Gamer Widow:
The Phenomenological Experience of Spouses of Online Video Game Addicts

by

Jason C. Northrup, M.M.F.T.

A Dissertation

In

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Approved

Sterling Shumway, Ph.D.

Thomas Kimball, Ph.D.

C. Nichole Morelock, Ph.D.

Thomas McGovern, Ed.D.

Fred Hartmeister, J.D., Ed.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

December, 2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel as though I have just reached the peak of Mount Everest. It's hard to believe that I'm really at this point when it seems like it's been ages that I've been climbing this mountain. But I know that I would not be here except for the help of some very special people. First of all, I would like to thank my "guides" on this expedition: Sterling, you have supported me and this research from the beginning. Thank you for making yourself available to me despite your busy schedule. Your feedback and encouragement has been more valuable to me than you will ever know. Tom, as the resident expert on all things qualitative, your input was especially valuable. Thanks for taking the time to make sure I was doing this right. Nichole, thank you for all of your uplifting comments and great feedback. Dr. McGovern, every time I bumped into you in the hall at the HSC, you greeted me with a smile and a word of motivation. I know that this project would not be what it is without all of your contributions.

I also need to thank the other professors and mentors who helped me at the beginning of this journey. Most of you have been called elsewhere and so I was not able to complete this journey with all of you here, but know that you played an important part in my getting to this point. Roy Bean, you were my first advisor at Texas Tech and helped make me into the academician I am today. Thank you for all the weekly lunches in your office going over research and chatting about *Lost*. Karen Wampler, thank you for being the first to affirm that I had it in me to be a researcher and that this was a valuable topic to explore. Richard Wampler, thanks for helping to shape me into a critical thinker and a supervisor. David Ivey, thanks for your support

as well. Also, I would like to thank my original ACU MFT professors for a second-to-none clinical education and for encouraging me to pursue my doctorate. Thanks to Waymon Hinson, Jackie Halstead, and Peter Bradley.

I also know that I would not be here without the support of my family. My sister Deliahna, thanks for always being there for me. Mom and dad, you have been incredible role models. You helped instill in me a love for learning and a belief in myself that I could do anything I put my mind to. Dad, you have always supported me unconditionally and have always been man enough to tell me "I love you." Mom, you have exemplified the dedication that it takes to serve your fellow man, but you have also shown me that family always comes first. I could not have asked for better parents and I am so glad that you have seen me reach the end of this journey.

Kirsten, my love, you have been my "dissertation widow." How ironic is it that you've had to put up with my endless hours in front of a computer screen? But without you, I could not have done this. You have pushed me when I needed to be pushed and known when I needed to step away from it. You are forever my best friend. Your love and support have made me who I am today. And Madalyn, little doodle-bug, you can't even talk yet but you've been my motivation for these last months to push through fatigue and finish this thing. I can't wait to see what the future has in store for our little family.

Finally, I give honor to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. You are the one who has blessed me with the ability to achieve this feat, so I give all the glory back to You.

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have examined the concept of addiction to video games, particularly to the genre known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). To date, however, none have examined the impact of this addiction on family members of video game addicts. The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of the spouses of online video game addicts.

This study uses a phenomenological methodology as described by Moustakas (1994). Data were gathered via a qualitative online survey solicited to members of three different online forums that cater to "gamer widows." Data suggested three categories that described participants' experiences of being married to an online video game addict: *Changes in My Husband, Changes in Me,* and *Changes in the Marital Relationship*. Among these categories, 12 themes emerged, including *Isolation…Except His Gamer Friends, Protecting His Gaming, To Get Back to His Game, Personal Consequences, Emotional Consequences, Concept of Addiction, Aversion to MMORPGs, Ignoring the Addict, Our Roles and Responsibilities, More Distance Between Us, Financial Losses,* and *Why I Stay*. In addition, 37 subthemes were identified. The study concludes by discussing the essence of the phenomenon, as well as implications for mental health professionals who might encounter gaming addicts and their spouses in their practices. Recommendations are made for future studies as well.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, internet technology has advanced at an unprecedented pace, having a pervasive impact on cultures across the globe. What was initially perceived as a fad for computer aficionados is now a staple of life around the world. Consider that in 2007 the total number of internet users worldwide reached over 1 billion, and in North America alone there are 233 million internet users (Internet world stats, 2007). The quality and breadth of internet use continues to expand as well. For example, core economic, social, political, and cultural activities are now facilitated by the internet (Nie & Erbring, 2002). The internet has changed the way people communicate with one another, do business together, obtain information, make money, and even entertain themselves (Castells, 2003).

One example of how this advancement in technology and the internet has become a medium for entertainment is that of video games. Once upon a time, graphics-based video games were limited to large, bulky arcade units that facilitated one or possibly two players playing side-by-side or in turns. The graphics and sound were rudimentary at best. Players interacted with the game via a joystick and buttons. Later came video games made for home console systems (e.g. Atari, Nintendo, Sega), which also facilitated one or two players. While consoles made playing games more convenient, players were still limited somewhat by the fact that if two people wished to play together they had to be in the same room to do so. With the proliferation of computers, video games became playable on the personal computer (PC). With an entire keyboard and a mouse now available to players, some games made interacting

within the game far more complex than the simple buttons-and-joystick systems that were previously available. As the internet gained ground, video games eventually became accessible online, via both personal computers and more modern consoles (e.g. Xbox, PlayStation2, Nintendo Wii). These games could be played by oneself or in direct competition in real time with other players from anywhere in the world. Today, online video games have become one of the most popular sources of entertainment for adults and children alike (Entertainment Software Association, 2005). Numerous types of online video games exist, including card games, puzzle games, word games, trivia games, and action games, among others. Many of these games can be played between two people or between practically limitless groups of people.

Even in the early days of video games, questions were raised about their addictive nature (Egli & Meyers, 1984; Klein, 1984; Soper & Miller, 1983). Some argued that players who compulsively played represented a small minority (Brooks, 1983) while others claimed that as many as 10-15% of players were addicted (Egli & Meyers, 1984). At this time researchers concentrated mainly on video games' effects on children and adolescents since they were the primary players and games were marketed mainly to these age groups (Brooks, 1983; Egli & Meyers, 1984; Fisher, 1994). As video game technology improved, games became more complex. For example, players could "save" their game, turn off the game, and then resume it right where they left off at a later time. Also, game plotlines became as complex as any movie or novel. Completion of each level advanced the story, as well as the potential for competition with others.

Over the next decade or so, video games became less of a novelty and more of a mainstream form of entertainment. Hard core video game players became known as "gamers," and an entire generation of children that grew up playing video games turned in to adults. Video game companies began designing games aimed at older teenagers and adults. These games often contained violent or sexual content, though uninformed parents often unwittingly bought the games for their children. Given that they viewed video games as strictly children's entertainment, they did not realize that video games were capable of such mature themes. As parents caught on, changes were made. A rating system similar to the one the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) uses for movies was put in place to help parents keep young children away from these games. But like movies with an "R" label often only make adolescents want to view them that much more, games rated "M" (for "Mature" audiences) tend to be most popular among adults and adolescents alike (Olson et al., 2007).

Particularly popular is a specific type of online video game known as a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). Games such as *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, *Ultima Online*, and *Star Wars Galaxies*, among others make up this genre. These games operate by first requiring players to custom design a character (referred to as an "avatar" by some) by selecting traits from a number of different dimensions (e.g. race, profession, gender, clothing, etc.). Players then use their character's unique skill set to explore an online virtual world full of adventure, peril, and excitement. Players from around the world can interact with each other's characters in real time, via text and graphics-based platforms. They become allies or

enemies with one another, fight battles against common foes, and perform difficult

tasks to improve their characters' standings and skills within the context of the game.

A similar genre of virtual worlds with titles such as *Second Life*, *There*, *Active*

Worlds, and *Red Light Center* involve the same level of customization and

socialization that MMORPGs employ, but do not use points, scores, battles, winners,

or losers as MMORPGs do. Players engage in activities and interact with each other

simply for the sake of personal enjoyment. These games are simply referred to as

MMOGs, or Massively Multiplayer Online Games. One unique aspect of many

MMORPGs and MMOGs is that even after players purchase the game's software they

must continue to pay a monthly fee to maintain access to this virtual world, usually

around \$10.00-\$15.00 a month.

Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell (2004) recently studied individuals who

regularly play these games. They surveyed a sample population ($n = 540$) of a popular

MMORPG (*EverQuest*; total player population at the time about 400,000) and found

that 84% of the sample was 20 years old or older. Of these adults, 36.6% were

married. This means that assuming that the sample was an accurate reflection of the

total population at the time, almost 121,000 players of this one game were married.

As large of a population as this is, the online video game industry is growing at a

rapid pace. In 2000 the MMORPG industry reported 300,000 users. In 2003,

however, the industry reported over 3 million users (Woodcock, 2003). In 2008 that

number has risen to over 16 million users worldwide (Woodcock, 2008). One game in

particular has helped this trend. In 2004 a new MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*, was

launched, and within six months the game's manufacturer boasted 1.5 million users

(*World of Warcraft Sets New Milestone with 1.5 Million Subscribers Worldwide*,

2005). In 2007 the game reported 8 million subscribers worldwide (*World of*

Warcraft Passes the 8 Million Mark, 2007). There are several dozens of these games,

each boasting thousands, if not millions, of participants. What's more, the popularity

of these games continues to rise, so the number of married individuals playing these

types of games is large and growing (Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004; Yee, 2006a).

Griffiths et al. (2004) also reported that 79% of the adult respondents reported

feeling like they had to "sacrifice" major aspects of their lives in order to maintain

their status in the games. This makes sense when considering that the average amount

of time adults spent playing the game was 24.7 hours a week. Many recent

researchers generally consider 20 hours a week to be problematic (Brenner, 1997;

Chen & Chou, 1999; Chou, Condron, & Belland, 2005; Chou & Hsiao, 2000). While

"relationships" was one of the potential aspects of players' lives they listed as

sacrificed, Griffiths et al. (2004) did not explore the specific effects that gaming had

on marital or familial relationships. However, it is logical to assume that this amount

of investment in the game probably has a significant detrimental impact on marital

and familial relationships (e.g. decrease in intimacy, failure to fulfill work and/or

familial obligations, possible online affairs, etc.).

Recent accounts in the news support this assumption. Consider the recent

report of a couple in Reno, Nevada that spent so much time playing MMORPGs that

they were convicted of neglecting their 22-month-old son and 11-month-old daughter

("Parents Neglect Starved Babies," 2007). In a less severe example, a recent

newspaper feature examined a man spent long hours playing an online game in which

his character was "married" to another character within the virtual world of the game (Alter, 2007). Their relationship consisted of living in a virtual house together, dates at virtual night clubs, and even included virtual sex. His real-life wife, however, did not find this relationship amusing and expressed her concern, yet he was unwilling to stop playing the game. Another anecdote in the news highlights a mother and her 17-year-old son who failed the tenth grade twice as he spent several hours a day and night playing a popular MMORPG (Tanner, 2007a). The mother stated that her own father was an alcoholic and that she was seeing similar symptoms in her son. After taking her son to several therapists and suggesting that he had a video game addiction, she described their reaction as dismissive, stating that they had never heard of such a possibility. "Nobody was familiar with it," she said. "They all pooh-poohed it" (Tanner, 2007a, p. A11).

While these particular therapists were unaware, some in the mental health community recognize video game addiction as a growing problem. The issue has become prevalent enough that the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Psychiatric Association (APA) have both considered making video game addiction a formal disorder and potentially adding it to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Conan, 2007; Tanner, 2007b). In addition, clinics have been established for the treatment of video game and internet addiction in North America and Europe (Center for the Study of Internet Addiction Recovery, n.d.; Curley, 2007; Computer Addiction Services, n.d.; Internet/Computer Addiction Services, n.d., Virtual Addiction.com, n.d.). In Asian countries, where video game addiction is even more widespread and recognized,

hundreds of hospital units and psychiatric clinics are available to treat the problem and video game companies have worked with the government to try to curb gamer addiction (Dickey, 2005; Faiola, 2006). Online communities, some based on the 12-step model, have also arisen to help gamers conquer this behavior (On-Line Gamers Anonymous, n.d., WoW Detox, n.d.). Other online communities exist as support groups for the family members of video game addicts (EverQuest Widows, n.d.; Gamer Widow, n.d., World of Warcraft Widows, n.d.).

Significance of the Study

The evidence for online video game addiction continues to mount. Anecdotal evidence from MMORPG players (some of whom are personal acquaintances), my own clinical practice, news reports, internet-based support groups, and the very existence of video game treatment centers all testify to this growing problem. Based on this growing body of evidence, I believe that marriage and family therapists and other mental health professionals are likely seeing an increase of couples and families in therapy where extensive participation in online video games by one or both of the adults is a particularly major concern. Yet only recently has the possibility of video game addiction as an adult problem received significant attention from researchers in the helping professions (Griffiths, et al., 2004; Parsons, 2005). Therapists have begun to recognize the existence of a problem, but they do not fully understand it due to the lack of research. Tanner (2007b) states that this need for further study is the reason that the AMA and APA have stopped short of endorsing video game addiction or compulsion as a disorder in the upcoming *DSM-V*.

Some researchers have done preliminary studies on the effects of MMORPG addiction, finding that adult players were likely to admit among other consequences sacrificing relationships with family or friends for the sake of the game (Griffiths, et al., 2004). Many of the spouses of MMORPG addicts have built online communities where they refer to themselves as "gamer widows" (EverQuest Widows, n.d.; Gamer Widow, n.d.; World of Warcraft Widows, n.d.). They commiserate with each other, telling story after story about how their spouse spends all of their time playing a game while the relationship deteriorates. Yet anecdotal accounts in which an addict or a family member initially seek treatment for the problem often reflect a lack of awareness or dismissive attitudes on the part of therapists (EverQuest Widows, n.d.; Gamer Widow, n.d.; Parsons, 2005; Tanner, 2007a). Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) would likely find the deterioration of familial relationships due to compulsive gaming to be a particularly salient concern given the potential systemic impact of this effect. The purpose of this study, then, is to help MFTs and other mental health professionals begin to understand the effects video game addiction have on marital and familial relationships by describing the common phenomenological experiences of gamer widows. A better understanding of the phenomenon as a whole will lead to more widespread recognition of the problem from professionals, improved treatment, and identification of more specific areas for further research.

Organization and Presentation of the Study

Chapter II consists of a review of the relevant literature. First I discuss the rationale for choosing the term "addiction" in this study. The term can be controversial as it pertains to behaviors, therefore I believe it is important to discuss

further. Next, because the subjects of this study are *spouses* of video game addicts, I believe it is relevant to examine the literature that demonstrates the connections between Marriage and Family Therapy research with Addiction research. I then discuss the literature on video game and internet addiction. The research specific to MMORPG addiction is in its infancy, therefore it is necessary to broaden the scope of the literature review to examine addiction to video games in general as well as to the internet. The chapter concludes by pointing out gaps in the current research on MMORPGs.

Chapter III begins with a review of phenomenological research methodology. Consistent with guidelines for phenomenology methodology (Berg, 2001; Cresswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994), I then outline my own personal encounters with video game addiction, including my own limited experience with video games and relationships with individuals who could be considered addicts. The rest of the chapter describes this study and its methodology in greater detail.

Chapter IV contains the results of this study, including the themes and subthemes that emerged from interviews with spouses of gaming addicts and exhaustive descriptions of the results. Chapter V discusses the relevance of the findings in relation to the current literature. I discuss how the results of this study confirm the existing research on MMORPG addicts. I also present treatment implications for therapists and researchers. I revisit the question of whether or not this phenomenon should be considered an addiction. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of this study as well as ideas for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rationale for "Addiction" Terminology

The concept of "addiction" has been increasingly applied to a broad range of behaviors, including sexual behaviors, gambling, shopping, and eating (Holden, 2001; Martin & Petry, 2005). The use of this term as applied to behaviors is not without controversy, however. While the inclusion of non-chemical behavioral addictions has gained support in the research literature (Holden, 2001; Hollander, 2006; Martin & Petry, 2005; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006), some view the reference to such behaviors as "addictions" as a watering-down of the severity of the term (Jaffe, 1990; Kershaw, 2005). Currently, the *DSM-IV-TR* officially categorizes instances of detrimental behavioral patterns as an "Impulse-Control Disorder" (ICD) (APA, 2000). Recently, however, some have argued that ICDs be categorized as addictions (Hollander, 2006; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006). These arguments will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Use of the term "addiction" specifically to describe problematic internet use and video game playing is common (Brenner, 1997; Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 1998, 2000; Salguero & Moran, 2002; Young, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1999a, 1999b), but has also been criticized (Clark, 2006; Grohol, 1999; Yee, 2006c). Besides the overall debate on using addictions to describe behavioral phenomena, one significant reason for the controversy is the lack of research scientifically demonstrating the addictive potential of video games or internet use. The AMA recently refrained from suggesting the APA formally classify problematic video game use as an addiction,

citing this lack of research (AMA, 2007). Much of the existing research is simply correlational in nature. A longitudinal study that examined video game use while controlling for preexisting conditions such as depression or anxiety would be a useful study for determining the addictive potential of video games, but such a study does not yet exist.

Another controversy surrounding use of the term "video game addiction" relates to the emotional impact of the word "addiction." Some researchers studying video games, who are admittedly active participants in MMORPGS, overtly resist use of the term. They state that using a term historically reserved for illicit substances only fuels negative portrayals of "gaming" and unfairly places blame for problematic usage on the games instead of the players (Clark, 2006; Yee, 2006c). These researchers also state that current video game addiction diagnostic criteria, which factor in reports of the amount of time spent playing, do not adequately take into account a person's life circumstances such as amount of available free time (Clark, 2006; Yee, 2006c). In other words, what may be defined as problematic use for one player (e.g. a married father of two who works full-time) may not be problematic for another (e.g. a single college student taking a light class load).

While I recognize both the broader debate of classifying problematic behavior patterns as addictions and the narrower debate of classifying video-game-playing as addiction, I have decided to use addiction terminology when referring to problematic video-game-playing, including MMORPGs. I based this decision on several factors. First, while the research scientifically demonstrating video game addiction does not yet exist, supporters of classifying ICDs in general as addictions point to emerging

research that supports a physiological basis for non-chemical behavioral addictions, meaning that these phenomena are not purely psychological in nature or simply "bad habits" (Hollander, 2006; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006). Research demonstrates biochemical and neurological similarities between individuals with substance-use disorders and ICDs (Potenza, 2001; New et al., 2002; Siever et al., 1999). In a very physical sense, ICDs function similarly to substance-use disorders. This is not to say that the activity involved in an ICD is inherently addictive to just anyone (e.g. many people can easily control shopping, sexual activities, video-game-playing, etc.), but simply that some individuals can in fact become addicted to the activity. This may have more to do with the individual than the activity, but it is no less an addiction for them.

In addition, supporters of categorizing ICDs as addictions point out that the devastating effects of ICDs on individuals' personal lives are comparable to the effects of substance-use disorders (Hollander, 2006; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006). Often times the fallout of an ICD includes broken relationships, lost jobs or opportunities, financial jeopardy, a decline in physical health, etc. Also, the treatment of these two types of disorders is often very similar (Hollander, 2006; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006). Similar treatment methods include identifying and eliminating "triggers," participating in 12-step groups, and substituting positive coping mechanisms for the behavior. Finally, the use of addiction terminology regarding problematic video-game-playing is so prevalent in the existing research that using different terminology would likely create unnecessary confusion. The utilization of addiction terminology does not assume that other descriptions for problematic video-

game-playing (e.g. an ICD, an obsession, problematic use, etc.) are not useful, but rather it serves to better associate this study with the majority of the existing body of research, therefore avoiding confusion.

<div align="center">Addiction and Marriage and Family Therapy</div>

If we are to frame this phenomenon as an addiction, yet examine it from the viewpoint of the addict's spouse, it then becomes relevant to discuss the literature on addiction and families. When a person becomes an addict, they are not the only ones who suffer because of the addiction. The spouses, children, parents, and other family members of addicts are also impacted by the addiction, sometimes for generations. Family members can also often unwittingly help maintain the addiction or be an instrumental part in helping the addict stop abusing (Copello & Orford, 2002; Hurcom, Copello, & Orford, 2000; Stanton & Heath, 1995; Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss, 1987). For these reasons, the systemic concepts of marriage and family therapy have important things to say about addiction and its treatment.

Addiction is a circular process. According to the principles of systems theory, familial patterns and processes both result from and contribute to one family member's addiction (Stanton & Heath, 1995). For example, an alcoholic's drinking might result in his wife refusing to be emotionally or physically intimate with him. To cope with this lack of support, the alcoholic turns to drinking even more. And so the cycle repeats itself. The addiction can become an organizing principle in the family that impacts the whole family's behavior, development, and identity (Steinglass et al., 1987). This is not to say that non-addicted family members are to blame for their partner's behavior. They are trying to cope with their partner's behavior as best they

can, but these efforts do not create long-term change in their partner (Hurcom et al., 2000).

