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Just a game, or dangerous obsession?

By *MARTHA IRVINE, Associated Press writer*

[an error occurred while processing this directive] HUDSON, Wis. -- His mother found Shawn Woolley's body in a rocking chair in front of his computer. His head was slumped to one side -- still facing a screen of the online game that she said had become his obsession.

"That damn game," Liz Woolley said to herself as she broke into tears.

At Shawn's side was the .22-caliber rifle he'd used to end his life.

Scattered around him, police reports say, were dirty clothes, fast-food wrappers, dozens of empty pizza boxes and chicken bones thrown haphazardly to the floor. His mother had pounded on his apartment's door and windows for two days before finally cutting through the chain lock to break in last Thanksgiving morning.

The 21-year-old, who'd hastily quit his job more than a week earlier, left no suicide note in the one-bedroom apartment in Hudson, Wis., a small town about 30 miles east of Minneapolis. The only signs of what had been on his mind were a few scribbled names and terms related to EverQuest, the online virtual reality game he'd been playing for well over a year.

Based on those and other clues, Liz Woolley suspects her son killed himself after being jilted online. But she places the blame for his death squarely on the game and its maker-- Sony Online Entertainment.

"Shawn was worse than any junkie I've ever seen," Liz Woolley said. "After he started playing the game, he just didn't enjoy life anymore."

She believes Sony intentionally added features to Everquest to keep players online for hours at a time.

Officials at Sony Online would not comment on the Woolley case or the possibility raised by Liz Woolley that she may sue. Scott McDaniel, the company's vice president of marketing, said the game should be viewed like any other form of entertainment.

"There's a duty on the consumer to use it responsibly," McDaniel said of EverQuest.

Whether online gaming -- or Internet surfing for that matter -- can truly be addictive is still a matter of much debate among computer and mental health experts.

But whatever they name it -- addiction, obsession or compulsion -- those experts say a growing number of people are spending huge chunks of time on their computers at the expense of their everyday lives.

The average Everquest subscriber plays about 20 hours a week.

Increasingly, mental health professionals say they are getting calls from family members and online junkies themselves who find themselves neglecting friends and family, skipping school, work and even a daily shower to get more time on the computer.

"I don't know if we're talking 1 percent or 10 percent or 20 percent. But my sense is that this is a significant problem that's just really starting to show up on the radar screen," said psychologist David Walsh, president of the National Institute on Media and the Family. The Minneapolis-based nonprofit focuses on the effects of media, including the Internet, on young people and families.

Experts say pornography Web sites appear to be the biggest draw. Others spend hours chatting via computer with friends or people they meet online.

Still others -- often teenage boys looking for an escape from the stress and awkwardness of adolescence -- are pulled in by games.

"It's extremely difficult to go against the tide of what, for these kids, has become popular culture," said Hilarie Cash, a licensed mental health counselor who co-founded Internet/Computer Addiction Services in Redmond, Wash., in 1999.

She is among a small number of therapists nationwide specializing in patients who have trouble reining in their computer time.

David Greenfield, a psychologist in Hartford, Conn., is another. When it comes to games, he and others say EverQuest seems to be particularly difficult to resist -- so much so that some call it "EverCrack."

A sort of computer-driven Dungeons and Dragons, the online game has more than 430,000 registered players worldwide who form teams, or "guilds," in a never-ending journey to earn points and slay monsters.

It's among the most successful ventures in a burgeoning realm, belonging to a category called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. Such games allow people to effectively live shadow lives, divorced from flesh-and-blood existence.

And while most people keep their playing time in check, experts say there are some who can't.

Pre-existing depression and anxiety may be one reason, said Alan Marlatt, director of the Addictive Behaviors Research Center at the University of Washington.

Experts say peer pressure also seems to be a factor in EverQuest, since logging off may hurt a guild's chances of advancing.

And even when a player does want to quit a session, they say it can take hours to stash extra protective gear and weapons earned in the game and find a hiding spot in which to "safely" log off. Sony's McDaniel said, however, that in some cases, it takes as few as 45 seconds for a player to quit.

His family said the camaraderie with online friends was part of the allure for Shawn Woolley, a shy, overweight young man known for his wry sense of humor but who never had much luck dating. One former high school classmate described him as a geek. Others who knew him say he was sweet and sensitive but hard to get to know.

A longtime epileptic, Shawn also struggled with seizures, which his mother said computer time only aggravated.

After graduation from high school, Shawn spent a semester studying graphic design at a nearby vocational school, then dropped out. He took a job as assistant manager at a pizza chain but left that, too, in July 2000 and moved back with his mom.

By that time, he'd started playing EverQuest -- and his younger brother said its effects were already noticeable.

Tony Woolley, Shawn's 14-year-old brother, said the two used to do all sorts of fun things together -- "bowling, go-carts, anything." Then Shawn all but stopped hanging out with him.

"I used to ask him, 'Why are you doing this? We need you here,'" Tony said. "But he never answered."

Their mother recalls the time Shawn broke down and cried when another EverQuest player stole the online treasures he'd collected in the game.

"Shawn, that's just a computer," she told him. "It's make-believe."

Frustrated, she took his computer keyboard to work. But he bought another one. When she tried to limit his computer time, he played at night when she was sleeping.

She later discovered he'd stolen her credit card number to pay his EverQuest bill, then about \$60 for six months of playing time. (Sony recently raised its EverQuest rates to \$12.95 per month.)

There was a glimmer of hope early last year when the county social services agency assigned Shawn a caseworker, after his mother booted him out to try and force him to get a job. He got a room in a local group home, started seeing a therapist and began regularly taking medication for seizures and depression.

In May 2001, he got a job at another pizza parlor. But once he started earning money, he left the group home, got his own one-bedroom apartment and, by August, had enough money to buy a second-hand computer.

"He was an adult," his mother said. "What could I do to stop him?"

As his EverQuest play increased, she said Shawn started skipping counseling appointments and medication doses and rarely answered his telephone.

On Nov. 11, he quit work and holed up in his apartment, refusing visitors and phone calls. A computer log shows that he played the game almost constantly until Nov. 20, the day police think he shot himself.

His mother found his body on Thanksgiving, a day she had hoped he'd shut off the computer and join the family for dinner.

Shortly after, she dug into his computer files and found a list of the last few EverQuest names he'd used. Among them was the name "ILUYYOU," which he stopped using in late October. It was one of a few clues that led to her theory that he'd been hurt by an online love.

Among his things, she also found a letter from a new caseworker who told him she planned to visit the Monday after Thanksgiving -- a move his mother said was obviously too little, too late.

"If you're an alcoholic or addicted to drugs, there's places you can go for help," she said, as a single tear runs down her face. "But there was no one there for him -- no one who knew how to help."

Liz Woolley just started setting up an organization called Online Gamers Anonymous and a Web site to help people like Shawn -- with plans to use any money she might get from a lawsuit to help fund the organization.

"I can't just sit here," she said. "I cannot let him die in vain."

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