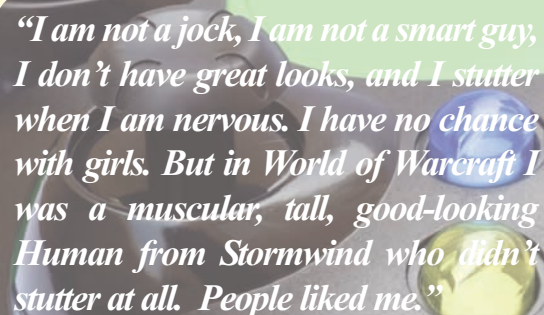
power and status one can achieve, in a way most people cannot do in their real lives. This is highly prized for an individual who feels oppressed at a low paying job. In the online game, they can become a hero. Some people have also found romantic companionship with other people playing the game and put a lot of time into these relationships, even though they most likely will never meet in person. If all these needs - self-esteem, power and control, companionship, entertainment, escape, belonging - are being met by the game, it is easy to see how these virtual worlds can be much more satisfying than real life. The problem is, the feelings a player receives in the virtual world don't often translate into the real world and players don't feel better about themselves when the computer is off. Consequently, they retreat again and again into their virtual worlds where those feelings are satisfied.

Incidences of players gaming for 10-12 hours per day are becoming common and the devastating effects and consequences of online gaming addiction is becoming more apparent to individuals and their families. The American Medical Association has estimated that at least 10-15% of video game players meet the criteria for overuse.<sup>3</sup> Extremely dependent players have quit school, lost marriages and jobs, missed meals and neglected their families and friends in order to go on raids and participate in battles. The most harrowing have been several news stories from Asia about players who have died after several days of gaming marathons where they haven't eaten or slept, and young children in the U.S. who have died due to neglect while their parents were busy game playing.

### Video Gaming As An Addiction

It has been argued that because the Internet is used as a social medium, society cannot be addicted to the Internet, but Griffiths stated that it is the features of the Internet

that people become addicted to, such as pornography, chat rooms, shopping, gambling, and most currently, online video gaming.<sup>4</sup> There has been much controversy about video gaming as an addiction, but with the growing amount of media attention and mental health professionals who are recognizing the problem, it is undoubtedly becoming a problem. A Report of the



*"I am not a jock, I am not a smart guy, I don't have great looks, and I stutter when I am nervous. I have no chance with girls. But in World of Warcraft I was a muscular, tall, good-looking Human from Stormwind who didn't stutter at all. People liked me."*

Council on Science and Public Health for the American Medical Association encouraged including 'Internet/ video game addiction' as a formal diagnostic disorder in the upcoming revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V - which would confirm it as a mental disorder.<sup>3</sup> Currently, of the behavioural addictions, Pathological Gambling is the only disorder in the DSM. Pathological gambling has more similarities than differences with excessive video game playing, which is why symptoms for video game addiction have been adapted from the diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling.<sup>5</sup>

These signs and symptoms include:

1. Preoccupation with gaming (e.g. preoccupation with reliving past gaming experiences, planning the next venture, thinking of ways to be able to continue play).
2. Needing to increase the amount of time gaming to achieve satisfaction.
3. Having repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop gaming.

4. Feeling restless or irritable when attempting to cut back or stop gaming.
5. Gaming as a way of escaping from a problem or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g. feelings of helplessness, anxiety or depression).
6. Lying to family members or others to conceal the extent of the gaming.
7. Jeopardizing or losing a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gaming.

Like most addictions, the most difficult part about overcoming the problem, is first acknowledging there is one. Video game addicts are privy to the denial and rationalizations like other addicts and stopping game play does not just become an issue of 'shutting if off'. Though some players have been able to 'kill' their characters and delete their computer game software, others are not so successful. For most players, recovery must involve a look at the issues underlying the video game play and examining the emotional motives that prompt them to play.<sup>6</sup> There are many players that have skills in self-awareness and self-discipline to know when to turn off the computer and live a balanced life with game play as a recreational choice. But we can no longer discount online video gaming as a potential disorder that needs to be taken seriously. There are too many dependent players who continue to retreat into their virtual world despite the many detrimental consequences and continue to socially isolate. For these game players, the world they need to begin to explore - is the real one. ... continued P. 3