Steinglass et al. (1987) proposed a conceptual developmental model to explain how alcohol becomes incorporated into a family's functioning. They state that alcoholism skews the balance of growth and stability in a family which results in a rigid system. They suggest that homeostasis is maintained by three regulatory behaviors: routines, rituals, and problem-solving. These behaviors can be shaped by powerful external factors, such as alcohol. They propose that when alcohol permeates these regulatory behaviors, that the family's stability begins to revolve around the presence of the alcohol. Therefore the alcohol must be retained if they are to remain stable. The family ends up trading long-term growth for short-term stability (Steinglass et al., 1987). It seems reasonable that this model could also be applied towards other powerful factors besides alcoholism, such as drug addiction, sexual addiction, gambling addiction, or even an online gaming addiction.

According to Steinglass et al. (1987), it is critical for treatment providers to differentiate between "alcoholic families" (those families in which alcohol has become an organizing principle) and families with an alcoholic member (those families in which alcohol is not an organizing factor yet). This will help the provider to diagnose the extent of the problem and develop appropriate treatment plans. Steinglass et al. (1987) also emphasize the need for clinicians to identify what phase of development the family is in, as alcoholism will affect each phase differently. For example, in an "early-phase" (i.e. young) family, the central task is to differentiate the family from each partner's family-of-origin and establish a solid family identity. If

alcoholism was present in one partner's family-of-origin and they are trying to establish a separate identity from this family-of-origin, then partners may seek professional help at the earliest symptoms of alcoholism. In contrast, a "middle-phase" family is one in which a family identity has already been established. In the case of a "middle-phase" family in which alcoholism is incorporated into their identity, they will have established patterns that seek short-term stability at the cost of long-term growth. Treatment would look very different for each of these families because each developmental stage is dealing with different tasks and challenges.

In addition to Steinglass et al.'s (1987) model, another important model to consider is the Stress and Coping Hypothesis proposed by Hurcom et al. (2000). Their model suggests that spouses of addicts are coping as well as they can with the extreme stress that the addiction brings into the family. Coping occurs in three domains, as adopted from Moos, Finney, and Cronkite (1990): appraisal-focused coping, where efforts are made to reframe the meaning of a stressor; problem-focused coping, where action is taken to reduce or eliminate the stress; and emotion-focused coping, where the individual attempts to manage the emotions arising from the situation. Moos et al. (1990) also differentiate between "active coping" (cognitive and behavioral strategies) and "avoidance coping" (refraining from active confrontation of the problem), such as withholding one's feelings or indirect tension reduction (e.g. smoking or eating).

It is logical to assume that the present study will illustrate aspects of the models of Steinglass et al. (1987) and Hurcom et al. (2000). For example, the family development stage of different participants may have different implications for how

entrenched the MMORPG addiction is in the family's functioning and how treatment might be approached. Also, the coping strategies of gamer widows may reflect more emphasis on short-term stability or "avoidance coping" than on long-term growth or "active coping" strategies. One purpose of this study is to examine these patterns and see if these families function in comparable ways to families with other addictions.

MMORPGs and Addiction

Though MMORPGs are a particularly unique subset of video games, it is important to examine the literature on the broader subject of video games and their effects because much of it is likely to be applicable to MMORPGs. MMORPGs have most, if not all, of the same general features as offline video games. These include features such as being rewarded for skilled play with points or special game-related items, sophisticated visual graphics, and increasingly difficult challenges to meet as the game progresses. MMORPGs also have additional features that set them apart from traditional features, including the fact that the game is never beaten and that players are constantly interacting with all other players on a server in real time. One of the main features of MMORPGs that distinguishes them from other video games is the fact that they are played via the internet. Literature concerning the far more widely discussed topic of internet addiction will therefore also be discussed throughout this section as some of the key features of internet addiction are applicable to MMORPG addiction as well.

Demographics

The most recent Pew Internet and American Life Project (2007b) demographic information regarding internet use in America states that 71% of all

adults use the internet, including 87% of those ages 18-29 and 83% of those ages 30-49. 69% of internet users report using it on a daily basis (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007a). According to the same survey, the most popular internet activities performed on a daily basis include checking email (56% of users), using search engines to find information (41%), and getting news (37%). Also according to these data, 9% of all internet users play online video games on a *daily* basis. Less than 10 years ago the average American adult internet user spent about four hours online in a given week (Anderson, 1999), but today that figure has risen to 12.6 hours a week (Nielson Media Research, 2007). Clearly, the internet continues to tightly weave itself into the very fabric of our culture.

Recent demographic data collected for the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) states that 75% of heads of households today play computer or video games and that the average video game player (a.k.a. "gamer") is about 30 years old (ESA, 2005). In addition, 35% of gamers are under the age of 18, 43% are 18 to 49 years old, and 19% are 50 years and older (ESA, 2005). On average, adult gamers have been enjoying video games for about 12 years (ESA, 2005). Also, 57% of gamers are male compared to 43% female, a differential that has been slowly diminishing over the last couple of decades (ESA, 2005). Most video games today are marketed towards older teens and adults (ESA, 2005). However, until recently, video games were mainly aimed at and played by children and adolescents, particularly boys (Buchman & Funk, 1996; Clymo, 1996). In fact, the first generation of children that regularly played video games since their early formative years has entered into adulthood during the last decade, and most find it a completely normal form of

entertainment. This is evidenced by the fact that over half of those that play now expect to still be regularly playing video games 10 years from now (ESA, 2005).

The research specifically aimed at MMORPGs dovetails with this data. In 2008, over 16 million online game subscriptions were active, 93.5% of which were MMORPGs (Woodcock, 2008). Surveying the popular MMORPG *EverQuest,* Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell (2003, 2004) found that 84% of this particular game's players were adults. Among adults, they found the median age to be 30. Yee (2006b) surveyed players from four different popular MMORPGs and found that 75% of players were adults. The median age for Yee's total sample, adults and adolescents, was 25. Griffiths et al. (2003, 2004) found that 20.4% of *EverQuest* players were female while Yee (2006b) found that 14.3% of the gamers he surveyed were female. All of this data challenges widely-held stereotypes (especially among therapists who may be unfamiliar with modern video games) that video games are played almost exclusively by teenage and college-aged males. Yee (2006b) adds further weight to this criticism, finding that 50% of MMORPG players have full-time jobs and only 22.2% are full-time students. In addition, Griffiths et al. (2003, 2004) found that 54% of *EverQuest* players were married. Yee (2006b) found that 36.3% of gamers were married and 22.1% had children. All of this information points to one inescapable truth: video games are no longer simply for kids. In fact, individuals representing a wide range of different age groups regularly enjoy playing video games.

Though adults now make up the overwhelming majority of gamers, research examining the effects of video games in general has historically focused on children and adolescents (Anderson, 2003; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Bensley & Van

Eenwyk, 2001; Dill & Dill, 1998; Sherry, 2001). This fact raises legitimate questions about the validity of generalizing this research to MMORPG-players. Definitively answering these questions is outside of the scope of this paper. However, despite the differences in age and other demographic variables between traditional and modern video game research, I believe that this body of literature has much to say about the addictive potential of video games in general. Therefore this paper will discuss this research and how it may relate to the modern research on MMORPGs.

Recognizing Addiction

Before researchers attempted to conceptualize official criteria for addictions to video games, MMORPGs, or the internet, they made several observations regarding these phenomena. These observations primarily consisted of reporting the negative consequences of overusing these media followed by a call for more research. These observations will be discussed in detail here. More formal conceptualizations and diagnostic criteria for addictions to these media will be discussed afterwards.

In Video Games

Even before MMORPGs existed, observations regarding the link between video games and addiction were made almost as soon as video games became a prevalent form of entertainment (Egli & Meyers, 1984; Klein, 1984; Soper & Miller, 1983). Klein (1984), for example, noted that many of the children he counseled seemed addicted to video games, going as far as to skip school, spend lunch money, and even steal in order to play at arcades. Soon, researchers realized that excessive video-game-playing was not just a bad habit, but that it actually met much of the formal criteria associated with addiction and impulse control disorders. Egli and

Meyers (1984), for example, noted that as many as 13 % of surveyed adolescents exhibited compulsive behavior towards video games, often sacrificing other interests and social activities in order to play. It is important to point out that these early contributions to the video game addiction literature were made at a time when video games were coin-operated and primarily based in arcades or other public venues. They were not as easily accessible as they are today, via home-based console systems or personal computers. Despite these inconveniences and negative consequences, children continued to play enough that researchers began to question the addictive potential of these games.

Later researchers also noticed other aspects of excessive gaming that suggested an addictive component. Some first began to conceptualize excessive gaming as an addiction by noting similarities between it and gambling addiction. Symptoms common to both include preoccupation with the activity, using the activity as a form of escapism, compulsion to engage in the activity, and even withdrawal symptoms (Fisher, 1994, 1995; Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Griffiths, 1991; Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Phillips, Rolls, Rouse, & Griffiths, 1995). In addition to these symptoms, researchers have also shown that many gamers often experience a sort of time-loss while playing, demonstrated by the fact that gamers consistently underestimate the amount of time they spend playing (Wood & Griffiths, 2007; Wood, Griffiths, & Parke, 2007). Another effect of video game addiction shared by other addictions is that excessive gamers often ignore the social consequences of their long hours of play, such as damaged or broken friendships or social isolation (Colwell & Kato, 2003).

In MMORPGs

The question of addiction has recently been more specifically aimed at MMORPGs. Ng and Wiemer-Hastings (2005), for instance, compared a group of MMORPG-players to a group of offline video-game-players, demonstrating that 25% of MMORPG-players played between 11-20 hours a week, 34% played between 21-40 hours a week, and 11% played 40+ hours a week. In contrast, the authors found that 2% of offline gamers played 11-20 hours a week, 4% played 21-40 hours, and 2% played 40+ hours a week. In addition, they found that most MMORPG-players had tendencies of playing for 8 hours continuously, lost sleep because of playing, had been told by someone else that they spent too much time playing, enjoyed playing the game more than real-life activities with friends, and generally answered questions in ways that strongly suggested overuse.

Griffiths et al. (2004) found similar data, both in terms of the frequency of play and in the effects of excessive play. Specifically, they found that in order to keep playing the game, 27.5% of adults had sacrificed a hobby or other pastime, 18.5% gave up sleep, 7.3% sacrificed work or education, and 20.8% sacrificed socializing with friends, family, or their romantic partner. In addition, Yee (2002, 2006b) found that 15% of MMORPG-players agreed or strongly agreed that they became angry or irritable when unable to play, 30% continued to play even when frustrated or unable to enjoy the experience, and 18% reported that their playing had caused them significant, health, financial, academic, or relationship problems. Regarding the question of addiction, 50% considered themselves to be addicted to the MMORPG. These data seem to suggest either strong preexisting addictive tendencies among

MMORPG-players or something inherently addictive about MMORPGs themselves, especially in light of the statistical differences discussed earlier between MMORPGs and normal video games.

In the Internet

As early as the mid-1990s, when the internet had only been easily accessible to the public for a few years, anecdotal reports of internet addiction were appearing in various news and popular media. Overuse of the internet had been linked to a variety of problems, including work performance (Neuborne, 1997; Robert Half International, 1996; Young, 1998). One study conducted by a major U.S. company, for example, found that only 23% of internet use via its connection was business-related (Neuborne, 1997). Others recognized that academic impairment brought on from excessive internet use was an issue for some (Brady, 1996; Murphey, 1996; Young, 1996, 1998). Students reported that they lost sleep and had difficulty finding time to study or complete assignments as they spent increasing amounts of time surfing web pages, entering online chat rooms, and playing online games (Young, 1996a, 1998). Physical symptoms related to internet addiction were also reported, including sleep deprivation, eyestrain, and carpal tunnel syndrome (Young, 1996a, 1998). Despite these negative consequences, most affected individuals reported no desire to curb their behavior, and those that did reported multiple unsuccessful attempts (Young, 1996a, 1998). Some therapists began to see clients for compulsive internet use, including online game-playing, but many of the earliest clients were often quickly dismissed due to lack of awareness and knowledge of the problem (Young, 1996a, 1996b, 1998).

Marital and family problems were also commonly linked to internet addiction, both in popular media (Quittner, 1997) and in academic research (Young, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Similar to MMORPG addicts, internet addicts often found themselves losing track of time, often resulting in ignoring household chores, neglecting children or spouses, and financial problems related to high internet service provider bills (Young, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Addicts would frequently go as far as to lie to their spouses about how much time was spent online and hide online bills, not at all unlike substance abusers who cover up the extent of their use from other family members (Young, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Internet addicts would sometimes start close relationships with other online users that created problems in their marriage, especially when these relationships led to romance or cybersex—online sexual role-playing via text messaging and possibly web-enabled cameras (Young, 1996a, 1998). Marital problems were also often related to users secretly using online pornography or visiting sexually-oriented chat rooms (Young, 1996a, 1998). These reports are significant because some MMORPG players, both single and married, have been known to begin online relationships that sometimes develop into cybersex or even real life relationships (EverQuest Widows, n.d.; Yee, 2004). In some MMORPGs, the players' characters can actually marry each other (Yee, 2003). It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that the possibility of having online affairs through the MMORPG medium could be a contributing factor to how the game affects married players and their spouses. The similarities in problems created by internet addiction and MMORPG addiction suggest that literature regarding conceptualization and diagnosis of internet addiction may be useful when discussing MMORPG addiction. This

literature will be discussed in more detail when discussing the conceptualization and diagnosis of MMORPG addiction.

Conceptualizing Addiction

Numerous researchers have attempted to isolate the root cause of video game addiction (Braun & Giroux, 1989; Brehm, Wright, Solomon, Silka, & Greenberg, 1983; Choi & Kim, 2004; Chou & Ting, 2003; Chumbley & Griffiths, 2007; Funk et al., 2002; Gordal, 2000; Griffiths et al., 2004; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995; Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Hsu, Lee, & Wu, 2005; Hsu & Lu, 2004; Loton, 2007; Soper & Miller, 1983; Wan & Chiou, 2006; Wood et al., 2004), but have found that this task is far more complex than previously thought. Researchers first pointed to factors inherent in the games themselves to explain addictive behavior (Braun & Giroux, 1989; Brehm, Wright, Solomon, Silka, & Greenberg, 1983; Choi & Kim, 2004; Chou & Ting, 2003; Chumbley & Griffiths, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2004; Hsu, Lee, & Wu, 2005; Hsu & Lu, 2004; Soper & Miller, 1983; Wan & Chiou, 2006; Wood et al., 2004). However, video game addiction is not a universal phenomenon; not everyone who plays video games becomes addicted, even those who play on a regular basis. It is not enough to say that video games are addictive and end the discussion there. Recognizing this, researchers have begun to examine factors inherent in the addicts themselves (Funk et al., 2002; Gordal, 2000; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995; Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Loton, 2007, Wan & Chiou, 2006). The most recent thought on the subject suggests that it is the *interaction* of these variables (i.e. game-related factors and player-related factors) that must be recognized (Yee, 2002, 2006a). Each video game addict is unique, motivated by a myriad of different possible

combinations of factors. However, some strong trends have emerged that demand closer inspection.

Game-Related Factors

When conceptualizing video game addiction, researchers first examined the inherently addictive aspects of video games. Soper and Miller (1983) were among the first researchers to suggest various factors that make video games so addictive, including the sophistication of the multi-sensual and sentient-like stimulation, interpersonal competition, hostility-releasing, and especially rewards for skilled play. Numerous researchers have pointed at the schedule of rewards and punishments as one of the most addictive aspects of video games (Braun & Giroux, 1989; Brehm et al., 1983; Chumbley & Griffiths, 2007). Video games challenge the player to meet difficult, but attainable, goals. When these goals are met the player is directly rewarded through points, character bonuses, special game-related items, or advancement in the game. The obtainment of these rewards leads to a positive affective response for the gamer. When goals are not met, the player is punished through loss of points, decreases in character ability, loss of game-related items, or the eventual "death" of the player's character. In addition to the schedule of rewards and punishments, factors such as character customizability and level of realism in a game are some of the highest-rated aspects of games when gamers consider factors that induce continued play (Choi & Kim, 2004; Hsu et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2004). Each of these factors is inherent in MMORPGs and they have all been suggested to be possible causes of gaming addiction (Griffiths et al., 2004).

These factors have been suggested to contribute to a related concept: "flow experience." Flow experience has been speculated to be a significant factor in the overall appeal of video games (Hsu & Lu, 2004) and in video game addiction (Chou & Ting, 2003). Flow experience is best described as a holistic experience felt when one acts with total involvement (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). It is an emotional state characterized by perceptual distortion or complete absorption in an activity as a result of the combination of high levels of concentration and enjoyment while simultaneously becoming less and less aware of the outside world (Chou & Ting, 2003). Flow experience is not a concept limited to video games, but can be applied to practically any activity (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). MMORPGs seem uniquely suited for facilitating flow experience due to the combination of numerous factors including superb graphics, regular interaction with other players in addition to game-based characters, and the fact that the game is never really beaten since new challenges are always being introduced. Social interaction has also been shown to be an important aspect of flow experience in online games, as online gaming community norms often encourage absorption and increase enjoyment of the game (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Kim, Oh, & Lee, 2005). Chou and Ting (2003) reported that Taiwanese gamers' flow experience while playing MMORPGs was an even greater indicator of addictive habits than repetitive behavior.

The research linking flow experience to video game addiction is still somewhat controversial. However, recent research by Wan and Chiou (2006) studied two different theoretical approaches to explaining video game addiction: flow experience and a humanistic needs model. The results of their study on humanistic

needs and gaming addiction will be discussed in the next section. Regarding flow experience and gaming, the authors compared a group of video game addicts to a group of non-addicts. Their results indicate that while flow experience may be a salient factor for online game-play among non-addicts, it is not necessarily one for addicts. In other words, non-addicts were more likely to report flow experience than addicts. The meaning of these results is not clear and the authors do not offer much explanation. One possibility not discussed by the authors is that the lack of flow experience experienced by addicts could be evidence of increased levels of tolerance, similar to how an alcoholic rarely feels intoxicated when he or she drinks. The gamer may not feel as immersed in video games as he or she did when first playing, but they may feel the need to keep playing just to feel "normal."

Conceptualizations of internet addiction are also relevant to discuss here as MMORPGs are played online. Various researchers have contributed theories as to what makes the internet more addictive than other media. Cooper (1998) devised the "Triple-A" model to help explain the allure of online sexual activity. According to this model, the three main addictive aspects of online sexual activity are Accessibility, Affordability, and Anonymity. Accessibility refers to the fact that there are literally millions of websites accessible at any hour of the day providing services or entertainment that would otherwise be difficult or inconvenient to obtain in the real world. Affordability refers to the fact that many of these websites are accessible at no charge beyond what the user pays in internet service provider fees, which is usually a reasonable fee. Anonymity refers to the fact that users perceive their activity to be anonymous, and can therefore engage in activities that they would not attempt in the

real world out of a sense of shame or fear of negative consequences (e.g. pornography viewing or cyber-sexual activity). Young (1999b) developed a similar concept to the Triple-A model that was more applicable to a broader range of internet activity: the ACE model. Her three components are Accessibility, Control, and Excitement. Accessibility is the same concept that Cooper (1998) already addressed: millions of opportunities for stimulation available around the clock. Control refers to the greatly increased sense of personal control one achieves via the internet (e.g. via online trading or managing finances online). Excitement refers to the emotional rush one obtains through winning (e.g. winning an online auction or playing online video games). Each of these concepts is easily applied to online games. There are hundreds of MMORPGs to choose from (Accessibility), often available for a reasonable monthly fee (Affordability), providing opportunities to behave vicariously through a completely customizable character in a virtual world where no one needs to know one's real name (Anonymity). As players increase their status in the game, they are more easily able to achieve their game-related objectives (Control), leading to a sense of mastery, competence, and success (Excitement).

One qualitative study argues that the most salient of these sets of factors underlying pathological use of the internet is anonymity (Young, Pistner, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). Anonymity frees people from their inhibitions to engage in obscene or even illegal activities, participate in "safe" social settings, pursue online affairs, and create customizable personas (Griffiths, 2001; Suler, 2002, 2004b; Young et al., 2000). Suler (2002, 2004b) states that the internet is a useful medium for individuals to exercise aspects of their personality that they normally do not—or cannot—in real

life. He states that when an individual experiences extreme differences between their inhibitions in the real world versus those in their online world, they will likely experience greater desire to spend time in their online world. The principles of anonymity and disinhibition can be applied to MMORPG players without much difficulty. Players can use their game characters to say and do things they might never in their offline lives.

Preexisting Player-Related Factors

In addition to factors inherent in video games and the internet, preexisting factors inherent in the players themselves must be taken into account. For example, some researchers have suggested that the appeal of video games and the internet is the feeling of control they provide, especially to those who feel that other aspects of their lives are out of their control (Gordal, 2000; Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Young, 1999b). Players who already feel this way are more likely to be attracted to the virtual world provided by an MMORPG in which they have far greater direct influence than they might have in the real world.

