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Video games call teens to 'duty'

October 21, 2008 - by Laurie Watt

Video games like Call of Duty pull teens in, allow them to do things they couldn't do in real life and give them a mental and physical high, says a University of Toronto lecturer on video game design.

"There are some teens, especially around the mid-teens, some have absolutely no life outside the game. It almost becomes unhealthy," said Steve Engels.

Brandon Crisp, 15, left home Thanksgiving Day after his parents cut him off of Call of Duty; he has not been seen or heard from since.

Brandon's parents, Steve and Angelika Crisp, said the game interfered with his sleep and they feared it would impact his school work; St. Joseph's Catholic Secondary School principal Matt McCann said Brandon was a good student, without attendance issues, until he left home over a week ago.

That prompted Engels to label Brandon "a fan" but not an addict.

"He's a fan, but not an obsessed person. If he were really obsessed, you'd know. He'd not attend school, forgo food and sleep, like an obsessive gambler," the senior lecturer said.

Engels added many video games are designed to appeal to males aged 18 to 30. The games enable them to be what they dream of being, and empower them to change the world, albeit virtual.

"It doesn't matter how big or small you are. You can be anything you want. They allow people to actualize what they would like to do," Engels explained.

He added combining the opportunity to be what you dream you can be with an enticing narrative, makes it really tough to stop playing. An interactive video game ramps up the sensation that a good book gives many people.

"I've had a few books that when you start reading, you can't put it down, like some of Dan Brown's (Angels and Demons, The Da Vinci Code) or a Harry Potter. You finish one chapter, and the next one is tantalizing. You say you'll read one more chapter or play five more minutes.

"You get pulled into some of the action and have the ability to put it down, but you can't, because you have to take it to the next level, reading the next chapter. The chapters on videogames are all there for you. Generally, you don't have to use your imagination; you have the freedom to act out and explore."

Called "immersion," the phenomenon gives participants a sense of control, as they see their virtual world unfold, the lecturer explained.

Call of Duty is a realistic game, with versions designed on various themes. Call of Duty 4 is based on modern warfare, and a new version is expected out later this year. An earlier version is based on World War II.

The game can be played independently on an Xbox, but often players opt to go online and play with others; settings can be cities, shipyards, and ships. Action is fast-paced, and the experience can get the adrenaline pumping, Engels added.

"Most games tend to be marketed toward one demographic, young males 18 to 30. It's chicken and egg," he said, noting this group does play more games, but that could be because of the games designed to appeal to them.

As the group plays more, companies create and upgrade the games they offer; the gaming industry is looking to appeal more to women, but has not been particularly successful.

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agreed - parental guidance

Submitted by Megan MacLean from Huntsville on Thursday, October 23, 2008 at 4:41 pm

My family are gamers. It gives us a lot of fun frivolous conversation and debate when we remember to take it in moderation. We still spend a great deal of time together and function fine outside of our hobbies. Last generation parents were always complaining about kids getting stuck to the tv. In other cases it's books, or the phone, or staying out too late. It's easy for any of us to get caught up in things that we like so it's up to parents to teach thier kids how to take everything in moderation and respect everyone else's time as well. (Not an easy task to be sure!)

Video games not to blame

Submitted by Neil Sparling from Huntsville on Tuesday, October 21, 2008 at 4:10 pm

First of all 'Call of Duty' and games of this genre have a "M" rating, which means the game has a mature rating and is for an 18+ player. So my question is, who is buying the kids these games? We can't point our fingers at the gaming industry when we as parents have neglected to pay attention to the ratings. In my opinion these are the same inflamatory comments that were spouted in the 80's by some "University lecturer" about the Dungeons & Dragons board games.Let's step up and admit what the real problem is.

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