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### HELPFUL TIPS FOR GAMERS

1. **Don't Play.** It's simple - you'll never have the opportunity to get hooked.
2. **Be aware and get educated.** These are the most important tools when it comes to preventing a problem. Parents need to educate themselves about technology, and become involved with what their children are doing. Impose limits and consequences.
3. **Know your game.** Pick games that have less of an addictive quality, especially ones that have a finite end.
4. **Set a time limit.** Give yourself a two hour time limit to play, and only play during 'recreational hours' - that means not playing when you have work, school, family or social obligations.
5. **Have other hobbies.** Especially ones that involve interacting with others face to face.
6. **Put computers in a public and central location in the home.**
7. **Listen to others.** Family members often recognize the problem first.
8. **Ask for help.** There are several game addiction resources and professionals to help players and their families. If you would like some help and support for you or your family, please contact Bellwood Health Services.

*Edith Townsend, MSW, RSW, is a therapist in Bellwood Health Services' Problem Gambling Program and works with people suffering with compulsive shopping, shoplifting, spending, and most recently, Internet addictions including video game addictions.*

*Originally published in the Spring 2010 issue of Moods Magazine, [www.moodsmag.com](http://www.moodsmag.com).*

#### References:

- 1) Entertainment Software Association. 2009. Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry.
- 2) "World of warcraft subscriber base reaches 11.5 million worldwide". Blizzard Entertainment. 2008-12-23. <http://eu.blizzard.com/en/press/081223.html>.
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- 4) Griffiths, M. (1998) Internet Addiction: Does it really exist? In J. Gackenbach (Ed), Psychology and the internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal applications (pp.61-75). New York: Academic Press.
- 5) Griffiths MD, Davies MNO. Does video game addiction exist? In: Raessens J, Goldstein J, eds. Handbook of Computer Game Studies. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 2005:361-369.
- 6) Young, K.S. Addiction to MMORPG's: Symptoms and Treatment. Center for Internet Addiction Recovery. [www.netaddiction.com](http://www.netaddiction.com)

## The Bellwood News is Going GREEN!

Help us help the environment by choosing to receive future newsletters and other Bellwood updates via email. To join our email service, contact [jlezcano@bellwood.ca](mailto:jlezcano@bellwood.ca) with your full name, current mailing address and the email address you would like us to use for future correspondence.

## Bellwood Program News

### ***NEW - THREE-WEEK SEXUAL ADDICTION TREATMENT PROGRAM***

Bellwood has been Canada's treatment provider for sexual addiction since 2002.

Our new specialized task-focused treatment program is designed to help individuals:

- Identify unhealthy sexual behaviours and their consequences
- Develop an abstinence treatment plan
- Identify triggers and create a relapse prevention plan to deal with triggers
- Explore core trauma issues
- Learn about healthy intimacy and healthy sexuality

This new three-week program option is designed for individuals dealing with sexual addiction only or those in solid recovery from substance dependency.

Individuals with both substance and sexual addictions can access Bellwood's concurrent substance addiction and sexual addiction treatment program.

*Upcoming admission dates for the three-week sexual addiction treatment program are May 27th and July 15th, 2010.*

### ***METHADONE TAPERING & ADDICTION TREATMENT***

Bellwood is now offering a specialized Methadone Tapering and Addiction Treatment Program. The goal of the program is to progressively reduce methadone use and help our clients overcome their addiction through a comprehensive treatment plan.

Methadone tapering is done on an outpatient basis, and upon completion of the outpatient phase, clients then enter Bellwood's residential treatment program.

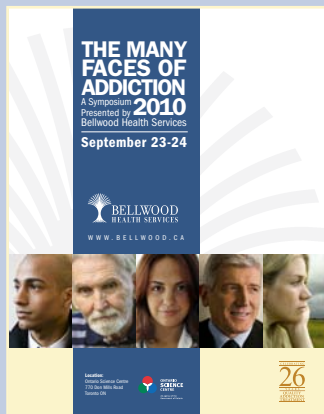
Contact us today for more details about these specialized programs or other Bellwood services.