Other researchers suggest that players with difficulty regulating emotions or those with mental or emotional disorders (e.g. depression or anxiety) are constantly seeking stimulation as a means of distraction from their emotional pain, a distraction that all types of video games easily provide, albeit only temporarily (Funk et al., 2002; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995).These researchers suggest that the temporary nature of the distraction that video games provide requires increasingly long hours of continuous play to achieve its desired effect (i.e. tolerance) (Funk et al., 2002; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995). Research on internet addiction is similar: internet

addicts show tendencies towards depression, isolation, low self-esteem, compulsion, and interpersonal dangers such as feeling unusually close to strangers (Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000; Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003; Young & Rodgers, 1999). Researchers suggest that internet addicts not only use the internet to cope with these emotional problems, but that their internet use exacerbates the problem, creating a downward spiral effect (Armstrong et al., 2000; Whang et al., 2003; Young & Rodgers, 1999). Loton (2007) examined how low self-esteem and social difficulty might be related to problematic MMORPG play. He found that these factors did significantly predict problematic (i.e. addictive) game-play test scores, but only accounted for a small amount of the variance (for self-esteem, $\beta = .184$, $p < .001$; for social skills, $\beta = -.103$, $p < .03$). These results suggest that additional factors must be considered to better conceptualize addiction.

In addition to studying how flow experience, a previously discussed game-related factor, might contribute to gaming addiction, Wan and Chiou (2006) also examined how a two-dimensional humanistic psychological needs model, a player-related factor, might contribute to addiction. This part of their study is inspired by Maslow's (1943, 1970) hierarchy of needs theory, which distinguishes between "deficiency needs" and "growth needs." When deficiency needs are not met, the individual feels dissatisfied and anxious; when they are met, the individual ceases to feel this way. Deficiency needs include physiological needs, safety, relational needs, and esteem needs. These must be neutralized before growth needs can be met. While deficiency needs can be satiated, growth needs (e.g. self-actualization and transcendence) are enduring motivators. Meeting growth needs may not ever be

completely achieved, but this does not lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction; rather, the *process* of meeting these needs increases the feeling of satisfaction in one's life and serves to further motivate one's behavior. Wan and Chiou (2006) found that motivations for video game addicts to continue play were more related to the relief of "dissatisfaction" (i.e. deficiency needs) than the pursuit of "satisfaction" (i.e. growth needs). Conversely, non-addicts were more motivated to play to achieve satisfaction than to avoid dissatisfaction, and were therefore more able to avoid obsession over the game when it ceased to be a source of satisfaction. The authors suggest that addicted players play more to avoid withdrawal symptoms or preexisting negative psychological conditions (e.g. low self-esteem or poor social skills) than out of a sense of genuine satisfaction, much like alcoholics or drug addicts (Wan & Chiou, 2006). It is possible that the feelings of dissatisfaction that some addicts are trying to avoid are related to dysfunctional relationships, including marriages. However, no studies to date have examined this possibility.

Integrating Addiction Concepts

Yee (2002) was one of the earliest researchers to propose that problematic video-game-playing (he is reluctant to call it an *addiction*) is the result of the complex interaction of preexisting conditions and game-related variables. Yee (2002) called the preexisting conditions that may motivate players to commit to unhealthy levels of play "motivational factors." Examples include such factors as low self-esteem, poor social skills, and high levels of stress. Individuals with preexisting motivational factors may be attracted to MMORPGs because they can offer players a greater sense of control, provide numerous opportunities for feelings of competence, and are an

effective distraction from real-life problems. Yee (2002) called the game-related variables which attract gamers to keep playing the games "attraction factors." Examples include the cycle of rewards and punishments and the potential for communication, entertainment, and immersion. Yee (2002) suggests that problematic play develops out of the complex interplay of these two factors, and is rarely, if ever, the result of one factor alone. He points out the fact that if the games were inherently addictive then all MMORPG-players would be affected universally, which they are not.

Exploring the subject further, Yee (2006a) used a factor analysis to discover the variables most salient to MMORPG-player motivations. He found that ten factors accounted for 60% of the overall variance. These factors were a mix of game-related and player-related variables. They included game-achievement components such as advancement, game mechanics, and competition; social components such as socializing, forming long-term relationships, and teamwork; and immersion components such as discovering new information, role-playing, customization, and escapism. Yee's (2006a) research also included a variation of Young's (1996a) criteria for internet addiction. He found that the escapism component emerged as the strongest predictor for problematic game play ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), followed by hours of use ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$) and game advancement ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$). These data suggest that motivations for video game play are complex and not easily generalized.

Diagnosing Video Game and Internet Addiction

Various researchers have recommended formal criteria for classifying video game addiction or problem video-game-playing as a disorder in its own right, as

opposed to merely a symptom of a broader disorder such as depression or anxiety (Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 1991; Salguero & Moran, 2002). The criteria proposed by Griffiths (1991) are based on the *DSM-III-R* (APA, 1987) criteria for pathological gambling. He devised an instrument examining nine dimensions of video game addiction, where the presence of four or more criteria is considered an indication of addiction (Griffiths, 1991). Similarly, Fisher (1994) created an instrument designed to measure video game addiction based on the pathological gambling criteria from the *DSM-IV* (APA, 1994). Her scale also requires meeting four of nine criteria to qualify as addicted (Fisher, 1994). Salguero and Moran (2002) devised a nine-item scale based on a combination of the *DSM-IV* (APA, 1994) criteria for pathological gambling and substance dependence.

Common criteria for video game addiction among these researchers include preoccupation with playing (e.g. thinking about playing while at work), tolerance (e.g. needing to play 6 hours at a time to feel satisfied when one used to be able to play 4 hours and feel satisfied), compulsivity (e.g. unable to resist the urge to play while at work), withdrawal symptoms (e.g. irritable when unable to play while on vacation), using video games to escape problems (e.g. playing when feeling upset with a spouse), lies and deception to keep playing (e.g. hiding the extent of game use from a spouse to avoid negative repercussions), disregard for the physical, psychological, or social consequences of playing (e.g. continued playing despite losing touch with friends), and family or schooling disruption due to playing (e.g. neglecting play time with children to keep playing) (Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 1991; Salguero & Moran, 2002). These studies demonstrate that for those who meet criteria

for addiction, video-game-playing is out of their control, is invasive, is a means of

escaping reality, and impairs social development (Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 1991;

Salguero & Moran, 2002).

Criteria for internet addiction cover a myriad of online activity, but definitions

of the disorder usually include online gaming and are more widely circulated in the

research literature, and will therefore be discussed here as well. The first instance of

diagnosing internet addiction was in 1996, when Dr. Ivan Goldberg posted criteria for

"Internet Addiction Disorder" as a joke on an internet bulletin board for psychologists

that he had helped establish ("Just Click No," 1997). These criteria were based upon

the criteria for Pathological Gambling Disorder in the *DSM-IV* (APA, 1994), and

included definitions of tolerance and withdrawal symptoms, losing time, unsuccessful

attempts to control or quit the behavior, and continued use despite negative

consequences ("Just Click No," 1997). To his surprise, upon seeing these criteria

many of his colleagues actually admitted that they had a problem with internet

addiction and asked for help ("Just Click No," 1997). Though he was skeptical about

the validity of his new "disorder," he indulged his colleagues and set up the "Internet

Addiction Support Group" online, a forum where users could discuss their common

plight ("Just Click No," 1997). He later changed the title of his disorder to

"Pathological Internet Use" and now states that he regrets using the term "addiction"

in the original terminology, stating that calling everything that people can overdo an

addiction would create a need for a myriad of new disorders ("Just Click No," 1997).

Around the same time, Dr. Kimberly Young (1996a) quite seriously proposed

criteria for diagnosing internet addiction. She also used *DSM-IV* criteria for

pathological gambling (APA, 1994) as a template, and proposed eight criteria for internet addiction. These include preoccupation with the internet, tolerance (needing to spend more time using the internet to achieve satisfaction), unsuccessful attempts to control use, withdrawal symptoms (restlessness or irritability when attempting to control use), losing time, jeopardizing relationships or work to maintain internet habits, deception to maintain internet habits, and using the internet as escapism (Young, 1996a). According to Young (1996a) the presence of five or more criteria is sufficient to diagnose someone as addicted to the internet. Both sets of criteria suggested by Goldberg ("Just Click No," 1997) and Young (1996a) are applicable to MMORPG addiction, and in fact have been used as criteria to measure addiction in MMORPG-related studies (Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Parsons, 2005; Yee, 2006a).

While many studies readily used the practically identical criteria suggested by either Goldberg ("Just Click No," 1997) or Young (1996a) to study internet addiction (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Armstrong et al., 2000; Brenner, 1997; Chou, 2001; Davis, Smith, Rodrigue, & Pulvers, 1999; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Petrie & Gunn, 1998), others have been skeptical of the concept of internet addiction (Beard & Wolf, 2001; Grohol, 1997, 1999, 2005; King, 1996; Morahan-Martin, 2005; Shaffer, Hall, & Bilt, 2000; Suler, 2004a). Some critics take issue with the use of the term "addiction," stating that practically any behavior can become obsessive and problematic (e.g. sex, gambling, shopping, eating, spending, working, television-watching, etc.), but that this does not necessarily make them "addictions," especially without a chemical basis for the behavior (Beard & Wolf, 2001; Grohol, 1997, 1999,

2005; King, 1996; Suler, 2004a). They argue that if anything, this phenomenon is an

impulse-control disorder, which is already covered by the latest version of the *DSM*

(APA, 2000), and therefore the creation of a new disorder is not needed (Beard &

Wolf, 2001; Grohol, 1999). In addition, they state that such impulse-control disorders

may simply be attempts to control depression, anxiety, insecurities, or feelings of

worthlessness (Grohol, 1999; Morahan-Martin, 2005; Suler, 2004a).

To answer these particular criticisms, researchers have developed alternative

conceptualizations and criteria for this phenomenon. Beard and Wolf (2001), for

example, proposed criteria for "problematic internet use," intentionally refraining

from referring to the phenomenon as an addiction. Their criteria are similar to

Young's (1996a), but differentiate between criteria that simply demonstrate increased

time spent or interest in the internet and those that demonstrate impaired coping

mechanisms or relationships. They argue that internet users may have legitimate

reasons for increased time or interest spent on the internet (e.g. required for work,

keeping in touch with people, information seeking, etc.), but this does not necessarily

indicate pathology and the diagnostic criteria should account for this possibility

(Beard & Wolf, 2001). They suggest that to be diagnosed with problematic internet

use one must first meet all of the following criteria: preoccupation, increased time to

achieve satisfaction, unsuccessful efforts to cut back or control use, restlessness or

irritability when not able to use, and staying online longer than intended. They

suggest that one of the following criteria must also be presence to indicate

problematic internet use: jeopardizing relationships or career because of the internet,

lying to others to maintain use, and use of the internet to relieve dysphoric mood

(Beard & Wolf, 2001). Another set of criteria for problematic internet use simply requires preoccupation with the internet, negative consequences for use or preoccupation, and the lack of any other possible diagnosis being responsible for the symptoms (Shapira et al., 2003). To date, no definitive diagnostic criteria exist for internet addiction or any of its many alternative conceptualizations, but each variation is still applicable to MMORPGs.

Other critics point to the fact that the internet is just the *medium* that allows for a myriad of addictive or compulsive activities, but it is not the object of the addiction itself (Grohol, 1999; Morahan-Martin, 2005; King, 1996; Shaffer et al., 2000; Suler, 2004a). To frame this argument another way, if someone compulsively watched pornographic DVDs, he or she might be said to have a sexual addiction, but not an addiction to DVDs. Examples of online activities that people may compulsively use or are addicted to include shopping, pornography, chat rooms, scanning news or sports feeds, downloading and enjoying music or videos, and of course, video-game-playing. In fact, proponents for internet addiction concede that at least five sub-types of internet addiction have been shown to exist through qualitative research methods: cyber-sexual addiction (e.g. pornographic websites or sexual chat), cyber-relationship addiction (e.g. chat rooms), net compulsions (e.g. gambling or shopping), information overload (e.g. news or database searching), and computer addiction (i.e. video-game-playing) (Young et al., 1999). Clearly the concept of "internet addiction" is a broad one and its criteria do not by themselves easily describe what exactly "addicts" may be addicted to.

Morahan-Martin (2005), however, tempers this observation with another: the internet is a medium that grants people access to a host of activities—normal and pathological—that they would not otherwise have access to. In other words, it is not enough to simply state that old addictions or compulsions are simply being expressed in a new way; some attention must be paid to the medium itself to fully understand the addiction. The fact that MMORPGs are played via the internet means that certain activities that are not possible in offline games are made possible in MMORPGs. The accessibility of the internet allows players to play the game whenever they want and communicate with all of their MMORPG-friends in real time. The internet allows players to leave their mark on a virtual world for other players to see, even when they are not online. The anonymity of the internet can free them to be more honest than they might believe they could be with the people living in their own house. Quite simply, the online aspects of MMORPGs greatly enhance the opportunities for addictive tendencies to develop among gamers.

Summary

The research strongly suggests that for some individuals, especially children, video games can be addictive. This assertion is evidenced by the inability to stop playing for some despite numerous negative consequences, including poor academic performance, social impairment, loss of time, and financial loss (Colwell & Kato, 2003; Fisher, 1994, 1995; Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Griffiths, 1991; Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004; Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Klein, 1984; Parsons, 2005; Phillips et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2007; Yee, 2002, 2006a). Though video games may be the method of choice for some individuals to cope with preexisting emotional problems (Funk et

al., 2002; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995), the research suggests that video games in and of themselves may have unique attributes that lend them to addictive tendencies (Braun & Giroux, 1989; Brehm et al., 1983; Chumbley & Griffiths, 2006). Proper conceptualization of MMORPG addiction should incorporate both of these factors (Yee, 2002, 2006a). Proposed criteria for video game addiction are adapted from criteria for substance dependence and impulse control disorders. These include preoccupation, tolerance, compulsivity, withdrawal, escapism, lying to facilitate the behavior, and disregard for the various negative consequences of the behavior (Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 1991; Salguero & Moran, 2002).

While these studies all support the claim that video games are addictive, it must be emphasized again that much of the research has focused on children and adolescents, not on adults. Future studies must determine whether or not the effects of video games on adults are comparable to the effects on children. Also, MMORPGs are such a relatively new type of video game that few studies have examined them specifically. While it is logical to assume that negative consequences of video game addiction such as impaired interpersonal relationships or loss of time would also apply to MMORPGs, it remains to be seen whether or not this assertion can be backed up empirically. To date, no studies specific to MMORPGs (or other types of video games, for that matter) have explored exactly how marriages or families are affected by this addiction. This study aims to take the first step in addressing this concern by examining the effects of MMORPG addiction on married adults.

Chapter III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of the spouses of video game addicts. The phenomenological approach, a qualitative research methodology, seeks to describe the *meaning* of several individuals' experiences of a common phenomenon (Cresswell, 1998). The phenomenological methodology was therefore well-suited for the purposes of this study. In order to better explain the phenomenological tradition, this chapter will first describe general qualitative research characteristics, and then provide a rationale for the phenomenological approach. Finally, a description of this study will be presented.

Qualitative Research

Though there are several different qualitative research traditions (e.g. biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, ethnography), they all share certain characteristics (Cresswell, 1998). These similarities will be briefly presented in this section. First, qualitative researchers share certain assumptions related to *ontology*, or the nature of reality (Cresswell, 1998). Qualitative research views reality as constructed and subjective. Each individual involved in the research process contributes their own perspective. Multiple realities exist, such as the reality of the research participant and the reality of the researcher. It is therefore important that the researcher report these multiple perspectives as accurately as possible. This is accomplished in different ways, such as presenting extensive quotes from informants, developing themes that reflect the words chosen by the informants, and offering evidence of different perspectives of each theme (Cresswell, 1998).

Second, qualitative traditions share assumptions related to *epistemology*, or the relationship of the researcher to that being researched (Cresswell, 1998). Specifically, qualitative researchers and their subjects interact and influence each other (e.g. via prolonged observation or interviews). By directly interacting with the research participant, the researcher attempts to minimize the "distance" between himself or herself and those being researched. The researcher, then, must acknowledge his or her own role in shaping reality, as it has significant implications for the axiological assumptions of the research (Cresswell, 1998).

The third set of shared assumptions in qualitative traditions concern the *axiology*, or the role of values in a study (Cresswell, 1998). In qualitative research, the researcher acknowledges the fact that the study is laden with values. He or she freely admits his or her own values and biases in addition to those inherent in the information gathered from the research participants. The author must disclose that the information presented represent an interpretation of the author as much as the subjects of the study (Cresswell, 1998).

The fourth set of shared assumptions in qualitative research concerns the *rhetoric*, or the language of the research (Cresswell, 1998). This means that the qualitative researcher uses specific terms such as *understanding, discover,* and *meaning* to establish purpose statements and research questions (Cresswell, 1998). The qualitative researcher also uses a personal and literary narrative in the study, employing language based on definitions that evolve during the course of a study, rarely defining terms at the beginning of a study. The terms as defined by research participants are viewed as holding primary importance (Cresswell, 1998).

Each of these sets of shared assumptions work together to create the final shared assumption: *methodology*, referring to how one conceptualizes the entire research process (Cresswell, 1998). A qualitative researcher begins the process inductively, demonstrating that the process is one of an emerging design. Qualitative researchers embrace the idea that the research process has an impact on participants, and the participants in turn impact the research process. For example, the very process of introspection that participants are required to undergo during qualitative research will inform their internal narrative that describes their experience. Also, research questions may at first be couched in broad, general terms, only to be refined and narrowed as the study proceeds and the researcher gains new insights into the phenomenon. Another example is how categories are developed from information and language provided by the research participants rather than the author defining them in advance. Each of these assumptions informs the phenomenological approach to qualitative research, which will now be discussed in detail.

Phenomenology

Though there are several variations of the qualitative research tradition of phenomenology (e.g. empirical, dialogical, social, etc.) (Cresswell, 1998), *transcendental* phenomenology is the chosen approach for this study. Transcendental phenomenology is described in detail by Moustakas (1994), who explains that it owes its philosophical roots to Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician who wrote extensively on phenomenological philosophy during the early 20th century. Husserl's ideas were broad and abstract, but he emphasized four themes. First, he emphasized a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy (Cresswell, 1998). During the late 19th

century, philosophy had been enamored with "scientism," or using strictly empirical means to understand the world. Husserl believed that knowledge based on intuition and essence preceded and provided the basis for empirical knowledge, and that this should be the focus of philosophy (Moustakas, 1994). He wanted philosophy to return to an emphasis on concrete, lived experiences.

Second, Husserl emphasized philosophy without presuppositions (Cresswell, 1998). He referred to this suspension of judgments about reality as *epoche* (Cresswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Epoche takes place when "the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). The epoche is clearly illustrated in qualitative research through the process of "bracketing," in which the researcher admits his or her own presuppositions and biases (Cresswell, 1998).

Third, Husserl stressed the intentionality of consciousness (Cresswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The concept of intentionality is an Aristotelian one which states that consciousness, or internal experience, is always directed at an object, whether real or imaginary. The reality or essence of an object, then, is bound to one's directed consciousness of it.

A natural extension of the intentionality of consciousness is the fourth theme: the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy (Cresswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The reality of an object is only realized within the meaning an individual ascribes to it. The self and the object, therefore, are inseparable components of meaning-making (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning cannot exist without one or the other.

These points of emphasis help us better understand the foundational question of the phenomenological approach: "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience for this person or group of people" (Patton, 2001, p. 104)? Note that this question does not imply that the purpose of phenomenology is to produce a theory with which we can better explain or control the world. Rather, phenomenology offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us into more direct contact with the world (Van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological approach presupposes that a phenomenon has the same structure or essence even when it is perceived in many different situations over time (Patton, 2001; Valle & King, 1978). The focus of a phenomenological study, then, is the experience of the phenomenon and its invariant structure (Cresswell, 1998).

In terms of the exact method of data analysis, Moustakas' (1994) approach was chosen for this study for several reasons. First, Moustakas (1994) is very precise in describing the correct methodology for a transcendental phenomenology. He clearly details a step-by-step process designed to effectively analyze data and discover the invariant structures and essences of the phenomenon. Second, Moustakas (1994) offers suggestions that modify existing models of phenomenological researchers such as Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975). The result is that the researcher incorporates the best of several different phenomenological approaches. Finally, Moustakas' (1994) approach has been used quite effectively in a variety of fields, such as studying the "ripple effect" in mentoring programs (Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell, 2004), the experience of male rape in non-institutionalized settings (Pretorius & Hull, 2005), the role of reflection in elementary school teaching

(Morgan, 2007), and the experience of creativity for marriage and family therapists (Drew, 2008).

Online Qualitative Research

Online qualitative research offers several potential advantages over traditional qualitative methods, as well as some disadvantages. One major advantage is that it offers the chance for participants to edit their typed responses (Crichton & Kinash, 2003), reviewing their comments before posting them to make sure that they are accurate reflections of their experiences. Another advantage unique to asynchronous online qualitative research is that respondents have plenty of time to reflect upon their answers or review relevant resources before answering (Crichton & Kinash, 2003), leading to potentially richer answers for the researcher. A related advantage is that participants with restrictive schedules can complete the interview in segments instead of all at once. Also, participants cannot be distracted or discouraged by nonverbal cues from the researcher (Crichton & Kinash, 2003), such as a frown or a pause. Another advantage is that participants are less likely to be influenced by social desirability factors (Gunter, Nicholas, Huntington, & Williams, 2002). One final major advantage that online qualitative research offers is its cost-effectiveness (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Gunter et al., 2002). Online data collection avoids major expenses of time and other resources that traditional face-to-face interviewing requires, such as travel and transcribing interviews. Participants are more likely to be drawn from a wider geographic range than traditional qualitative methods.

