

Rehab for the Mario Bros.?

By Reg P. Wydeven
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In 1979, our family got the Atari 2600 for Christmas. We spent many winter nights in front of our 32-inch Zenith playing Combat, Asteroids and Space Invaders. On my 11th birthday, I got Pac-Man. Much like Buckner and Garcia's 1982 chart-topping hit, I had "Pac-Man Fever." Like the song goes, the game was "driving me crazy" and had me "going out of my mind" as I spent hundreds of hours trying to conquer the indomitable 9th key level.

After the 2600, we got an Atari 5200. Then I saved up my allowance and in 8th grade bought a Nintendo. Then a Super Nintendo. Then a Nintendo 64. Then an Xbox. Finally an Xbox 360. Needless to say, I like video games. I remember one Christmas Eve I got "Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic" and I was still playing it when my kids woke up on Christmas morning.

I was beginning to think that my gaming was starting to become a full-blown, debilitating addiction. I figured that I might be considered disabled under the Americans with Disabilities Act and could require my employer to accommodate me at work by allowing me to play online games, like "Star Wars: Galaxies", for a few hours each day. That was, until the American Medical Association's annual policy meeting last month.

A report prepared for this meeting by the AMA's Council on Science and Public Health sought to have excessive video game playing be classified as a formal psychiatric addiction and included in a widely-used diagnostic manual of psychiatric illnesses. Apparently, "Pac-Man Fever" could become an official affliction.

While the AMA elected not to define gaming as a disorder, it did order more research on the issue, including studies on appropriate amounts of video game playing and other "screen time" for children. The AMA is also asking the American Psychiatric Association to consider its report in the ongoing revision of its diagnostic manual, the DSM-IV, which was last published in 1994 and the next edition is scheduled to be completed in 2012.

According to the AMA's seven-page report, up to 90% of American children play video games. Of these children, up to 15%, or more than 5 million kids, might be addicted. The report goes on to state that children who start gaming at younger ages are more likely to develop "dependence-like behaviors." The report also indicates that Internet role-playing games involving multiple players, like "Galaxies," are the most addictive.

Like video games, many of today's youth are also "addicted" to text messaging. Firing off messages to friends from cell phones is all the rage these days. Because of this, at its August 9th meeting, the board of directors of the NCAA is considering implementing a rule banning coaches from sending text messages to recruits.

While there are currently no restrictions on coaches text messaging recruits, if the rule is affirmed, it would remain in place until a January vote at the NCAA's annual convention in Nashville.

Contrary to popular belief, I still have all four years of eligibility for NCAA Division I basketball. Shockingly, I have not yet received any text messages from coaches, and now it looks like I never will. Sadly, the only way I'll ever make it to the Final Four is by playing "NCAA Basketball 2007" on my Xbox.

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