(416) 495-0926 or (800) 387-6198

[info@bellwood.ca](mailto:info@bellwood.ca) [www.bellwood.ca](http://www.bellwood.ca)

## THE MANY FACES OF ADDICTION 2010: A Symposium Presented by Bellwood Health Services

**Join us on September 23rd & 24th at the Ontario Science Centre  
for Bellwood's second annual addiction education symposium.**

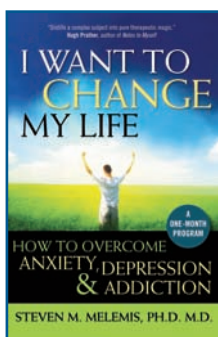


### Speakers and topics include:

- Dr. Cardwell Nuckols: *The Art & Science of Healing AND Treating the Multi-System, Multi-Problem Client: Matching Client Need to Modality*
- Terry Evanshen: *Seize Each Day*
- LCol Stephane Grenier: *A New Way to Look at an Old Problem*
- Rick Csiernik: *Oxycontin, Percodan, Methadone & All Those Nasty Opioids That Cause Havoc in the Workplace: Or Do They?*
- Linda Bell: *The Alarming Costs of Workplace Addictions: Are Your Employees Drinking Away Your Profits?*
- Dr. Steven Melemis: *Relapse Prevention Strategies: The Five Rules of Recovery*
- Adrienne Campbell & Shane Smith, Miller Thomson: *Company and Employee Rights: A Difficult Balancing Act*
- Rhona Charney: *Co-Dependency in the Workplace: Are You Guilty?*
- Dr. Shelley McMain: *Dialectical Behaviour Therapy for the Treatment of Concurrent Substance Disorders and Borderline Personality Disorder*
- Sue Minns: *I Choose the Red Shoes*

**For information about our early bird registration rate, or for other symposium details, visit [www.bellwood.ca](http://www.bellwood.ca) or call (800) 387-6198.**

### *I Want to Change My Life: How to Overcome Anxiety, Depression and Addiction - The Latest Book by Bellwood Physician Dr. Steven Melemis*



The purpose of life is the pursuit of happiness. But sometimes you lose your way and end up taking the wrong path. When that happens, how do you change the course of your life?

This book is designed to help you improve your life, and give you the coping skills to achieve your goals.

The book includes:

1. **The five rules of recovery.** Discover the five most important things you need to do in order to succeed at recovery.
2. **Relapse prevention strategies.** Learn about the stages of relapse and specific strategies for each stage. Discover the common mis-

takes that lead to most relapses.

3. **Coping skills for recovery.** Cognitive therapy techniques to help you change the thinking that sabotages your recovery.
4. **Stress management.** Stress is one of the major causes of relapse. Learn a new approach to stress management. When you are tense, you tend to repeat what is familiar and wrong instead of doing what's new and right.
5. **Post-acute withdrawal.** This is one of the most misunderstood areas of recovery. Understand what causes post-acute withdrawal and strategies for surviving it.
6. **How to overcome anxiety and depression.** Many people who have an addiction also have underlying anxiety or depression. Discover new techniques for overcoming these conditions.

*I Want To Change My Life* is available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) and [Indigo.ca](http://Indigo.ca). ISBN: 9781897572238.

For more information, visit [www.AddictionsAndRecovery.org](http://www.AddictionsAndRecovery.org).

## Bellwood Bids Farewell and Happy Retirement to ...

### Toby Levinson

Toby Levinson is a caring, experienced clinician, with a twinkle in her eye, who is always respectful and a fabulous dresser. She has worked at varying times with Dr. Bell and his clinics, since 1965. One of the most experienced addiction specialists in Canada, Toby received her BA from the University of Toronto in 1946 and her MA in 1950. She is a Certified Psychologist in the Province of Ontario, and her certificate number of 42 (she was the 42nd person registered when the profession was regulated by the Province in 1960) indicates that she is probably one of the longest working psychologists in the province today.



Always on the go, having worked variously at the Toronto Psychiatric Hospital, The Toronto Mental Health Clinic and the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF), Toby says she will always remember when Dr. Bell first called her on a Sunday morning in 1965. He said, "This is Gordon Bell calling, I was wondering if you would be interested in doing some psychological testing at The Bell Clinic." Thus began a long working relationship.

When Dr. Bell established the Donwood Institute in 1967, Toby joined the staff on a part-time basis. Her first role was setting up the psychology department with volunteers to do group testing. Toby designed and implemented a five-year follow-up study of 154 patients funded by the Ford Foundation. She phoned clients at six months, saw them at one year, phoned again at three years, and interviewed them personally again at five years. Toby travelled across Canada and the United States and anyone who knows her, knows she loves to travel. The research became one of the first published long-term program evaluation studies of addiction treatment.

Toby recognized that presenting papers at international conferences is a good method of travelling. She has presented papers in Germany, Russia, Malta, Thailand, France, Belgrade in then Yugoslavia, Budapest in Hungary, Norway, Australia, and even in North America, in Washington, Chicago, Calgary, Ottawa and Toronto.