Of course, one must also consider the disadvantages of online qualitative research. One major disadvantage is the sampling bias that online data collection

creates (Gunter et al., 2002). All online surveys necessitate that respondents have internet access, which limits the size of the sample. In this study, however, it is likely that all spouses of online video game addicts will have internet access since their spouses use it regularly to play MMORPGs. Sampling bias will occur, however, in that only individuals who frequent online forums designed to support "gamer widows" are likely to learn about and participate in the study. An additional concern is that participants are frequently not able to receive immediate cues to elaborate on their responses (Crichton & Kinash, 2003). Another disadvantage is the limited means for empathetic or emotional communication from both the researcher and the participant, (Crichton & Kinash, 2003). Emotions cannot simply be observed as they would in a face-to-face interview (e.g. tears signaling sadness). This emotional distance may also lead to a lack of participants experiencing a feeling of "being in" the interview (Crichton & Kinash, 2003). Another obstacle in online data collection is the fact that participants may be more likely to abandon the interview if they become distracted or otherwise feel that they cannot complete the process (Crichton & Kinash, 2003).

Nevertheless, I believe that the potential benefits of collecting data online outweigh the potential detriments for this study. Some disadvantages can be minimized in various ways. For example, the fact that participants are not able to be immediately prompted to elaborate on their answers can be alleviated somewhat by asking participants via email to expound on some of their answers. Also, to get a better idea of the participant's emotional state I can simply ask them directly about how they are feeling. Another way to effectively minimize a potential disadvantage is

to send email reminders to complete surveys for participants who have started but not completed surveys in a timely manner.

Self of the Researcher

Consistent with Husserl's emphasis on epoche (Cresswell, 1998), I find it necessary to disclose my presuppositions and biases that could influence the results of this study. The purpose of this section is to discuss my theoretical orientations and my previous encounters with video games and MMORPG addiction. I need to bracket these experiences, setting them aside so that I can be open to the results of this study.

For starters, I am a marriage and family therapist, therefore I think in terms of systems theory. I believe that most problems are systemic in nature, meaning that every component of the system has a part to play in maintaining the problem and working towards solutions. Though my preference is to not assign blame for the phenomenon of gaming addiction, I have taken precautions to give the participants a forum to tell their own story, however they want to word it.

Also, I have personal experiences with video games that must be disclosed. Like many kids my age, I grew up around video games. They were a regular part of my life. My dad, sister, and I had fun together with the Nintendo, playing games like *Duck Hunt* and *Super Mario Brothers*. I had friends from school come to the house and hang out to play fighting games like *Street Fighter II* and adventure games like *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. I had some very fun, positive experiences with video games. So my bias is to not blame the games for gaming addiction. After all, I grew up with video games and did not become addicted. However, the

participants may disagree with this premise and I must let them conceptualize this phenomenon however they wish.

I should also discuss my experiences with MMORPGs, as they could bias the results of this study. My first experience with MMORPGs was after my freshman year of college. I was home for the summer, spending time with friends from high school. There was one acquaintance that was often invited to go out with us, but consistently declined. I found out that this acquaintance had purchased a new game called *EverQuest* which could be played online with other players from around the world. He had joined a "guild," a group of players that coordinated their playing together to advance in the game by conducting raids. I did not think much about it again until the end of the summer. That's when we drove by this acquaintance's house for an unannounced visit. His skin was pale and he seemed much thinner than usual. We went into his room where he had multiple computers running the game at the same time. I remember seeing dirty dishes piled up around the computer monitors. Clearly our friend was troubled, but at the time I did not think that it was the game itself that could be causing it, or even perpetuating it. I just thought he might be depressed. Unfortunately I would not be in town for much longer as I was going back to school soon. I soon forgot about my acquaintance's game.

My next encounter with MMORPGs came a couple of years later as I was working as a Resident Assistant for the university. Part of my duties involved regularly checking up on residents of my hall to make sure they were doing all right. I remember having a few different residents who were heavily involved in MMORPGs and seemed to spend all their time playing. I began to talk to them about the games,

joking with them about how it had "taken over their lives." That's when they began to quite seriously use words like "addicted" and "need to play" to describe their gaming. At this point I began to wonder about the possibility of abuse with online gaming.

I did not encounter online gaming again until I began graduate school for marriage and family therapy. This is when I actually saw a few clients in which online gaming was a presenting concern. I tried to find out what I could about this phenomenon, but there was nothing in the literature at the time. When I decided to pursue my Ph.D. and needed to choose a research topic, I felt drawn to study this phenomenon that there was so little research on. When I could not find much in the way of academic literature, I turned to the World Wide Web. That is when I discovered the Yahoo! group *EverQuest Widows.* I quickly became absorbed in the stories of these spouses (male and female) of individuals who seemed addicted to *EverQuest.* I empathized with their emotional pain and wanted to help them. As a systemic therapist, I also wondered about what their role in the process might be. I quickly realized that this was where I wanted to make my mark academically; I wanted create awareness of the serious effects of online gaming addiction on couples and families. I decided that the best way to do this would be to let the gamer widows tell their own story. That is when I decided to pursue a qualitative study.

I want to reiterate here that I have had positive experiences playing video games in the past (though not MMORPGs). I do not believe that the games are completely to blame for gaming addiction any more than I believe alcohol is to blame for alcoholism. However, just because I do not believe that the games are to blame does not mean that gaming addiction does not exist. That is why it is important to

study it further and raise awareness of it in the professional community. However, as I will describe later, I must also take precautions to prevent my experiences and biases from influencing the results of this study.

Description of the Study

Sample

Criterion sampling helped ensure that participants all share the common experience of being married to an online video game addict. First and foremost, participants had to indicate that they believe that their spouse has an addiction to MMORPGs, though the term addiction meant different things to different participants. Also, to improve the generalizability of these findings, participants were required to be married to a gamer for at least one year. This requirement ensured a similar level of commitment to the marital relationship shared by all participants. Participants who were unable to meet these requirements or did not give their consent to the study were excluded.

In order to locate individuals who shared these inclusion and exclusion criteria, participants for this study were solicited from three online forums dedicated to MMORPG "widows." These forums are: *Gamer Widow* (www.gamerwidow.com), *World of Warcraft Widows* (http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/WOW_widow), and *EverQuest Widows* (http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/EverQuest-Widows). Using these discussion forums, I posted a message inviting readers to participate in an online qualitative survey (Appendix A). This message included a link to the survey. From time to time I reposted this invitation until I had ten usable participants to ensure saturation of data, the maximum number of participants recommended by

Cresswell (1998) to reach saturation. Saturation is defined as the point at which the researcher can predict responses of participants or at which new data does not lead to new understanding (Asbury, 1995; Cook, 2001; Morgan, 1997).

16 participants responded over the course of four weeks. Six participants were excluded from the study. Three individuals did not meet the inclusion criteria because they indicated that they were not currently married (i.e. they indicated they were divorced or single). Another individual's survey was excluded because she indicated that she disagreed with the idea that her husband was addicted to MMORPGs. One individual indicated that she believed her husband was addicted, but the description of her experience seemed to indicate that while her husband enjoyed occasionally playing, he did not seem to be really addicted. For example, she stated that she was not really bothered by his playing and that he played around 18 hours a week, significantly less than the 24.4 hour per week average among gamers (Griffiths et al., 2004). Her data was excluded because it did not seem to adequately support her stated belief that her husband was a gaming addict. Finally, one individual completed the survey and met the inclusion criteria, but after member checking with this participant she asked to be removed from the study. She stated that she had told her husband about her participation in the study and that his feelings were hurt by this, so she told him she would remove herself from the study. This left ten participants to include in the study, more than enough to reach saturation according to Cresswell (1998).

Consent and Confidentiality

This qualitative survey was facilitated through the online data collection software, *Vovici*. This software tool allows users to create online quantitative and/or

qualitative surveys, publish them on the internet, and analyze or export participants'
responses (Vovici, n.d.). Upon clicking on the link to the survey, participants were
directed to a welcome page explaining the purpose of the study as well as their rights
as a research subject, followed by a consent form that had to be completed before the
rest of the survey could begin (Appendix B). Subjects learned that the purpose of this
study was to learn more about the lived experience of spouses of online video game
addicts. Participants also learned that they were free to discontinue the survey at any
time and for any reason, though only completed surveys would be used in the final
data analysis.

　　　　This webpage also informed subjects that their identities would be
confidential and explained how confidentiality was ensured. First of all, all online
survey data was stored on a secure server and was password protected. Any hard
copies of the data were stored in locked cabinets in locked offices. Only the
researcher had access to the data. Additionally, all participants were asked to give a
pseudonym that was used in place of the participants' names in the study. At no point
did the survey ask for real names of participants. As a final security precaution,
participants were advised to list an email address they considered to be secure. The
reason I asked for an email address was because I needed to ask follow-up questions
and to utilize *member checking*, which will be described in more detail later.

Background Data Collection

　　　　Upon consenting to participate in the study, participants were taken to a
webpage which asked for demographic information (Appendix C). This section asked
for information such as gender, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, education level,

type of occupation, and annual income. This information was be used to identify

unique attributes of each subject so as to better describe them during data analysis. In

addition, as described previously, participants were asked on this page whether or not

they believed their spouse had an addiction to online gaming. If the client answered

negatively to this question, they were thanked for the information they provided and

the survey ended. If they answer positively, they continued the survey.

Quantitative and Qualitative Items

Upon answering positively to whether or not they believe their spouse has an

addiction to online video games, the respondents were taken to a group of qualitative

items (Appendix D). After completing the qualitative items, participants answered the

3-item KANSAT and then answered a group of quantitative items (Appendix E).

These quantitative items were intentionally designed to mirror the qualitative ones.

The rationale for the similarity of quantitative and qualitative items was to enhance

the credibility of the study through *triangulation,* a process described in more detail

in the following section. The survey was designed so that participants who may not

have time to complete the survey in one sitting could come back later and resume the

survey from where they left off through the use of "cookies" downloaded onto their

computer. After they had completed the quantitative items, respondents were thanked

for their participation and reminded that they would be contacted via email for

member checking purposes.

Credibility, Dependability, and Confirmability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative studies must eliminate

threats to the trustworthiness of the research. They describe specific guidelines for

minimizing these threats, such as achieving credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Specific techniques to achieve each of these guidelines will now be described in detail.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that qualitative research should produce credible (i.e. reliable) findings. They suggest several techniques for qualitative researchers to ensure strong credibility. One such technique is peer debriefing, in which the researcher shares his or her research and personal experiences of the process with a peer for the purpose of receiving critical feedback from the peer. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that peer debriefing helps guard against researcher biases, explores different possible meanings of the data, and clarifies different interpretations. I employed peer debriefing by discussing the research and my personal experiences with a peer who is well versed in qualitative research methods as she had recently completed a qualitative dissertation. In addition, I kept records of my peer debriefing sessions in my reflexive journal for the audit trail.

Another method suggested by Denzin (1978) for ensuring credibility is triangulation. Denzin (1978) describe four different types of triangulation researchers can employ: investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, data triangulation, and methodological triangulation. I performed methodological triangulation by including some quantitative items (Appendix E) after the qualitative ones (Appendix D). These items asked similar questions to the qualitative ones and were answered in a Likert scale format. After respondents completed their surveys, their qualitative and quantitative responses were compared. In methodological triangulation, if qualitative

and quantitative answers are similar, then the reliability and credibility of the research are strengthened.

A final method of improving credibility of the research suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is member checking. Member checking consists of the researcher sharing data and his or her analysis of the data with each research participant. The participant then offers critical feedback to the researcher to help ensure that the analysis of the data is accurate. I informed each participant that I would contact them for member checking purposes. They were emailed a copy of their qualitative responses and my interpretations of their responses. After they examined their responses and my analysis, they emailed me back their feedback and clarified any misinterpretations of the data. Any clarifications were then included in the final analysis.

Dependability and Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that an inquiry audit is an effective method for ensuring both dependability and confirmability. An inquiry audit consists of an auditor checking the researcher's findings against his or her documentation (e.g. transcripts or field notes) and methodology to ensure that the findings are appropriate and logical. Dependability refers to the quality of the *process* of documentation while confirmability refers to the quality of the *product*, or outcome, of the documentation. For this study I employed both an internal and external auditor to randomly select different subjects and check the documentation for each subject against my analysis. Both the internal and external auditors were satisfied with the results reached based

on the analysis. In this way the dependability and confirmability of this study were enhanced.

In addition to an inquiry audit, I also kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process (Appendix F). Part of this journal focused on my own personal experiences of the research process. This focus is consistent with the phenomenological experience of *bracketing*, or *epoche,* in which the researcher must suspend all prejudgments of the phenomenon to better rely on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to describe the phenomenon (Cresswell, 1998).

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) details a specific method for analyzing phenomenological data, which is itself a modification of van Kaam's (1966) method of phenomenological data analysis. Moustakas's (1994) procedures and their specific applications to the current study are listed as follows:

"1. *Listing and Preliminary Grouping"* (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher examines the verbatim transcript of the interview and separates out each participant's statement that describes an element, or horizon, of the phenomenon. This is also known as horizonalization, and each statement is given equal value. Since I am collecting my data online via the *Vovici* software, all participants' data were already typed, eliminating the need for transcription. All data, quantitative and qualitative, were exported from the *Vovici* software to *Microsoft Excel*, a spreadsheet program. Data from the qualitative items were then transferred to *Microsoft Word*, a word processing program. Using this program, I began highlighting, separating, and listing specific units of data.

"2. *Reduction and Elimination: To determine the Invariant Constituents*"
(Moustakas, 1994). In this step each unit of data is tested for two requirements. First,
does it contain a piece of the phenomenon that is a necessary and sufficient
constituent for understanding it? And second, is it possible to abstract and label it? If
the unit of data meets these two requirements, it is kept as a horizon. If not, then the
data unit is eliminated. Again, using *Word* I was easily able to highlight and delete
data.

"3. *Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents*" (Moustakas,
1994). Here, related invariant constituents are clustered together into particular
meanings. These meanings, or themes, are then given a descriptive label. Repetitive
or irrelevant data units are deleted. Using *Word*, I organized constituents into groups
and created central themes that emerged from the data.

"4. *Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by
Application: Validation*" (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, the researcher does one final
check of the invariant constituents and their themes against the complete record of the
participant. Specifically, the researcher answers the following two questions: 1) Is the
constituent or theme expressed explicitly in the data? 2) Is the constituent or theme
compatible if not explicitly expressed? If the constituent or theme is neither explicit
nor compatible, then they are removed as they are irrelevant to the participant's
experience.

"5. *Construct an Individual Textural Description of the Experience*"
(Moustakas, 1994). Using the constituents and themes, the researcher creates a
textural description of the phenomenon for each participant. The textural description

focuses on *what* exactly was experienced (Cresswell, 1998). For example, textural descriptions may focus on *what* kinds of specific effects the spouse's online video game addiction has had on the marriage. In this study, I modified Moustakas's approach in that I did not create a textural narrative, but instead compiled outlines of textural themes.

"6. *Construct an Individual Structural Description of the Experience*" (Moustakas, 1994). Using the textural description and the process of imaginative variation, the researcher creates a structural description of the phenomenon for each participant. Moustakas (1994) describes imaginative variation as the researcher's effort to extrapolate and intuit from what is known (the textural description) to arrive at the essence of the experience. The structural description, then, focuses on *how* the phenomenon was experienced, attempting to describe its essence (Cresswell, 1998). For example, structural themes may describe *how* the spouse's online video game addiction has the kinds of effects that it does on the marriage. Again, I modified Moustakas's approach here by compiling an outline of structural themes instead of creating a structural narrative.

"7. *Construct an Individual Textural-Structural Description of the Experience"* (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, individual textural and structural descriptions are merged to create a *textural-structural synthesis* that incorporates the invariant constituents and themes. Once this step is complete I member checked with each participant via their provided email address to verify that the themes and descriptions I created accurately reflected their experiences. If the participant requested changes to my analysis, I modified the descriptions and member checked

again until the participant was satisfied that it accurately reflected their experience of the phenomenon.

"8. *Construct a Composite Textural-Structural Description of the Group's Experiences"* (Moustakas, 1994). After each participant had an opportunity to give their feedback to my analysis, a textural-structural description of the group's experiences was created. This step examines each participant's experience and focuses on the common threads between them to accurately describe the essence of the phenomenon.

Pilot Study

Prior to launching the study, the author sought and received IRB approval (Appendix G) to conduct a pilot study. There were several reasons for this. First, the author wanted to receive feedback on the content, flow, and feel of the study from a participant's standpoint. Second, the author wanted to receive feedback on the clarity and more importantly the relevance of the questions from the point of view of a gamer widow. For example, what questions would they see as unnecessary? What would they see as missing from the study? Finally, the author wanted to practice the data collection and analysis process to test its feasibility. A few significant changes were made to the study as a result of this process.

The author solicited the online group *EverQuest Widows* for a member to participate in the pilot study. The first respondent to the solicitation was given a link to the online survey and asked to answer the survey questions as well as answer additional questions about the survey itself. The participant, a 55-year-old female

who is a Master of Social Work, chose the pseudonym Izzy. In addition to the survey

questions, the author asked the following questions regarding the survey itself to Izzy:

1. What do you think of the survey overall?

2. What questions were in the survey that you believe are *unnecessary* to describe the

experience of a gamer widow?

3. What questions were not in the survey that you believe should have been included

to better describe the experience of a gamer widow?

4. Is the survey relatively easy to use?

5. What else could be done to improve the survey?

Izzy indicated that the original survey she viewed was very in depth and that

all questions currently in the study were necessary for fully understanding the

complex experiences of gamer widows. She suggested that the survey do more

probing on how and why the participant became involved with the addict to begin

with, especially whether or not the participant knew about the gaming addiction prior

to becoming involved with the addict. In addition, she suggested that the survey ask

why the spouse is still with the addict. The author agreed that Izzy's suggestions were

valuable in understanding the gamer widow experience, and modified the survey

accordingly. Specifically, the second qualitative item was modified to ask *when* the

participant first realized that their spouse had an addiction to MMORPGs as well as

how they knew. An additional qualitative item was added to ask what has kept the

participant in the marriage so far and what would cause them to leave it. A

corresponding quantitative item asking how much the participant agrees with the

statement "I plan to stay in this relationship regardless of my spouse's gaming addiction" was added to the quantitative items for validation purposes.

After practicing the data collection and analysis procedures, the author also saw some additional room for improvement for the survey. For example, though Izzy is currently separated from her husband, she indicated that she was "Married" in the quantitative portion of the survey. This is a significant matter as inclusion criteria allow only currently married individuals to participate in the study. The therapist decided to make the exclusion criteria more explicit in the introduction of the survey and separate the previously combined responses of "Separated" and "Divorced" to minimize the likelihood of this happening again.

Also, the therapist realized that the survey did not ask participants to provide demographic information on their spouses. This information could prove useful in the data analysis, so the therapist added demographic questions about the spouse that mirror the questions asked to the participant. In addition, the author noticed that Izzy's spouse played a different MMORPG when his playing first became problematic than the one he currently plays. A question was therefore added in the demographic portion asking what MMORPG was being played when the participant first began realizing it was a problem. The author also noticed that some of the answers Izzy provided were quite thorough, while others were rather brief. Therefore the decision was made to emphasize the request to elaborate that is already in the survey by printing it in bold-face font. Finally, based on some of the content that Izzy wrote in her responses to the survey questions, the therapist decided to include an additional qualitative item that specifically asks how participants feel about

MMORPGs in general as well as a corresponding quantitative one for validation

purposes. The following chapters will present the results of the final study and discuss

the implications of these results.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Ten individuals participated in my study. All were Caucasian females. The average age was 35.5, ranging from 24 to 50 years old. All spouses were Caucasian males. The average reported age of participants' spouses was 36.3, ranging from 25 to 50 years old. Before discussing the broader categories, themes, and subthemes that emerged from their data, I would like to briefly introduce you to each of the participants. Their more detailed textural-structural descriptions are included in Appendices H-Q.

Meet the Participants

Ann

Ann (Appendix H) is a 38-year-old Caucasian woman who works full-time as an administrative assistant. She has been married for 19 years to her 40-year-old Caucasian husband who works full-time in the software industry. They and their children are Catholic. Ann states that her husband currently plays two MMORPGs, *World of Warcraft* and *Age of Conan,* though he played *EverQuest* when she first started noticing his gaming becoming problematic. She estimates that he plays 38 hours a week. She strongly believes that he has an addiction to MMORPGs. She indicates that she is somewhat dissatisfied with her marriage and her husband as a husband, and very dissatisfied with her relationship with her husband.

Arby

Arby (Appendix I) is a 50-year-old Caucasian woman who stays at home. She takes care of one of her children, who is autistic. She has been married for 16 years to

a 50-year-old Caucasian man who works full-time in a management position. Unlike

Arby, who is Jewish, he does not claim to affiliate with any religion or spirituality.

Arby estimates that he plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW) 60 hours a

week. He started playing over five years ago, also playing the games *Savage* and

Guild Wars. She strongly believes that he has an addiction to MMORPGs. She states

that she is extremely dissatisfied with her marriage, her husband as a husband, and

her relationship with him.

Dawn

Dawn (Appendix J) is a 28-year-old Caucasian female who works full-time in

a finance-related position for a corporation. She does not claim any religious or

spiritual affiliation. She has been married for six years to her 29-year-old Caucasian

husband, who works part-time in the health care industry. She says that he also claims

no religious or spiritual affiliation. They have a three-year-old son together. Dawn

estimates that her husband plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* for about 45 hours

a week. She came to the conclusion in the last few months that he is addicted to

online gaming. She states that she is very dissatisfied with her marriage, her husband

as a husband, and her relationship with him.

Jane

Jane (Appendix K) is a 31-year-old Caucasian woman who is a stay-at-home

mother in addition to running a small business from home. She has been married for

12 years to her 36-year-old Caucasian husband who works in a computer-related

industry. They have two boys, ages 5 and 12. Jane says that her husband currently

plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft,* though he played *Tribes* when she first

started noticing his playing was problematic 10 years ago. She estimates that he currently plays around 35 hours a week, though she also states that he has cut down his gaming time. She strongly believes that her husband has an addiction to online gaming. She states that she is extremely dissatisfied with her marriage, her husband as a husband, and her relationship with her husband.

JD

JD (Appendix L) is a 24-year-old Caucasian woman who does not subscribe to any particular religion, but considers herself a spiritual person. She works full-time as a job-coordinator. Her husband is a 25-year-old Caucasian man who, like his wife, does not participate in any one religion but still considers himself to be spiritual. He works full-time as a member of the military. JD estimates that her husband plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* approximately 30 hours a week. She believes that her husband is addicted to this MMORPG. She states that her satisfaction level is mixed for her marriage, her husband as a husband, and her relationship with him.

Kavik

Kavik (Appendix M) is a 29-year-old Caucasian female who currently stays home to care for her 9-month-old son. She does not affiliate with any religion or spirituality. She has been married for the past 11 years to a 30-year-old Caucasian man who works as a software engineer. Kavik says that he currently plays the MMORPG *Age of Conan* for 30 hours a week, though he played the game *EverQuest* when she began to notice his gaming becoming problematic. She believes that her husband has developed an addiction to online gaming. She states that she is somewhat satisfied with her marriage, her husband as a husband, and her relationship with him.

Kelly

Kelly (Appendix N) is a 24-year-old Caucasian female who works full-time as a teacher. She is married to a 28-year-old Caucasian man who works part-time in the field of technical support. He is also attending college. Kelly estimates that her husband plays the game *EverQuest* for about 50 hours a week. Though she admits that she does not know much about MMORPGs as she has very little interest in them, she strongly believes that her husband has an addiction to them. She indicates that her satisfaction level with her marriage is mixed, but she is somewhat dissatisfied with her husband as a husband and her relationship with him.

Sassy

Sassy (Appendix O) is a 45-year-old Caucasian woman who does not subscribe to any particular religion, but considers herself to be a spiritual person. She works part-time as an assistant. She has been married for 16 years to her husband, a Caucasian male who, like Sassy, does not subscribe to any one religion but considers himself spiritual. He works full-time as a warehouse worker. He started gaming while recovering from shoulder surgery. Now, Sassy estimates that he plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* about 55 hours a week. She strongly believes that he is addicted to online gaming. She indicates that her satisfaction level with her marriage is mixed, she is very dissatisfied with her husband as a husband, and extremely dissatisfied with her relationship with him.

Sirena

Sirena (Appendix P)is a 40-year-old Caucasian female who identifies herself as Protestant. She works full-time as a teacher. She has been married 14 years to her

40-year-old Caucasian husband, who also identifies as Protestant. He works full-time in the military. Sirena estimates that he plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* approximately 30 hours a week. She believes that he is addicted to gaming. She states that she is very dissatisfied with her marriage, somewhat dissatisfied with her husband as a husband, and is mixed on her satisfaction with her relationship with him.

unmerry widow

Unmerry widow (Appendix Q) is a 46-year-old Caucasian woman who identifies as not religious, but spiritual. She is not employed, but stays at home to care for her children. She says that they have become her whole life, especially after she lost her oldest in a car accident. She has been married for 10 years to her 40-year-old Caucasian husband who is not religious either. He works full time as a lab technician. Unmerry widow estimates that he plays the MMORPG *EverQuest* approximately 35 hours a week. He started playing another MMORPG five years ago called *Baulder's Gate,* and at the time unmerry widow hoped that he was just going through a phase that he would snap out of. That has not happened, and now she strongly believes that her husband has an addiction to gaming. She states that she is extremely dissatisfied with her marriage, her husband as a husband, and her relationship with him.

Categories, Themes, and Subthemes

After completing the online survey, I exported participants' responses to a Microsoft Word document and individually analyzed them. I compared qualitative and quantitative items for methodological triangulation purposes, and all ten participants demonstrated strong credibility. Next, I organized significant statements into clusters of meaning, and then I identified textural and structural themes for each.

I emailed an initial narrative of each participant's experience to them for member checking purposes. Six of the ten participants sent feedback, usually with very few if any modifications.

After completing individual analyses, I analyzed categories and themes across survey responses. Initially, seven major categories were identified, 20 themes, and 47 subthemes. However, as different levels of abstraction became apparent, some categories, themes, or subthemes were combined or discarded. For example, my initial categories of *My Emotions* and *My Beliefs* were collapsed into the new category *Changes in Me.* Also, some themes were only found in one or two survey responses. These themes were eliminated altogether because they could not be validated across more survey responses. After reviewing the data across survey responses, I was left with three categories, including *Changes in My Husband, Changes in Me,* and *Changes in the Marital Relationship* (Tables 1, 2, and 3). From these categories, 12 themes emerged, including *Isolation…Except His Gamer Friends, Protecting His Gaming, To Get Back to His Game, Personal Consequences, Emotional Consequences, Concept of Addiction, Aversion to MMORPGs, Ignoring the Addict, Our Roles and Responsibilities, More Distance Between Us, Financial Losses,* and *Why I Stay*. In addition, 37 subthemes were identified. The following sections will describe these categories, themes, and subthemes in more detail.

Category: Changes in My Husband

The category of *Changes in My Husband* (Table 4.1) illustrates the effects that gaming addiction has had on their husbands. All ten participants described their husbands changing, and these changes were always negative without exception. Each

Table 4.1

Category: Changes in My Husband

Theme	Subtheme	T/S	Example	*n*
Isolation… Besides His Gamer Friends		S	It is hard to communicate with someone who is plugged into headphones and doesn't listen, ignores you or can't hear you. (Kavik)	10
	Socializing Much Less	T	He does not socialize a lot outside of his WoW circle. (JD)	9
	Withdrawing from Family Functions	T	He has not attended any family functions, including funerals, with us. (Arby)	4
	Not Letting Other Gamers Down	T	He will go out of his way to play so as to not let the other gamers down. (Ann)	4
Protecting His Gaming		S	There can not be communication when he is at the computer or anger comes out in him. (Ann)	9
	Snapping at Distractions	T	My husband…does snap at our son and constantly complains that our THREE YEAR OLD can't play by himself for very long. Duh!! (Dawn)	5
	Defensiveness	T	He also gets defensive if I try to get him off the game or talk about his gaming as if it is a problem. (Kavik)	4
	Denial	T	He refuses to admit that he has a problem. (unmerry widow)	4
To Get Back to His Game		S	He does things fast and sloppy to get back to his game. (Sassy)	7
	Work Ethic Suffers	T	He has also asked to call in sick to work. (Dawn)	5
	Poor Childcare	T	His discipline consists of him getting on to them over the top of his laptop. (Sirena)	4
	Deception	T	I have also caught him lying repeatedly about not playing while he is watching our son during the day. (Dawn)	3
Personal Consequences		S	I'm sure his health is suffering because of this game. He never exercises at all. (Dawn)	5
	Angry All the Time	T	He is angry all the time and snaps at me and the family. (Sassy)	3
	Health Suffering	T	[I knew he was addicted] 5 yrs ago when he started sleeping 2 hours a day. (Arby)	3
	Falling Back Into Gaming	T	We argue, he's better for a couple of days, then, as I said, he begins to fall back into his regular WoW routine. It is a vicious cycle. (Sirena)	3

participant described watching their husband deteriorating in numerous ways, and certain changes stood out more than others. From the participants' perspective, the gaming addiction caused their husbands to become angrier, more isolated, and to prioritize the game ahead of every other obligation. It was almost as if these women had somehow lost the men they had married, and a stranger had replaced them. Sassy summed up the various changes in her husband, saying "He has turned into a different person I no longer relate to." Four themes emerged within this category that will be discussed in more detail shortly, as will their subthemes. These themes include *Isolation…Besides His Gamer Friends, Protecting His Gaming, To Get Back to His Game,* and *Personal Consequences.*

Theme: Isolation…Besides His Gamer Friends

The theme *Isolation…Besides His Gamer Friends* describes how the spouses of gamer widows become more and more cut off from important relationships, with the exception of other online gamers. All ten of the participants discussed their husbands becoming more isolated in various ways. The participants directly attributed this isolation to the time and effort their husbands invested into the game. For example, Ann simply said, "He enters his own world when playing." Kavik went into more detail, explaining that "it is hard to communicate with someone who is plugged into headphones and doesn't listen, ignores you, or can't hear you." Three subthemes emerged within this theme: *Socializing Much Less*, which describes how the gamers spent far less time interacting with friends than they used to; *Withdrawing From Family Functions*, which describes how the addict stopped interacting with family members including their spouses, children, and extended family; and *Not Letting*

Other Gamers Down, which describes how the addict made up for their lack of interacting with friends and family by developing close relationships with other gamers.

Subtheme: Socializing Much Less. Nine of the ten participants stated that their husbands either stopped socializing with friends altogether, or only did so when their spouses forced them to. In several cases the participant stated that their spouse was not particularly social anyway before the gaming addiction, but they would at least socialize with their spouse's friends in organized events. Post gaming addiction, even this became a rare occurrence. Arby stated, "He never really socialized with friends other than my friends. Now he doesn't even do that." Dawn echoed this thought, stating, "Neither of us have ever been extremely social people but we are at the point where it is difficult to schedule any activities because he has to check his 'raid schedule' first." It was apparent to nearly all of the participants that socializing, at least in the face-to-face, conventional sense, had taken a back seat to gaming for their husbands.

Subtheme: Withdrawing From Family Functions. Four of the participants also noticed that in addition to spending less time with friends, their spouse also tended to withdraw (or attempt to withdraw) from organized family events. These functions ranged in degrees of importance. For example, Dawn recounted a relatively minor instance in which

I wanted to take our son to the beach this weekend and he is complaining that his guild master is mad at him for not raiding at all this weekend, even though he signed up for (at least) three raids (that I know about) during the week. He has also missed a couple of family outings.

Other examples were more significant, even shocking. For instance, Arby stated, "He has not attended any family functions, including funerals, with us." For these participants, it was evident that their husband's gaming had become a bigger priority than attending even important events with their families.

 Subtheme: Not Letting Other Gamers Down. Four of the subjects made note of the fact that their husbands were not just playing a game by themselves, but they were playing with a larger group of players that had become very important to their husbands. Their husbands were not completely isolated, but were in fact developing relationships with other gamers. Ann described how her husband would "go out of his way to play, so as to not let the other gamers down." The participants tended to view these relationships in a negative light. Kelly was particularly disturbed by how her husband "sees his 'EQ' friends as people. They even call him on the phone...he talks to them like buddies." The gamer widows' low opinion of these relationships is likely because they come at the cost of relationships with family and friends.

 As I read about the extreme isolation of the husbands of participants, I empathized with these families. It seems on the surface that MMORPGs have a strong hold on these men if they are regularly sacrificing time with family and friends to play. Obviously this isolation would have major effects on other family members, but these will be discussed in more detail later. It also appears that it is not just the games themselves that pull in the players, but an entire culture of players within the games that seems to simultaneously demand loyalty and offer support and friendship. The next section describes how the addict would protect his gaming habits in various ways.

Theme: Protecting His Gaming

The theme *Protecting His Gaming* describes how the husband of the participant would defend his habits from various threats, such as distractions from the game or the accusation that his gaming was problematic. Nine of the participants described their husband doing this in different ways. Sometimes this would involve directly arguing with his wife that his habits were not a problem. Other times it would involve him displaying anger towards anyone or anything that might distract him from playing. Ann, for example, said, "There can not be communication when he is at the computer or anger comes out in him." In this way her husband would defend his playing. Three subthemes emerged from this theme: *Snapping at Distractions,* which describes how the addict would lash out at anything that might take their attention away from the game; *Defensiveness,* which illustrates how players would become aggressive and argumentative when confronted about their gaming; and *Denial,* which describes how players would more passively deny that they had a problem. These subthemes will now be addressed more specifically.

Subtheme: Snapping at Distractions. Five of the participants described their husbands as becoming reactive when something or someone would try to get their attention while they were playing. Often this would involve yelling, swearing, or even breaking things. This could be directed at anyone in the family including the spouse or young children. For example, Dawn states that while her husband does not snap at her when he is playing, "he does snap at our son and constantly complains that our THREE YEAR OLD can't play by himself for very long. Duh!!" To protect future

gaming behavior, these men discouraged their wives from communicating with them by lashing out at them when they were distracted from playing.

Subtheme: Defensiveness. Four of the subjects also described how their spouse would become argumentative with the participant when they confronted them about their gaming. This could involve raised voices, accusations, or even leaving the house. For example, Ann states that she mentions the game as addictive, then he accuses her by saying "I am nagging him and just don't understand him." Sirena states that her husband will go away in a huff when she confronts him about his gaming. "He just leaves if I bring up the game. He works two hours from home, so he will stay up there until he calms down or quits pouting." By arguing with their wives, these men are actively defending their game play and discouraging their wives from bringing the issue up again.

Subtheme: Denial. Four of the subjects described how their spouse would deny that their gaming was problematic, though this was not necessarily done in an argumentative way, as with *Defensiveness*. This was more of a matter of fact dismissal of the notion that they were doing anything wrong or hurting the family in any way. For example, Jane wrote that "I have tried to explain how much this habit hurts our family, but he just doesn't get it." Similarly, Kelly said, "He doesn't see it as a 'problem' and doesn't understand why I think of it as such." By dismissing their spouses' concerns in this way, they invalidated them, making it less likely that they would attempt to dissuade them again in the future. In this way the husbands protected their gaming behaviors.

Reading how the husbands of participants would fight with their spouses in such cold and callous ways made me feel frustrated as a therapist. I wanted to step in as if it were a therapy session and advocate for the gamer widows! Clearly MMORPGs have a significant meaning to the addicts if they are not willing to work with their wife and find solutions to the problems she is voicing. The next section will describe how the addict will act in various dysfunctional ways to better facilitate his game play.

Theme: To Get Back to His Game

The theme *To Get Back to His Game* details how the addict employed various strategies in different areas of his life so that he could play more often. Seven of the participants described how their husband would intentionally sacrifice various facets of his life so that he could increase his gaming efforts. These sacrifices could include his duties as a husband, father, or provider. For example, Kavik wrote that around the house, her husband "took days off work to play." The addict might also sacrifice his integrity by lying to facilitate his game play. Jane, for instance, said that her husband tries to mask his true intentions by letting her "'sleep in' so he can play without being nagged." Three subthemes emerged from this theme: *Work Ethic Decline*, which illustrates how the addict would work less hard around the house or on the job so that he could devote more attention to gaming; *Poor Childcare*, which describes how the addict would avoid childcare responsibilities so that he could concentrate on his game; and *Deception*, which highlights how the addict would lie or mislead his wife to be able to play more.

Subtheme: Work Ethic Suffers. Five of the subjects discussed how their husband's work ethic noticeably decreased, and this allowed them to invest more time and effort into the game. Three of them reported that their husband actually took time off of work to be able to play more. "He has also asked to call in sick to work so that he could play," said Dawn. Others spoke about their husband's lack of effort with household duties because they wanted to play more. "He does things fast and sloppy to get back to his game," wrote Sassy. These men invested less of themselves in their work duties so that they could invest more of themselves into the game.

Subtheme: Poor Childcare. Four of the subjects wrote about how their husbands would shirk childcare duties to be able to play more, even with young children. This could involve issues such as a lack of supervision. Jane, for example, wrote that her husband would play his MMORPG and "let them play video games and watch TV to keep them quiet." Discipline is another area that could be neglected while the addict's attention was focused on the game. "His discipline consists of him getting on to them over the top of his laptop," wrote Sirena. Sometimes the addict would not aid their spouse with the childcare even when they were in a pinch. In Kavik's case, "He would not get off [of the computer] even if I really needed help with the baby." By sacrificing time and attention to his children the addict could devote more effort into the game.

Subtheme: Deception. Three of the participants spoke of how their husbands would lie to them to play more. Sometimes the lies were direct. For example, Dawn wrote of her husband that "I have also caught him lying repeatedly about not playing while he is watching our son during the day." It was not just that he was not

supervising their child, but he tried to lie about it to cover his tracks. Other forms of dishonesty were more along the lines of lies by omission, holding back important information. JD's husband, for instance, snuck out one night to play his MMORPG next door with their gamer neighbor. As long as the gamers are not caught, their dishonesty allows them to play more.

Reading these accounts, I was surprised at times by the lengths that these participants' husbands were willing to go to support their gaming habits. It is shocking that a video game would have so much prominence in their lives that they would be willing to deceive employers and loved ones to be able to play more. And while these important people paid a significant price for the addict's misplaced priorities, the addict was also apparently willing to pay a price for the game. The next section describes how the participants observed the personal consequences that the addict paid to maintain his gaming habits.

Theme: Personal Consequences

The theme *Personal Consequences* demonstrates how the addict also suffered in various ways for the sake of his gaming. Five of the participants reported observing that their husbands suffered on a more personal level because of the game. At times the addict would suffer emotionally, as some of them seemed to frequently be in an angry or frustrated state when the game did not go their way. Jane wrote that her husband "would break keyboards regularly out of anger towards losing." In other cases the price the addict would pay was his health. "I'm sure his health is suffering because of this game," said Dawn. "He never exercises at all." Despite these costs, the addict did not seem to be able to stop his gaming. Three subthemes emerged from

this theme: *Angry All the Time*, which describes how often times the addict would become angry because of the game; *Health Suffering*, which describes the physical toll playing took on the gamers; and *Falling Back Into Gaming*, which described how the addicts continued to relapse despite all the negativity the gaming would bring into their lives.

Subtheme: Angry All the Time. Three of the participants characterized their husband as frequently being in an angry state even when not gaming. Sassy wrote, "He is angry all the time and snaps at me and the family." This could be suggestive of irritability as a withdrawal symptom. Or it could be indicative of more deep-seeded anger issues. Jane wrote that she has "almost left because my husband has gotten mean and aggressive." In any case, it seems that for some addicts the gaming played a role in their being in a frequent state of frustration, and yet they continued to play anyway.

Subtheme: Health Suffering. Three of the participants mentioned how their husband's health suffered in different ways because of his frequent gaming. As mentioned earlier, Dawn's husband's gained weight because of his lack of physical activity. Other participants' husbands lost sleep due to the long hours they put into gaming. Arby stated, for example, "[I knew he was addicted] five years ago when he started sleeping two hours a day." Despite the tremendous toll on their health and wellbeing, these gamers continued to make the game a higher priority.

Subtheme: Falling Back Into Gaming. As the price for the gaming addiction mounted (often in the form of arguments with the wife), the husbands of at least three participants actually tried to quit at some point. Yet they found they were unable to

remain abstinent from the game and soon found themselves playing again. Arby

wrote that after one particularly bad argument her husband was "good—no, great for

two weeks. Then [the gaming was] back with a vengeance." Similarly, Sirena states,

"We argue, he's better for a couple of days, then, as I said, he begins to fall back into

his regular WoW routine. It is a vicious cycle." Despite the personal and relational

consequences, these men found themselves unable to quit or even cut back their

gaming.

When I read how the gamers themselves are also paying a price for their

habits, it hits me again just how strong the hold is that gaming has over them. Perhaps

it should not surprise me, though; if they were willing to continue playing despite the

negative consequences to their loved ones, why should they stop for their own

consequences? The addicts, however, are not the only individuals who experienced

changes. In the next section, I will discuss the changes that took place in the gamer

widows themselves as a result of their husbands' addiction.

Category: Changes in Me

The category *Changes in Me* (Table 4.2) describes the effects on the gamer

widows themselves as a result of their husbands' gaming addiction. Each of the

participants described numerous consequences that they suffered on a personal level

as a result of their husband's gaming addiction. While each woman's story was

unique, there were certain themes that were common among them. Their experience

helped shape their understanding of addiction and also their opinions of MMORPGs.

They also suffered emotionally and often coped by trying to ignore their husbands.