Toby left the Donwood to work full-time at the Clarke Institute in the early 1970s while completing the follow-up study. At the Clarke, collaborating with Dr. Syd Folb, she worked with couples having problems in their sexual relationship. Toby observed "at the

Clarke we were teaching people how to do it and at Bellwood we are teaching people how not to do it."

Toby left The Clarke Institute and returned to ARF five years later as Clinical lead for the Program for Employed Problem Drinkers. This was the first time Toby was ever asked to apply formally for a job.

When Toby retired from ARF in 1990, she called Linda Bell and quickly joined Bellwood four days a week as Manager of Continuing Health and Therapy. Toby has worked in a vast array of clinical roles at Bellwood including the provision of safety sensitive assessments, interventions, therapy and education. She also established our employer seminars, bringing together employers and employee clients. She supervised a large staff and was a resource to the whole team, wise in her observations and suggestions. Toby believes that "Bellwood has a very high standard and a professional staff that other treatment centres don't have."

Toby recently said: "I had the time of my life at the end of my career. Bellwood was my very favourite place, the highlight of my career. I learned an awful lot there. I learned a lot from all the staff and the students, the new faces." She said: "Every day was different, every day was fun. You never knew what would happen."

*The reward of a thing well done is having done it.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Toby is not totally hanging up her psychology hat, but she plans to spend more time with her husband, Jim, and will not be battling the snow to make the long trek up to Bellwood. Way to go Toby! We will miss you and your high standard for fashion, but we know you are only a phone call away. By the way, Toby loves to do lunch!

### Don Ross

Don Ross joined the Bellwood team in 2000 and was instrumental in building a caring and dedicated Intake and Assessment team. For many thousands of Canadians who have called seeking help and guidance, Don was the voice of Bellwood and a beacon of light and hope.



Prior to joining Bellwood, Don worked in the field of addiction in both the public sector as an assessment and referral counsellor, and the corporate EAP network.

We wish Don and his family health and happiness!

## Bellwood Alumni Corner

### *Celebrating the Freedom of Being Well*

Mark Your Calendar for These Upcoming Alumni Events!

#### **Bellwood Alumni & Staff Family BBQ**

Saturday, June 12<sup>th</sup>

Join us at **Adventure Valley** for a fun day of fellowship, special guest speakers, entertainment for children, sports activities and good food.

Watch the Bellwood website and your mail for further details and RSVP information.

Adventure Valley is located at Leslie St. and Steeles Ave East. Activities available include tennis, soccer, hiking & swimming (weather permitting). Visit [www.adventurevalley.ca](http://www.adventurevalley.ca) for more information.

#### **Bellwood Alumni Christmas Party**

Thursday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>

Circle the date and join Santa and the Bellwood staff for our annual holiday season celebration. Watch for more details.

#### **Aftercare Mini Treatment Programs**

Bellwood's **Mini Treatment Programs** provide an excellent opportunity for out-of-town clients to stay connected with Bellwood once they have completed treatment.

Upcoming dates:    June 20, 21, & 22  
                                  September 26, 27 & 28  
                                  November 21, 22, & 23

**For more information or to register for an upcoming Mini Treatment Program, call 1-800-387-6198, Ext 119.**

## **Bellwood Community and Professional Addiction Education Opportunities**

On February 18th, over 70 people attended "**Addiction & The Family**", a community education evening presented by Bellwood. This community event was facilitated by Bellwood staff physician, Dr. Gerald Cooney, who led an insightful presentation and discussion about addiction and the impact on families. Attendees learned about the causes and effects of addiction and how families can begin their own healing process.

For information about other upcoming community-focused education events, watch our web site, [www.bellwood.ca](http://www.bellwood.ca).

Healthcare and corporate professionals are invited to attend a Bellwood **Professionals in Residence Day** to learn more about addictions and how Bellwood can be a resource for treatment and education. Upcoming dates for these complimentary semi-

nars are: June 2, September 15, October 27, and November 24.

Bellwood offers workshops, seminars and workplace presentations that can be tailored to meet any corporate need. Topics can include identifying addictions in the workplace, intervention strategies, managing an addicted employee, workplace re-integration, and developing workplace substance abuse policies.

*For more information about training opportunities, or to register for any of these Bellwood events, contact Jennifer Lezcano at [jlezcano@bellwood.ca](mailto:jlezcano@bellwood.ca), or call (416) 847-0752, toll free (800) 387-6198, Ext 302.*