Kelly, for instance, summed up nicely how her emotional pain caused her to

Table 4.2

Category: Changes in Me

Theme	Subtheme	T/S	Example	*n*
Emotional Conse-quences		S	I think I have built a wall between us so that even when we are talking, I always have anger and resentment for the game hovering in my mind. (Dawn)	10
	Anger and Resentment	T	I hold my anger in and the resentment just builds and builds until I say something. (Sirena)	10
	Stress	T	I'm instantly stressed when I get home and see him on the computer. (JD)	9
	Frustration	T	It is very frustrating being the partner of a gamer, as the game takes up a lot of their time and attention. (Kavik)	6
	Loneliness	T	If I had to describe it in one word, it would be "loneliness." (Dawn)	5
	Jealousy	T	I am jealous of the time and energy the game takes up. (Kavik)	4
	Fear	T	I live in fear month after month that we will lose our home. (Arby)	3
	Rejection	T	I feel rejected and tossed aside. (Jane)	3
Concept of Addiction		T	It's just as bad as illegal drugs...maybe more so because there isn't a lot of physical evidence on the addiction. (Kelly)	10
	Your Most Important Priority	T	I would define it as something that takes over your life, something that the addict sees as more important than anything else in life and sacrifices anything to get/do more of the addictive behavior or substance. (Dawn)	5
	You Can't Control Yourself	T	The word addiction to me means you cannot control yourself on doing something, you have to have it like a drug, you do not want to stop what you are doing, you actually crave it. (Sassy)	5
	Adverse Effects	T	It adversely affects important aspects of your life such as relationships or work. (Kavik)	4
	Obsession	T	When you are not doing it, you think about it. (Sirena)	3
Aversion to MMORPGs		T	I believe that they should carry warning labels, just like tobacco and alcohol. (unmerry widow)	9
	Hatred	T	I hate [MMORPGs]...I think they are horrible. (Jane)	5
	Designed to be Addictive	T	I think they could be really neat, but they are designed to keep people playing them and paying for them. (Sirena)	4
Ignoring the Addict		S	I used to stress and had 2 TIA strokes, now I just try to ignore him and the game. (Ann)	5

withdraw further from the relationship, saying "We're not intimate. I tend to

stonewall when I'm feeling rejected, and he retreats further into the game where he's

'happy.'" Four themes and 13 subthemes emerged from this category and will be

discussed in detail in the following pages. The themes include *Emotional*

Consequences, Concept of Addiction, Aversion to MMORPGs, and *Ignoring the*

Addict.

Theme: Emotional Consequences

The theme *Emotional Consequences* illustrates the various emotions that the

gamer widows described feeling as a result of their experience of being married to a

gaming addict. All ten of the participants described experiencing negative emotions

as a result of their husband's MMORPG addiction. They experienced feelings like

anger, resentment, loneliness, and rejection, among other emotions. These emotions

in turn affected how they interacted with their husbands. For example, Dawn wrote,

"I think I have built a wall between us so that even when we are talking, I always

have anger and resentment for the game hovering in my mind." Later, she writes how

her emotions affect even their physical relationship. "I am angry and frustrated all of

the time and I feel like if I was intimate with him, I would be validating or rewarding

his horrendous behavior." Seven subthemes emerged from this theme, including

Anger and Resentment, Stress, Frustration, Loneliness, Jealousy, Fear, and *Rejection.*

Subtheme: Anger and Resentment. All ten of the participants described feeling

angry and resentful, often pairing these two emotions together in the same statement.

Sometimes these emotions were stated without necessarily going into specific

explanations; many might consider these emotions self-explanatory. For example,

Sirena stated, "I hold my anger in and the resentment just builds and builds until I say something." Similarly, unmerry widow said, "I can not even look at his computer and see the characters logged on without feeling anger, rage and resentment." Other times the participants would go into more detail about why they felt the way they did. Their explanations varied. Dawn, for instance, said, "I am constantly resentful that I feel like all of these responsibilities fall squarely on my shoulders and I don't get any help from someone who is supposed to be my partner." Jane's reasons were slightly different. She simply stated, "I resent him for not taking care of his family." Though the specifics might vary a bit, it seems that the origin of anger and resentment for these gamer widows is based in the fact that the addiction kept their husband from fulfilling their duties as a husband or father in different ways, and this was not acceptable to the participants.

Subtheme: Stress. Nine of the participants described their stress levels being tremendously increased. Some participants simply stated that they felt more stressed out without going into detail. JD put it this way: "I'm instantly stressed when I get home and see him on the computer." Arby simply stated, "Every day is stressful." Other times participants would overtly explain why their stress levels had increased. Sometimes it was related to their husbands' lack of interacting or helping out with household duties. "I get more frustrated with him...his lack of doing things," explained Kelly. "That stresses me out, and depresses me." Other participants stated that their stress was related to the other negative emotions they were constantly experiencing. Dawn wrote, "Overall I would say [stress] is higher for several reasons. I am constantly in a state of either sadness or anger." While participants cited

different reasons for experiencing more stress, it was an emotion felt by nearly every participant.

Subtheme: Frustration. Six of the participants specifically mentioned feeling frustration as a result of their husband's gaming. Most of the participants gave clear explanations for this emotion. Kavik wrote about how "It is very frustrating being the partner of a gamer, as the game takes up a lot of their time and attention," implying that she received less of her husband's time and attention. Similarly, Jane stated "It is very rare for me to actually be able to get him away from the computer to talk. I end up getting frustrated." At times participants' responses did not overtly state that they were feeling frustrated, but this emotion was clearly being experienced. JD, for instance, wrote "Then when he actually is paying me some attention I'm just supposed to magically be happy, like I am supposed to be thankful or something. Well I'm not a machine; I just can't turn it off and on!" In nearly every case, the participant's frustration was related to the lack of interaction with their spouse.

Subtheme: Loneliness. Five of the participants specifically described feelings of loneliness due to their husband's constant time spent playing their MMORPG. For Dawn, this is what her experience boiled down to. She wrote, "If I had to describe it in one word, it would be 'loneliness.'" Unmerry widow directly linked her loneliness to her husband's gaming, stating "I am lonely and isolated and overworked, because he has no time to help with the kids or anything else." For Kavik, her husband's gaming complicated other factors in her life to worsen her loneliness. "So it can also be lonely, especially at the moment as I have a 9 month old son and don't get to talk to many people during the day, and then my husband plays in the evening," she said.

The lack of interaction with their spouse resulted in loneliness for many of these gamer widows.

Subtheme: Jealousy. Four of the subjects described feelings of jealousy, though each participant seemed to experience this emotion in a different way. Jane, for example, aimed her jealousy at her husband's fellow gamers, saying "I am completely jealous of his friends because they have all of his time and attention." Unmerry widow, on the other hand, directed her jealousy in a different way, stating that she was "extremely jealous of other couples who have normal relationships." Kavik was not jealous of any particular person, but rather she wrote that "I am jealous of the time and energy the game takes up." Though the origins of the emotion might be different, jealousy was a common emotion felt my many of these gamer widows.

Subtheme: Fear. Three participants specifically discussed experiencing fear on a regular basis. For each of these participants, fear developed for different reasons. For Arby, fear was rooted in the financial concerns that developed after her husband's work ethic sharply declined and he stopped bringing in as much income. "I live in fear month after month that we will lose our home," she wrote. Jane's fear was directed towards her husband and his extreme displays of anger. She stated, "When he first started gaming 10 years ago it was scary for me because he would rage when he would lose." Kelly was more afraid of the fact that her husband had become so close to his gamer friends, people that she did not know or trust. "I feel scared for our safety," she said. "These people don't know us, we don't know them, yet he's 'let them in' to our house and family." JD stated that she was afraid of what the future might hold for their future children if her husband kept gaming. "I don't want kids

because I'm afraid he will ignore them too," she wrote. For gamer widows, it seems that there is much to be potentially afraid of, whether real or imagined.

Subtheme: Rejection. The subtheme of *Rejection* was voiced by three of the participants. They feel as though their husbands have rejected them in favor of the games they play. " It is heartbreaking to constantly have someone you love choose a video game over you," wrote Dawn. Similarly, Jane said, "I feel rejected and tossed aside." The fact that these women's husbands spent so much time invested in their games instead of with them led to the participants feeling unwanted by the men they had chosen to spend their lives with.

Reading about the emotional toll taken by these women, my heart went out to them. I wondered how their husbands did not see (or care?) about their wives' broken hearts. But their hearts are not the only things about them that have changed as a result of their experience of their husbands' addiction. Their experience has also helped shape their conceptualization of what exactly constitutes an addiction. The following section will describe these gamer widows' definitions of addiction.

Theme: Concept of Addiction

Each of the participants was asked to explain their ideas on the definition of addiction. There was quite a broad range of ideas here, but in the midst of this diversity there were still some common threads linking the participants together. All of the women believed that their husbands' addiction was severe. Kelly said that she believed her husband's gaming addiction was "just as bad as illegal drugs...maybe more so because there isn't a lot of physical evidence on the addiction." The common ideas that emerged from the myriad of opinions on this topic were framed in terms of

symptoms such as compulsion, obsession, and adverse effects. Four subthemes

emerged from this theme, including *Your Most Important Priority, You Can't Control*

Yourself, Adverse Effects, and *Obsession.*

    Subtheme: Your Most Important Priority. Five of the participants described

how they believed that an addiction could be thought of as someone's main concern

in life. Nothing is as essential to the addict as the object of their desire; nothing else

can compare. Dawn, for example, wrote, "I would define it as something that takes

over your life, something that the addict sees as more important than anything else in

life and sacrifices anything to get/do more of the addictive behavior or substance."

Ann's definition was more personal, stating, "Addiction is when you choose time

with that rather than bike rides with family or birthday parties with friends." Arby's

definition clearly reflected how her experiences as the wife of a gaming addict had

shaped her views. "Addiction is when nothing else matters but the game," she wrote.

"Not sleep, not family, not work." The experience of living with a MMORPG addict

seems to have contributed to these women's idea that an addiction is evidenced by

prioritizing something above everything else in life.

    Subtheme: You Can't Control Yourself. Five of the participants described their

conceptualization of addiction as being synonymous with compulsion. Sassy

explained, "The word addiction to me means you cannot control yourself on doing

something, you have to have it like a drug, you do not want to stop what you are

doing, you actually crave it; when you cannot have it you get mad." Kavik described

addiction as "when you feel compelled to do something," and Kelly said it was "an

unquenchable desire to do something all the time." For these women, seeing their

husbands' inability to curb their gaming likely contributed to their viewing addiction as something that is beyond one's control.

Subtheme: Adverse Effects. Four of the participants also discussed how addiction creates chaos in the life of the addict and his loved ones. "It adversely affects important aspects of your life such as relationships or work," said Kavik. Ann's definition was more personal, saying, "Addiction is when it takes money and time from your family." JD pointed out that often times the addict could be unaware of these effects. "[Addiction] is when you ignore the world around you and do not realize what your 'hobby' does to others," she wrote. So for these women, an addiction is not just something that the addict has trouble controlling themselves around, but it is also something that brings about negative consequences for the addict or his loved ones.

Subtheme: Obsession. Three of the subjects mentioned obsession as an important component of addiction. Jane included this component among other attributes of addiction in her definition, saying, "I define an addiction as a habit that you need to do, *think of 24/7,* put as a priority in front of eating, sleeping, working, family, etc. [emphasis added]" And Sirena said, "When you are not doing it, you think about it." For unmerry widow, obsession was not merely an aspect of addiction; it was addiction. "[Addiction is] obsession with something," she wrote. These women have seen their husbands obsessed with gaming, and for them it is an important part of what makes up an addiction.

As I read the different definitions of addiction that each participant gave, I was struck by how insightful many of them were. It was evident that they were not

simply reciting diagnostic criteria from memory; they were articulating their personal experiences with addiction (these experiences, however, actually fit quite closely to much of the formal diagnostic criteria!). These experiences have helped shape them into who they are and what they believe today. Their experiences have also influenced their thoughts and feelings on MMORPGs.

Theme: Aversion to MMORPGs

The theme *Aversion to MMORPGs* describes the participants' aversive thoughts and emotions evoked by MMORPGs in general. Nine of the participants recorded strong negative feelings or opinions about MMORPGs. Sometimes they articulated their beliefs about the dangers of MMORPGs, and other times they simply vented their strong emotions against them. Two subthemes emerged out of this theme: *Hatred* and *Designed to Be Addictive.*

Subtheme: Hatred. When asked about how they felt about MMORPGs, five of the participants stated that they loathed them. For these participants, these emotions were quite strong; there was no ambivalence or uncertainty. They absolutely hated these games. Arby explained, "Of course I despise them. The grab is too strong." JD said, "[I] hate them, they are a menace to society." These women have come to feel hatred towards these games because they are the objects of their husbands' addiction.

Subtheme: Designed to Be Addictive. Four of the participants expressed their opinion that these games are designed to be habit-forming and are therefore dangerous. Sirena stated, "I think they could be really neat, but they are designed to keep people playing them and paying for them." Kavik's thoughts were more detailed: "I find the intensity and competition and need to keep up with others (which

facilitates the non-stop playing) to be a problem," she wrote. Unmerry widow

proposed a solution to the addictive nature of the games, saying, "I believe that they

should carry warning labels, just like tobacco and alcohol." The belief of these

women that MMORPGs can be addictive is based in their experiences with their

husbands, who cannot seem to scale back their playing.

The gamer widows' reactive responses to MMORPGs make sense to me,

considering what these women have experienced. They feel they have been

abandoned for a video game. Though the games themselves might not be the root of

the problem, they are a definitely not helping the situation. The addictive design of

the games means that they are at least partly to blame, and therefore they are hated by

these women. The last theme that will be discussed here illustrates how these

participants changed in regards to how they cope with their husbands' addiction.

Theme: Ignoring the Addict

The theme *Ignoring the Addict* illustrates how the gamer widows changed

their approach to coping with the problem from confronting their husbands and

arguing, to ignoring the behavior for various reasons. Five of the subjects discussed

how they had begun to stop bringing up the addict's gaming habits. In some cases,

this was because such confrontations did more harm than good. For example, Ann

explained that she "used to stress and had 2 TIA strokes, now I just try to ignore him

and the game." In most cases, the gamer widow simply realized that fighting about

the problem was ineffective. Kelly, for instance, wrote, "We don't get anywhere, so

now we don't discuss it. I don't see a point." Similarly, Arby wrote "I complained in

the beginning about his playing and would make snide remarks but that was several

years ago. Not worth the energy." In Dawn's case, she ignored the behavior because she was planning to address it again one final time when she presented her husband with an ultimatum. "So I just mostly ignore the game playing, knowing that a decision will be made one way or another soon," she said. The participants here had simply grown tired of the constant fighting and were not willing to do it any more, so they started to ignore the addict. They changed their tactics, though not because it would produce any different results in their husbands. They were simply trying to save their strength.

It is logical to me that many gamer widows would end up ignoring their spouses since they are being ignored by the addict. It takes a lot of energy to constantly confront the behavior. I wonder, however, whether this tactic might do more to perpetuate the problem than solve it. Dawn's case seems to be an exception, however, as she is not planning to ignore the problem indefinitely. But fighting about it was not working and was taking up a lot of these women's energy, so something had to change. Clearly these gamer widows have experienced many different changes, as have the addicts themselves. Of course, changes in the individuals mean changes for the relationship. The final category that will be discussed is *Changes in the Marital Relationship* and will describe the various ways that the relationship has been impacted by the gaming addiction.

Category: Changes in the Marital Relationship

Participants described several changes that took place in the relationship with their husband as a result of their husband's addiction. The roles that they took on in the family changed, as did the way they interacted with each other. Nearly every

aspect of the relationship was affected, from intimacy to finances. This final category, *Changes in the Marital Relationship* (Table 4.3), discusses the various ways that the marriage was impacted by the husband's gaming addiction. These relationships were in dire straits, and many seemed on the verge of collapse. "Our relationship is hanging on by a thread," wrote unmerry widow. Similarly, Kelly wrote, "This game is destroying our marriage!" Four themes emerged out of this category, which will be discussed in further detail shortly: *Our Roles and Responsibilities, More Distance Between Us, Financial Losses,* and *Why I Stay.*

Theme: Our Roles and Responsibilities

All ten of the participants described extremely inequitable roles and responsibilities in the relationship as a result of their husbands' gaming addiction. Because the addict spent most of their time playing their MMORPG, their spouse had to compensate for their virtual absence. They made up for their husband's lack of parenting, providing, or doing work around the house. Jane wrote, for instance, "I have also had to step up and lead our children because his leadership is so inconsistent." Similarly, Kavik said, "The gaming means that I do the majority of the housework and look after the baby." Two subthemes emerged within this theme: *Chores* and *Parenting.* These were the areas that were most common within the relationship that the addicts neglected and the gamer widow had to make up for.

Subtheme: Chores. All of the participants reported having to make up for their husbands' lack of doing chores around the house. They sacrificed housework so that they could play their game more. Unmerry widow wrote, "He no longer takes out the trash or mows the lawn or shovels the snow. That is my job now…he just works then

Table 4.3

Category: Changes in the Marital Relationship

Theme	Subtheme	T/S	Example	*n*
Our Roles and Responsibilities		S	I have also had to step up and lead our children because his leadership is so inconsistent. (Jane)	10
	Chores	T	He no longer takes out the trash or mows the lawn or shovels the snow. That is my job now....he just works then plays. (unmerry widow)	10
	Parenting	T	He would not get off even if I really needed help with the baby. (Kavik)	6
More Distance Between Us		S	I feel as though my husband is just a warm body sitting on the sofa. (Sirena)	10
	Increase in Conflict	T	I complained in the beginning about his playing and would make snide remarks. (Arby)	10
	No Emotional Intimacy	T	He has detached from our emotional connection. (Jane)	10
	Rare Physical Intimacy	T	We do not have sex as often as we used to. (Kavik)	9
	No Communication	T	There is no communication other than hello when he gets home from work and bye when he leaves. (Arby)	9
	Separate Socializing	T	His social life is pretty much nonexistent…I am very active in my church, and somewhat active in my community. (Sirena)	6
	No Activities Together	T	We don't spend much time together talking or doing fun activities. (Kavik)	5
Financial Losses		T	I can't even begin to count how much money we have spent on WoW or because of WoW. I can say this....we would be much better off financially if my husband had never heard of WoW. (Sirena)	6
Why I Stay		S	I stay because I'm scared to leave. (Dawn)	10
	The Children's Sake	S	I don't want to break up our family because that would be awful for our kids. (Jane)	5
	Financial Reasons	S	I have no job skills, since I spent my entire adult life being a wife and mother. (unmerry widow)	4
	Love for Spouse	S	I love him and he is a really nice guy and we have a lot of fun together when he is not gaming. (Kavik)	3
	Hope for Change	S	I stay because I miss my best friend and hope he is still in there somewhere just waiting to wake up. (Dawn)	3

plays." Similarly, Sirena lamented, "I work full time then come home and work until I go to bed. He rarely does anything around the house." Discussing the unfair division of labor at home, JD stated, "I do everything. He does a few things but not much; if it does get done it's half ass done or takes weeks to do." Variations on these sentiments were expressed in all ten subject's survey response. This seems to indicate that a large part of being a gamer widow is doing everything around the house.

Subtheme: Parenting. For those participants with children, parenting was another major role that the gaming addicts neglected and the spouses had to make up for. The addicts neglected children of different ages, from infants to teenagers. Kavik, for instance, discussed how her husband neglected helping out with their baby in favor of playing the game, saying, "He would not get off [of the game] even if I really needed help with the baby." Participants often wrote about the effects that this neglect had on the children. Jane stated that "Our son has had an emotional breakdown because he has been rejected by his dad." Unmerry widow stated that in her case, "[The addict] has alienated his kids, because he would rather play a game than spend time with them." Similarly, Ann discussed her children's deteriorating relationship with their father, saying, "Our children talk to him, not with him, and they might get an answer." In these situations, the participant had to compensate for their spouse's lack of parenting involvement. Dawn illustrated how she makes up for her husband's virtual absence, saying, "He was home all day and couldn't manage to do any chores, or he is playing all evening while I have to eat dinner and play with our son by myself, etc." In every situation where the participant had children, they noted their partner's absence from the parenting role.

Reading about the inequitable roles and responsibilities in the relationship, I felt a sense of injustice for these women. Again, as a therapist I wanted to intervene to try to change the structure of the family. The fact that their husband did not put effort into their chores was not terribly surprising; chores can be tedious and boring, and it makes sense that they would shirk these in favor of a rich fantasy world. But the fact that these men would neglect their own children for the game is much more shocking to me. Children depend on their fathers in so many ways, so for these men to neglect their kids breaks my heart. I also thought about how some of the participants who did not have children were afraid to have any because their husband might neglect them in favor of the game. After reading about the experiences of the participants who were parents, I realized how well-founded these fears were. Roles and responsibilities are not the only areas of the relationship that are affected by the addiction, though. The next section will illustrate how the participants and their husbands grew more and more distant as a result of this addiction.

Theme: More Distance Between Us

All ten of the participants described becoming more and more distant from their husbands. This distance was due to many factors. The addiction impaired the intimacy between them and was the source of frequent arguments. Also, the participants and their husbands talked less and stopped doing things together because of the addiction. Sirena summed up her perception, saying, "I feel as though my husband is just a warm body sitting on the sofa." Arby said that she had not experienced any sort of intimacy with her husband in five years. Six subthemes came out of this theme reflecting different causes of the increased distance. The subthemes

to be discussed in more detail include *Increase in Conflict, No More Emotional Intimacy, Rare Physical Intimacy, No Communication, Separate Socializing,* and *No Activities Together.*

Subtheme: Increase in Conflict. All ten of the participants reflected on how conflict had increased in the relationship, at least initially, especially when they tried to get their husbands to stop gaming so much. Arby, for example, stated, "I complained in the beginning about his playing and would make snide remarks." The addiction was often the subject of arguments and fights. Kavik stated that "His gaming is one of the main sources of conflict in our relationship." Other times, the fights were more focused on the other effects of the gaming, such as the inequitable roles and responsibilities. "I have to fight with him to mow the lawn or do any house chores," wrote Sassy. Similarly, JD said, "It makes little unimportant things a big deal, like the socks being on the floor. Pisses me off and I yell at him, they are there because he is playing." At times, participants also instigated conflict because of their feelings of neglect. Jane, for instance, said, "I end up getting frustrated and start yelling at him to pay attention to us." Sometimes the addict would blame their spouse for the conflicts. In Ann's case, she wrote, "[The addiction has affected conflict] greatly, as any conflict is because I am jealous of him playing the game, so he says." Though conflict took different forms, it was a constant theme in each of the participants' experiences.

Subtheme: No Emotional Intimacy. All of the participants spoke of the loss of emotional intimacy in the relationship because of the addiction. For one thing, the addict spent so much time playing that it was difficult for the couple to nurture that

intimacy. Participants felt that their husbands had withdrawn emotionally. "He has detached from our emotional connection," wrote Jane. Similarly, Ann said, "The emotional support from him is not there." But at times the participants admitted that they had also held back emotionally out of resentment. "Oh, he shows affection now and then, but then it's hard for me to reciprocate, since I have a lot of resentment built up inside," wrote JD. The time that the game took up as well as the gamer widow's resentment all contributed to the lack of emotional intimacy in the relationship.

Subtheme: Rare Physical Intimacy. Nine of the ten participants reported experiencing physical intimacy less often as a result of their husband's addiction. This included sexual activity as well as non-sexual touching. Arby wrote that her relationship had "no kissing, hugs (even with children), no sex, not even innuendo." Sassy echoed this thought, saying, "He used to be a kissy-huggy person. He no longer touches me." Because of the time invested in gaming, sex was all but gone from these relationships. Kelly lamented, "Sex just never fits in the EQ time table. It's not a "good time" in the game. So...sex...nope...don't have it!" However, some of the participants admitted that they had a role in the decrease of sex in the relationship as well; they refused sex because they did not want to be limited to sexual objects in the relationship. "I am angry and frustrated all of the time and I feel like if I was intimate with him, I would be validating or rewarding his horrendous behavior," said Dawn. Unmerry widow similarly stated, "I refuse a quickie, just so he can hurry and get back on the game." Though both partners played a role in the lack of physical intimacy, this tendency was nearly universal among participants.

Subtheme: No Communication. Nine of the participants also reported a decrease in the overall level of communication as a result of the addiction, even about everyday sorts of things. Arby, for instance, stated, "There is no communication other than hello when he gets home from work and bye when he leaves." Dawn stated, "We don't talk about our days in the evenings." Sassy summed her experience up, saying, "He talks to his computer more than he does me." Even important things were not discussed. "He doesn't talk to me about important things that are going on," wrote Jane. Similarly, Kelly said, "We very seldom actually talk about serious things." The participants seemed to imply that the long hours playing the game robbed their husbands of the opportunity to talk to them about anything, big or small. Sirena put it this way: "I never start a conversation with him while he is playing. He would not hear most of it."

Subtheme: Separate Socializing. Six of the participants indicated that they no longer socialized jointly with their husbands, which contributed to them feeling even more like strangers to each other. The prevailing issue here was that the addict chose to spend his time playing the game instead of with other people. "His social life is pretty much nonexistent…I am very active in my church, and somewhat active in my community," wrote Sirena. However, sometimes the gamer widow also stopped socializing due to embarrassment over her husband's gaming. "We even stopped going to church for a while because I couldn't answer the questions about where my husband was (he was sleeping because he stayed up all night gaming)," said Jane. Sometimes other life circumstances affected the couple's ability to socialize in addition to the gaming. For example, Kavik stated, "Gaming has reduced our social

lives (though having a baby doesn't help either!)." The fact that the couple stopped socializing together seemed to make it difficult for them to feel close to one another.

Subtheme: No Activities Together. In addition to not communicating with each other, five of the participants indicated that they no longer did fun activities with their husband any more. "Everything you used to do with your spouse is gone," wrote Dawn. The game seemed to take up so much of their time that there was none left over for the gamer widow. But sometimes the gamer widow played a role in the lack of interaction as well. Like how JD stated, "Then when he actually decides to get off and spend time with me, he asks what I want to do, and I say I don't know, sometimes I suggest the Wii or a movie, but mostly I don't know because I am so used to him playing that I don't what to do with him." As the couple grew more distant, it became that much harder to find things in common to enjoy doing together.

After reading about the participants' sense of distance from their husbands, I felt sorry for them. It was as if the gaming addiction had become this huge canyon between the participant and her husband. Yet I also saw more clearly in this theme how the participants also contributed to the distance, especially when they felt rejected or taken advantage of. These reactions are certainly understandable, but they will not help bridge the gap. In addition to the lack of closeness in the relationship, the couples' finances were often affected by the gaming addiction. The next section will describe how this happened in greater detail.

Theme: Financial Losses

The theme of *Financial Losses* describes how six of the couples' finances were adversely affected by the husband's gaming addiction. There are various costs

that can be associated with MMORPGs, including the monthly subscription fees for each account, the costs of equipment such as computers or headsets, and some players even elect to use real money to purchase items within the game. These costs can add up for some players, especially if they control multiple characters. "I can't even begin to count how much money we have spent on WoW or because of WoW," said Sirena. "I can say this...we would be much better off financially if my husband had never heard of WoW." For many of these widows, there were significant indirect costs associated with their husband's gaming as well. For example, when an addict began to skip work to play more often, the family's income was affected. "Because his work ethic has changed, he has not gotten profit sharing which has drastically changed our income," wrote Arby. In other cases the gamer would handle the finances irresponsibly because they spent so much time playing. Sassy stated, "He has been late on payments because he forgets to pay them because he is online playing WoW." Finances were not significantly affected in every case, but for many of the participants coping with the gaming addiction also meant coping with financial difficulties.

Theme: Why I Stay

The final aspect of the relationship that was changed by the addiction involved the gamer widow's motivation for staying in it. All of the participants gave different reasons for why they opted to stay in the relationship for now. Sometimes they admitted that they were not entirely sure why they remained in the relationship; they were not happy or satisfied with their relationship. In some cases divorce was actively being contemplated. But most participants wanted to stay in the marriage for the long

haul. This decision could be impacted by the presence of children or because of financial concerns. It might also be because they still loved their spouse and were holding out hope that change was on the horizon. Four subthemes emerged from this theme: *The Children's Sake, Financial Reasons, Love for Spouse,* and *Hope for Change.* These subthemes will now be discussed in more detail.

Subtheme: The Children's Sake. For five of the participants, keeping the family together for the sake of the children was a strong motivating factor for staying in the relationship. Jane, for example, said, "I don't want to break up our family because that would be awful for the kids." Similarly, Dawn stated, "I stay for the sake of keeping things stable for our son." To these women, getting out of the relationship would be more traumatic to their children than the neglect and anger they were already privy to because of their father's gaming addiction.

Subtheme: Financial Reasons. Four of the participants cited financial reasons as their main motivator for staying. In some cases the couple's troubled finances were too deeply intertwined to leave. When asked why she stayed in the relationship, Sassy simply answered "We owe too much debt." In other cases, the participant did not believe that they could succeed on their own because they did not currently work. "I have no job skills, since I spent my entire adult life being a wife and mother," stated unmerry widow. Financial concerns were a strong motivator for many participants to stay in the relationship.

Subtheme: Love for Spouse. Three of the participants offered love as their main reason for remaining in the marriage. "I know I love this man," answered Kelly when asked for her motivations for staying in the relationship. Kavik wrote, "I love

him and he is a really nice guy and we have a lot of fun together when he is not gaming." So for a few couples, love was a primary factor for staying in the relationship.

Subtheme: Hope for Change. Three of the participants also indicated that they were hopeful that their husband could change. "I stay because I miss my best friend and hope he is still in there somewhere just waiting to wake up," wrote Dawn. In Jane's case, she agreed to stay "because he agreed to go to family therapy." And JD wrote, "I know he can not play, I have seen it." For these participants, hope kept their marriage alive.

Looking over the reasons that participants decided to stay, it was somewhat sad to me that more participants did not stay for love, hope, or other positive reasons. Most of the reasons given were simply because they wanted to avoid some sort of other future difficulty. And yet, I also understand how the majority of these participants could become so hopeless.

Composite Textural-Structural Analysis of Gamer Widowhood

Being a gamer widow involves experiencing changes in one's spouse, in oneself, and in one's marital relationship. These changes are deep and complicated, often overlapping. The following narrative will attempt to describe the essence of being a gamer widow by combining the textures and structures that make up the phenomenon:

Being a gamer widow means experiencing considerable change. You see your husband change. You change. Your marriage changes. Almost nothing is as it was before. Your husband's addiction affects nearly everything in your life.

Your husband's behavior stops making sense. He isolates himself from family and friends, trading these relationships for those with strangers he has met online. He defends his gaming fiercely, firmly convinced that it's not a problem. "I have tried to explain how much this habit hurts our family, but he just doesn't get it." He will argue with anyone who tells him otherwise. And yet he neglects important facets of his life like work, or childcare to facilitate his playing. He suffers personal consequences for his long hours of game play, like developing an angry temperament or letting his health decline. "He has turned into a different person I no longer relate to."

Of course, the effects of your husband's addiction are not limited to just him. It affects you too. You suffer emotionally, feeling things like resentment, stress, and loneliness. "I feel rejected and tossed aside." Your experience informs how you conceptualize addiction. "I would define it as something that takes over your life, something that the addict sees as more important than anything else in life and sacrifices anything to get/do more of the addictive behavior or substance." Often you develop a strong hatred for online games, believing them to be too habit forming. "I believe that they should carry warning labels, just like tobacco and alcohol." You start to ignore your husband to simply avoid fighting any more.

The differences in you and your husband mean that the marital relationship will look different too. Suddenly you are the one taking care of the house and the kids because your husband is playing all the time. You grow more and more distant from your husband, partly because his time is eaten up by the game, but also partly because you cannot stand what he is doing. "I think I have built a wall between us so

that even when we are talking, I always have anger and resentment for the game hovering in my mind." You stop talking to each other, sharing your emotions, and even having sex. You socialize without him and stop doing things together. Even your finances are affected by the addiction, as your husband either spends too much money on his habit each month, or his income is reduced because he would rather play than go to work. But still you stay in the relationship, though your reasons are different depending on your situation. Most likely it is for the kids' sake. It could also be because you do not work and are financially dependent on your husband. It might even be because deep down you still love your husband and still think he has the ability to change. Maybe.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The stated purpose of this study is to help MFTs and other mental health professionals begin to understand the effects video game addiction have on marital relationships by describing the common phenomenological experiences of spouses of online video game addicts. My hope is that as professionals become more acquainted with this phenomenon they will begin to realize that it is a serious problem with major implications for the couples and families who suffer from it. As this study has shown, there are a number of spouses out there who are in a tremendous amount of emotional pain. And yet many professionals are not yet well-acquainted with their struggle. As this problem is given the credence that it is due, it will eventually lead to more research and better treatment for online video game addicts, their spouses, and their families.

This study began with a review of the literature on various relevant topics to the topic at hand. First, I provided a rationale for why I decided to use "addiction" terminology when referring to this phenomenon instead of calling it an "impulse-control disorder." Next, the role of MFT in addiction research was explored. Finally, the research on video game addiction, including its conceptualization and its diagnosis, were discussed. After the literature review, I described the methodology of the current study and then presented my results, which included three categories, 12 themes, and 37 subthemes to describe the phenomenon of being a gamer widow. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to discuss the implications of these findings and to

connect them back to the literature, determining how this study adds to the current body of knowledge.

First I will discuss how the participants' experiences of their spouses' addiction supports existing research on the effects of online video game addiction, and also adds new, relevant information to the literature. Next, I discuss treatment implications for MFTs and other mental health professionals who work with couples and families where video game addiction is a presenting issue. Finally, I will discuss whether or not online video game addiction should really be considered an addiction. Afterwards I will present limitations of this study and ideas for future research.

The Experiences of Gamer Widows

The research on MMORPG addiction is still in its infancy. There is much that we still do not understand and much that can be debated. For example, do the games cause the addiction? Or do players have co-occurring disorders in which the addiction is merely a symptom? And is addiction even the right terminology to use? While these issues will be discussed later, it is outside the scope of this paper to answer these questions definitively (though I will certainly offer my opinions). The main focus of this paper is simply to describe the lived experiences of the spouses of online video game addicts. In as far as this goal is concerned, I believe that this study supports much of the existing research and also significantly adds to the literature.

Supporting What We Know

Supporting the Demographics

The experiences of the participants of this study support much of the existing research on gaming addiction. Their reports of their husbands' gaming behavior and

the consequences they suffer as a result of this behavior dovetails with what has already been presented in the literature. The ages of participants ranged from 24 to 50, while the ages of their husbands ranged from 25 to 50. The average age of the participants in this study was 35.5, while the average age of the gamers they were married to was 36.3. Keeping in mind that this sample did not include non-married gamers, this data appears to be consistent with the demographic information on gamers presented in the literature review, which stated that the average age of gamers today is about 30 (ESA, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004). This study lends support to previous research that states that video games are not just for kids any more.

Interestingly, though I was not trying to limit the sample to women, I did not have any males participate in this study. And yet according to the industry, 43% of total (non-MMORPGs included) gamers today are women (ESA, 2005), and anywhere from 14.3% to 20.4% of MMORPG-players are women (Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004; Yee, 2006b). The meaning of this result is not entirely clear. Perhaps the women who enjoy gaming are more likely to be in a relationship with men who enjoy it equally as much and are not likely to see it as a problem. Maybe women are less likely to meet the criteria for addiction for some reason. Perhaps it is simply a product of the sampling or recruiting methodology. Whatever the reason, it deserves further exploration in future studies.

Supporting the Effects of Gaming Addiction

The observed effects of MMORPG addiction on the addict reported by the participants also dovetail with previous research. Recall that in Chapter II I discussed how many MMORPG addicts tended to lose sleep because of playing, gave up work

to be able to play, became angry when unable to play, had been told by someone else that they spent too much time playing, and enjoyed playing the game more than real-life activities with friends (Griffiths et al., 2004; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Yee, 2002, 2006b). In addition, researchers have proposed diagnostic criteria for video game addiction based on the reported effects of addiction to video games (Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 1991; Salguero & Moran, 2002). Common criteria include meeting four or more of the flowing criteria: preoccupation with playing, tolerance, compulsivity, withdrawal symptoms, using video games to escape problems, lies and deception to keep playing, disregard for the physical, psychological, or social consequences of playing, and family or schooling disruption due to playing. Based on these criteria, each of the husbands of the participants in this study would be formally diagnosed as video game addicts according to their wives' accounts.

Participants in this study reported the same effects as those reported in previous research and suggested in the proposed diagnostic criteria. The amount of time that husbands of participants invested into playing, for example, addresses many of these symptoms. The average amount of time that participants estimated their husbands played their MMORPG was 40.8 hours a week. This is the equivalent of a full-time job. This data suggest a strong preoccupation with playing as well as a high degree of tolerance. In addition, the subtheme *Angry All the Time* describes participants' husbands being extremely irritable when not playing the game, and the subtheme *Snapping at Distractions* describes the players' irritability when their attention was taken from the game. These examples of irritability could possibly be interpreted as a form of withdrawal symptoms if this is related to the irritability that

gamers have reported in the past when unable to play (Yee, 2006b). Also, the subtheme *Falling Back Into Gaming* describes how players would relapse after attempts to quit gaming. This suggests that they feel compelled to play.

Other symptoms described in the video game addiction literature were evident in this study. For example, the subtheme *Health Suffering* includes descriptions of how participants often lost sleep as a result of their long hours of game play. The subtheme *Work Ethic Suffers* describes how participants often called in sick to work or did their jobs poorly to be able to play more. The subtheme *Deception* indicates that many participants are willing to lie to facilitate their gaming. The entire category of *Changes in the Marital Relationship* describes the various disruption to the family dynamics due to frequent confrontation from the spouse regarding the addict's constant playing. The theme *Isolation…Besides His Gamer Friends* describes how addicts preferred playing the MMORPG to socializing with friends or family, and the theme *Personal Consequences* describes many of the personal costs of gaming addiction, such as poor health, frequent anger, and an inability to control the gaming. These themes suggest a disregard for the physical, psychological, and relational consequences of playing.

The participants in this study had likely never read a list of formal diagnostic criteria for addiction to online video games. They described their own ideas of addiction. Yet interestingly, the common subthemes in their criteria for addiction were very similar to many of the criteria in these formal definitions of addiction. For example, the subtheme *You Can't Control Yourself* is essentially another way of describing compulsion. The subtheme *Adverse Effects* describes their view of how an

addict will continue to abuse the object of their addiction despite the numerous negative consequences in various areas of their lives. This is analogous to the disregard for physical, psychological, and relational consequences of gaming. The subtheme *Obsession* is very similar to the criteria of preoccupation with playing. So when these women described their husbands as being addicted to gaming, they were not necessarily exaggerating; their ideas of addiction are very similar to the formal criteria presented in addiction literature.

In short, everything that the spouses of video game addicts in this study have observed about their husbands supports what has come before. However, the purpose of this study was to add to the existing literature, not simply confirm what was already out there. There is much rich information that the participants give that provides more detail into areas of the lives of these addicts and their families that heretofore were only alluded to.

Adding to the Literature

In previous research it was mentioned that MMORPG addicts' relationships suffered as a result of the addiction, but the researchers did not elaborate on what this looked like or how severe it was. This study gives us a much better idea of what this troubled relationship looks like. The wives of MMORPG addicts suffer tremendously on a personal level as a result of the addiction. The relationship between MMORPG addicts and their wives is extremely strained, in many cases to the point where divorce is being considered. This is not simply an annoyance or an inconvenience to them. This is every bit as real and as damaging an addiction to them as narcotics or alcohol.

The Suffering Spouse

Women married to an online gaming addict suffer a great deal as a result of their husband's addiction. Hearing their stories and the emotional turmoil they endure, one cannot help but feel empathy for them. Naturally they feel anger and resentment towards their spouse. Here is a man who spends much more of his time playing a game than spending time with his family. Here is someone who is more loyal to a faceless stranger halfway across the country than he is to his own wife and children. How could she *not* feel angry? And of course it makes sense that she would feel stressed and frustrated. Her husband spends so much of his time playing the game instead of helping out around the house or with the kids, despite all her best efforts to try to get him to help. Stress and frustration are natural reactions.

More compelling to me are the more vulnerable emotions that these women shared that give us insight into the emotional pain they live with on a daily basis. This pain is valid and not an overreaction. I want therapists and other professionals to be aware of the loneliness that these women feel despite the fact that their husband is just sitting across the sofa or in the other room, his face lit by the dim light of a computer screen. I want to raise awareness of how legitimately jealous these women are of a silly computer game because it has completely captivated their husband in a way that they apparently have not. I want others to know why they feel rejected by their husbands, every day as he withdraws emotionally and physically. Many of these women even live in fear every day that they will be financially ruined as a result of their husband's addiction.

It is not difficult to understand why they would come to hate these games and honestly believe that they are just as addictive as illicit drugs; they have lived with the effects and to them there is not much of a difference. As unmerry widow said, "they should carry warning labels, just like alcohol or tobacco."

The Broken Relationship

As this addiction wreaks havoc on the player and the spouse, it is natural that the marital relationship would suffer in various reciprocal ways. As the addict neglects his various familial roles and responsibilities to be able to play more, his wife feels anger and resentment as she compensates for his virtual absence. This often leads to increased distance between the two of them that both parties have a role in perpetuating. For example, she might increase her vocal displeasure of his behavior to drive her point home. Meanwhile, instead of changing the behavior that he immensely enjoys, he simply invests more of himself into the game to escape the harsh emotional climate that has developed. As he withdraws emotionally from his wife he finds that he has support, acceptance, and even intimacy with his online friends. While his behavior is condemned at home, it is actually reinforced whenever he plays. Thus, a downward spiral develops.

The gamer widow cannot actively confront the addict's behavior indefinitely; the gamer will always escape back into the game. So it makes sense why in many cases the widow begins to ignore the addict in various ways to cope. Ignoring him is a way to condemn (or at least not reward) the behavior without spending so much time and energy. She might stop talking to him or withdraw from him emotionally or physically to send a message. This is a tit-for-tat response; the addict has already

withdrawn from her. But unfortunately this sort of a response only makes the addict's escape into the game that much more appealing.

Why does the gamer widow stay with her addicted husband? Why not simply leave the situation? The reasons vary in each situation, but there are some common motivations for staying. The motivation for staying is often based in fear. In some cases the gamer widow is understandably afraid of the impact that leaving would have on the couple's children. As Jane said, "it would be awful for our kids." These participants often seemed to believe that having a barely present father was better than having no father at all. This is not an easy decision to make, but it is important that gamer widows truly consider what would be in their children's best interests. Would living with their father's implicit rejection on a daily basis really be better for the child? The severity of each situation varies, but it is important for gamer widows to truly think these decisions through. Having their children be ignored by their father on a daily basis might actually be worse for the child than separating them from their father.

Another fear-based motivator in some situations is the financial risk for the gamer widow to leave her husband. This is especially true in situations where the gamer widow is financially dependent on her husband. Perhaps the gamer widow has never worked before and does not feel that her chances of being able to land a job are very good, as was the case with Arby and unmerry widow. It is preferable for the gamer widow in these situations to stay married than to lose her financial support, as unstable as that may be due to the addiction. This sort of motivation for staying speaks to the importance of being able to achieve financial independence.

In other situations the motivations for staying may be more positive. Many widows honestly still love their spouse, or at least the old version before the addiction was a part of their lives. They are holding out hope that their spouse can beat the addiction. I believe that it will be important for the gamer widow to tap into these positive emotions for lasting change to occur in their spouse. The next section will elaborate on this as I discuss the implications for therapy.

<p style="text-align:center">Implications for Therapy</p>

Hopefully by this point MFTs and other professionals can see the gravity of the experiences of gamer widows. It is important that behavioral health professionals treat this addiction just as seriously as they would treat any other chemical or behavioral addiction. To that end, I have outlined some suggestions for therapists who might work with couples or families where gaming addiction is a presenting concern. As a systemic therapist, I believe that it is extremely important that whenever possible treatment involve the whole system, not just the "identified patient." A substantial amount of addiction research testifies to the importance of treating the whole family, not just the individual (Copello & Orford, 2002; Hurcom et al., 2000; Stanton & Heath, 1995; Steinglass et al., 1987). So as I discuss treatment for online gaming addiction, it will be in the context of family therapy.

Incorporating the System

In Chapter II I discussed two models of conceptualizing chemical addictions that I believe can be applied to behavioral addictions, including online gaming addiction. First I discussed Steinglass et al.'s (1987) developmental model, which posits that alcoholism skews the balance of growth and stability in a family, resulting

in a rigid system that sustains the addiction. In the context of the current study,

Steinglass et al.'s (1987) model would suggest that the presence of the online gaming

addiction disrupts the balance of growth and stability. Steinglass et al. (1987) suggest

three regulatory behaviors that maintain homeostasis and can be shaped by external

factors such as gaming addiction: routines, rituals, and problem-solving. If the

gaming addiction invades these regulatory behaviors, the family's stability actually

begins to revolve around the presence of the gaming. Therefore the gaming must be

retained if they are to remain stable. The family must sacrifice long-term growth for

short-term stability (Steinglass et al., 1987).

Steinglass et al. (1987) suggest that treatment providers first differentiate

between those families in which the addiction has become an organizing principle and

those that have an addicted member, but the addiction has not yet become an

organizing factor. The latter family will be more interested in long-term growth and

be willing to make dramatic changes despite the cost of short-term stability. Dawn,

who discussed her plan of presenting her husband with an ultimatum, is an example

of someone who is willing to strive for long-term growth, though short-term stability

would be sacrificed.

In the case of families in which the addiction is an organizing factor, short-

term stability is prioritized. Often times the family's phase of development will

influence to what extent the addiction has become an organizing principle. In early-

phase families, for example, members are still trying to establish their family identity.

Regulatory behaviors like short-term problem-solving, daily routines, and meaningful

family rituals have not yet been firmly established. They might not have experienced

a crisis per se yet, but one or both of them might be able to see the path that their lives are taking and be motivated to do something about it early on. They are more likely to be willing to change these behaviors and purposefully establish their family identity. In this study, the families of participants like Dawn, JD, Kavik, and Kelly, who have been married only a few years or so, would be considered early-phase families, still forming their family identities.

A middle-phase family is older, often with young children or adolescents. Here the regulatory behaviors are already deeply entrenched and they have been thoroughly invaded by the addiction. The main developmental task is to maintain a stable and predictable family environment. It is more likely here that a family presenting for treatment will have already embraced their identity as a family in which gaming addiction is an organizing factor in their lives. Most likely they will be motivated to attend therapy because of some sort of crisis that they may or may not see as connected to the addiction. But they may be less willing or able to change the addictive behavior because their short-term stability depends so much more on it. Daily routines and meaningful rituals might revolve around the gaming, making life more predictable (though unsatisfying). The addiction, dysfunctional as it may be, may now actually serve as a short-term solution to certain major family problems. For example, for some couples the constant gaming may serve as an emotional regulator between the addict and the gamer widow, preventing them from experiencing the pain and discomfort of working on deep-seeded relationship problems such as incompatibility issues or past betrayals of trust. If the gaming was removed, then these other problems might actually have to be dealt with, and neither of them may be

ready for the ramifications. In this study, the remaining participants' families would be considered middle-phase, those of Ann, Arby, Jane, Sassy, Sirena, and unmerry widow. There were no late-phase families in this study, in which the primary developmental tasks involve launching children and negotiating new rules between the new families being created.

In addition to the Steinglass et al. (1987) model, the Stress and Coping model proposed by Hurcom et al. (2000) suggests that the presence of the addiction creates a great deal of stress for families of addicts and that they cope with it as best as they can. This is important to keep in mind so that the therapist does not make the mistake of assigning blame to the family for the addiction. Therapists should be willing to educate clients about their role in the addictive process, but their tone should be one of compassion and understanding.

According to Hurcom et al. (2000), coping can be either active or avoidant in nature. Active coping is when the addiction is confronted head on, such as when a spouse proposes an ultimatum or suggests seeking professional treatment for the addiction. Avoidant coping refrains from active confrontation, such as when the spouse ignores the addict's gaming, so that stability can be maintained. Coping takes place along three domains: Appraisal-focused, in which the meaning of the addiction is reframed; Problem-focused, in which action is taken to reduce the addiction; and Emotion-focused, in which the spouse attempts to manage her emotions relevant to the current situation. Therapists must be able to assess the coping style of gamer widows and suggest alternatives that emphasize long-term growth over short-term stability.

Proposed Stages of Therapy

I believe that treatment for gaming addiction should take both of these models into account. During the first, evaluative stage of therapy, therapists should assess the family's developmental stage, taking into account the unique challenges that each stage presents. Using a family history, therapists should determine whether this family is one in which the gaming has become an organizing principle or not. The therapist should also check for any co-occurring disorders. Addictions and co-occurring disorders are likely to support each other, therefore they must be addressed simultaneously. It may be that a co-occurring disorder such as depression or social phobia predates the gaming addiction and the addiction is a symptom of the bigger issue. The therapist must carefully assess the various coping styles that have been employed thus far. Many of the participants in this study, for example, discussed how after initially confronting the addictive behavior they begin to ignore it to keep the peace. This is an example of taking short-term stability over long-term growth. Also, the family must buy into the idea that this is a family problem and that everyone needs to work towards a solution. However, therapists must be careful here not to assign blame for the addiction. It must be understood that everyone has been trying to cope with their problems as best as they can, but it is time to find some new ways to do this. If the family is willing to address this problem as a family, then a treatment contract should be created.

The second stage of therapy must involve the removal of gaming from the household for an extended period. This stage is akin to detoxification. This stage may be relatively short, but it is likely that there will be some slips. Nevertheless, it is vital

that the gaming addict be able to remain abstinent from gaming during the course of treatment. At the same time, the therapist must acknowledge and validate the difficulty of this process for the addict and the family. During this stage, the family should identify potential triggers and eliminate them. For example, getting rid of any gaming software packaging that might be lying around, or deleting the software from the computer. In some extreme cases, the computer itself may have to be removed for a time.

The third stage of therapy is what Steinglass et al. (1987) refer to as *The Emotional Desert*. This is because the sudden loss of this organizing principle of gaming addiction can be extremely uncomfortable for a family in which problem-solving, routines, and rituals have revolved around it. Instead of feeling exhilarated that the gaming has stopped, the whole family may feel an initial sense of dysphoria. This is a stage in which the whole family will be tempted to allow the gaming back into their lives because it offers them a sense of stability. The therapist's main task here is to help the family maintain sobriety through this difficult time by identifying maladaptive coping mechanisms and establishing new ones. Emphasis should be placed on those coping styles that prioritize long-term growth over short-term stability. For example, perhaps the gamer was using the MMORPG to express aspects of himself that he did not feel able to share with his wife. An emphasis on growth would encourage the gamer to share this aspect of himself with his wife.

Also, I believe it is critical that emotional pain be identified and validated by the spouses in this stage. The theme of *Emotional Consequences* details the many real hurts that gamer widows experience, and acknowledging this hurt will be a step

towards healing. It is important, however, to address not only the pain of the gamer widow's that was directly caused by the addiction, but any pain of the addict's that might have motivated it as well. Participating in recovery groups, including those based on the 12-step model (e.g. Online Gamers Anonymous, n.d.), could be especially beneficial in this stage both as a means of helping families improve coping skills as well as validating emotional pain.

The final stage of therapy involves either family restabilization or family reorganization. Some families will come out of the previous stage sober, but not necessarily fundamentally changed. The gaming would no longer be a part of their lives, but they function for the most part as they did before. This is what Steinglass et al. (1987) refer to as *family restabilization*. Other families undergo a "second-order change." They function in fundamentally different ways and the organization of the family will be completely different. This is what Steinglass et al. (1987) call *family reorganization.* It is the result of the complete deconstruction and reconstruction of family functioning. According to the results of this study, one area of restabilization/reorganization that will likely need to be overtly addressed is the equitability of family roles and responsibilities. The main goal of the therapist in this stage is to help the family establish and embrace their new ways of functioning.

In summary, the model adapted from Steinglass et al. (1987) and Hurcom et al. (2000) takes into account a family's developmental stage and how severely the gaming has become an organizing principle in the family. It also assesses for coping styles that emphasize short-term stability over long-term growth, without assigning

blame to any one family member for the current dysfunction. It requires sobriety so that new ways of family functioning can be established.

Revisiting "Addiction" Terminology

In Chapter II I stated that though the practice of referring to ICDs as addictions is not without controversy, I believed I was justified in doing so for various reasons. For one, recent research indicates that even on a physiological level, ICDs function similarly to addictions, thus blurring the distinction between the two (Potenza, 2001; New et al., 2002; Siever et al., 1999). Also, treatment for the two is virtually identical, such as the use of 12-step groups (Hollander, 2006; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006). In addition, the literature on video game addiction already heavily favors use of the term "addiction" and I wanted to avoid confusion by calling it something else. Finally, the effects of ICDs on individuals' personal lives are often just as devastating as the effects of chemical addictions (Hollander, 2006; Pallanti, 2006; Potenza, 2006). The results of this study speak to this last reason. All the participants discussed numerous consequences to the addicts and the addicts' loved ones as a result of their addiction to online video games. Their experiences indicate that the effects of online video game addiction can often be just as severe as other addictions.

The results of this study indicate that just like in other addictions, gaming addiction is detrimental on a physical, psychological, and interpersonal level for the addict. Just like in other addictions, they display tolerance, withdrawals, compulsive use, and relapse. The spouses and other family members of these addicts suffer personally as well, and the marriages of addicts are fraught with emotional pain and

stress. Gamer widows are often so tired of fighting that they simply stop shouting and ignore their husband's behavior. If they are not careful the gaming addiction becomes an integral part of the family system.

I believe that the data from this study supports my decision to label this behavior as an "addiction." The effects that the gaming addiction had on the addict, the spouse, and the marital relationship are all strikingly similar to the effects of other types of addictions reported in the literature. With respect to those that might disagree, I believe that getting caught up in the semantics does not serve much of a purpose to researchers or to clients. For all intents and purposes, this phenomenon functions like an addiction. As the old saying goes, if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's probably a duck.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this research that must be discussed as well. One of the major limitations to this study is the fact that my sample was a sample of convenience. All of the participants were self-selecting members of online forums dedicated to gamer widows. Future studies must make efforts to obtain random samples.

Also, the generalizability of this research is limited for a couple of different reasons. One is the small sample size. Though small sample sizes are common in qualitative research, larger, quantitative studies are needed to improve the validity of these findings. In addition, my entire sample was made up of Caucasian females, which also limits the generalizability of these findings. I do not have a definitive answer for the reason my sample turned out the way it did. One possible reason for

the racial disparity is that this is a problem that is not likely to affect minorities as much as Whites for cultural reasons. Or perhaps it is a reflection of how online gaming is a difficult pastime for low socioeconomic status groups to access due to the monthly costs and the need for expensive equipment to facilitate it. A possible reason for the gender disparity is that females who enjoy online gaming might be more likely to be married to males who also enjoy it and are less likely to see it as problematic. Whatever the reasons, future studies should make more efforts to obtain more diverse samples.

Finally, the fact that my data was collected in an online survey provided some benefits, but also created limitations. I was not able to ask immediate follow-up questions to participants' responses, and not every subject participated in member checking.

Despite these limitations, I believe that the study has a tremendous amount of useful information to contribute to the literature. This is the first study of its kind, and therefore it is natural for the results of this study to be limited. I have taken steps to help mitigate the limitations, including member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and internal and external auditing. Therefore I believe that the results of this study are meaningful and relevant to the current discourse on online gaming.

<div align="center">Suggestions for Future Research</div>

Because this is one of the first studies to examine the experiences of gamer widows, more research is needed to confirm these results and explore related areas of interest. First, I believe it is vital that more research on gaming addiction examine the prevalence of co-occurring disorders. It seems like there would be a much higher

likelihood for co-occurring disorders among gamers, but as of yet the research does not exist to confirm this. If this were confirmed, it would also be extremely valuable to explore whether or not these co-occurring disorders were the result of the gaming addiction or whether they simply motivated the gamer to play more often as a way to self-medicate.

Regarding married gamers and their spouses, I believe that more research is needed to examine the state of the marriage prior to the gaming addiction. It would be important to know whether or not married gamer addicts began playing more as a way to escape a troubled relationship, or if the relationship was only troubled after the addiction took root. There would be serious implications for treatment depending on the results.

Finally, I believe that future studies should examine treatment efficacy for gamers and their families who seek treatment for the addiction. The model I proposed has been shown to be useful in other addiction contexts, but it remains to be seen if it would work with gaming addicts.

Conclusion

This study examined the lived experiences of gamer widows. It confirmed much of what we already know about gaming addicts; this addiction affects them negatively in physical, psychological, and interpersonal ways. This study also found that online gaming addiction affects not only the gamers, but the gamer widows and the marital relationship as well. It found that gamer widows are not simply annoyed by their husbands' behavior; they are deeply resentful of his lack of any sort of responsibility in the relationship. They are hurting because they feel lonely, rejected

by the person that was supposed to be their soul mate. They are coping as best as they can, but they might be unwittingly helping to perpetuate the problem by ignoring the problem. But quite importantly, this study reaffirms that gamer widows are not alone, and their plight is real.

Treatment must involve the whole family, not just the identified patient. It must take into account the developmental stage of the family, the coping methods employed, and the prevalence of the gaming addiction in short-term problem-solving, routines, and rituals. Effective treatment will either return the family to a prior, healthy state of functioning, or else reorganize the way the family functions altogether.

This has been quite a journey for me personally and professionally. I have certainly been stretched in terms of my own thinking about this phenomenon. I knew that it was bad, but I guess I did not realize just how deeply this addiction affected families until now. I would like to conclude by thanking the participants of this study: Ann, Arby, Dawn, Jane, JD, Kavik, Kelly, Sassy, Sirena, and unmerry widow. Though I have never seen them face-to-face, I feel as though I have come to know my participants as people, and I am honored to tell their stories. I am incredibly humbled that they were willing to share so much of themselves with me. My hope is that this study will raise practitioners' awareness of this issue, and that more efforts will be made to design and improve treatments for the whole family of the gaming addict.

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APPENDICES

A. ONLINE SOLICITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Message Board Subject Heading: Invitation to participate in a study of gamer widow(er)s

My name is Jason C. Northrup and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Texas Tech University. I am currently collecting data for a study entitled "The Phenomenological Experiences of Spouses of Online Video Game Addicts." While some research exists that examines video game addiction and even Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), virtually no studies exist that focus on the spouses of video game addicts. This study has the potential to help therapists and researchers better understand the experience of being a gamer widow(er) and highlight future areas of research.

If you have been married to a gamer for at least one year and you believe that he or she has an addiction to MMORPGs then you qualify for this study. Participation in this study will require completing a series of open-ended survey questions, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The purpose of this survey is to gain an in-depth understanding of your experiences as a gamer widow(er).

Any information you provide will be non-identifying and will be reviewed only by myself and my research committee: Dr. Sterling Shumway (806.742.5050) Dr. Tom Kimball (806.742.5050), Dr. Nichole Morelock (806.742.5050), and Dr. Tom McGovern (806.743.2820).

If you are interested in participating in the study, please click on this link: http://surveys.ttuhsc.edu/wsb.dll/s/60g54e. If you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of the project, please email me at jason.northrup@ttuhsc.edu or call me at 806.743.2820 ext. 233 and I will be happy to address them.

Although I am unable to provide you with any monetary incentive to participate, my hope is that articulating your experiences as a gamer widow(er) will, in turn, help you to feel more self-aware. Your disclosure will also help future therapists and researchers understand this phenomenon better and provide better treatment to those who seek it.

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Jason C. Northrup, Ph.D. Candidate
LMFT Associate, LPC Intern

B. ONLINE WELCOME PAGE AND CONSENT FORM

The Lived Experiences of Gamer Widows

My name is Jason Northrup and I am a doctoral student in the field of Marriage and Family Therapy. This study will be collecting data for my dissertation. The purpose of this study is for researchers and clinicians to learn more about the lived experiences of the spouses of Massively Multiplayer Online Video Game (MMORPG) addicts. Though the effects of MMORPGs on the gamers themselves are beginning to be explored, virtually no research has focused on the marital relationships of gamers. This qualitative study is designed to be a preliminary step in understanding this unique population. If you have been married to a MMORPG-addict for at least one year, then you qualify to participate in this study.

Please know that the bulk of this survey is qualitative in nature, meaning that responses are not limited to answers that I provide for you. Instead, you have the freedom to be as detailed in your responses as you want. Please do not feel that your responses are ever too long. More detailed responses are better for me as a researcher! **If you are unable to finish the survey in one sitting, you may return to the survey later and finish where you left off, as long as your computer accepts "cookies."**

Your confidentiality is very important to me and I have taken several steps to ensure it. First of all, I will not directly ask you for your names. Instead, I will ask you to provide a pseudonym, or fake name, so that I can better distinguish between participants. Second, no one will review the data besides me and my dissertation committee: Dr. Sterling Shumway, Dr. Thomas Kimball, Dr. Nichole Morelock, and Dr. Tom McGovern. Third, all the data, including email addresses, will be stored on secure servers and password-protected. Any hard copies of the data will be stored in locked filing cabinets.

I will be asking you for a secure email address. This is for two reasons: First, if I need to ask you for clarification regarding some of your responses then I will be able to reach you. Second, I will be sending you my preliminary interpretations of your responses and I want your feedback on whether or not these interpretations accurately reflect your thoughts and feelings. This is a common practice in qualitative research known as "member checking."

Unfortunately I will not be able to provide any financial incentives for participating in my study. My hope is that by participating you will increase your self-awareness and insight into your relationship. Also, by participating you will be helping future researchers and therapists better help people experiencing the same thing you are now.

If you have any questions at all about the study, please feel free to contact me via email at jason.northrup@ttuhsc.edu. I will be more than happy to answer any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Jason C. Northrup, Ph.D. Candidate, LMFTA, LPCI

Consent Statement

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

For the project "The Phenomenological Experience of Spouses of Online Video Game Addicts" (Dr. Sterling Shumway of the Department of Applied and Professional Studies at Texas Tech

University, 806.742.5050), the following summary describes how the elements of consent are explained to subjects.

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in this study of "The Phenomenological Experience of Spouses of Online Video Game Addicts." The study involves a demographic questionnaire, some quantitative items, and an open-ended survey.

BASIS FOR PARTICIPANT SELECTION

You were selected as a potential participant in this study because of your participation in online chat rooms and forums catering to "Gamer Widows."

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of spouses of online video game addicts.

EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES

Participation in this study will require approximately 60 to 90 minutes. There are three main components. To participate in this study, you will first fill out the demographic portion by providing demographic information. Upon completion of the demographic portion, you will answer 15 quantitative items about your experiences as a gamer widow. Upon completion of the quantitative portion, the open-ended survey will begin.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no significant physical risks to participate in this study. Psychological risks are minimal; however, as the procedure may facilitate disclosure of concerns relevant to participants' lives, they may experience feelings of tension or anxiety. Should participants experience excessive emotional discomfort, they are encouraged to withdraw from the study and will also be offered assistance in assessing those emotions or finding a therapist in their area to help assess those emotions.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

1. Contributing to the advancement of knowledge and research regarding the experience of gamer widows.

ASSURANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

1. Access: All data, including email addresses, will only be seen by those persons who are directly involved in conducting the research. All data will be kept in a secure area to which only those working on this project will have access. All confidential information stored on a personal computer or server will be password protected.

2. <u>Recording and storage</u>: Once all data are recorded and entered into a computer, you will be identified only by a code and your provided pseudonym. Your name will never be asked for.

3. <u>Publication</u>: If any of the findings from this study are published, only your pseudonym will be used.

RIGHTS AND INFORMATION ABOUT CONSENT

1. <u>Voluntary participation</u>: You will not lose anything to which you are entitled by refusing to participate.

2. <u>Withdrawal:</u> You may withdraw from the study at any time you choose.

3. <u>New information and unforeseeable risks</u>: If we obtain information during this study that changes our assessment of the risks involved, or if we find any other information that might affect your willingness to continue with the study, we will inform you.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE STUDY

Participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

The investigators will answer any questions you have about the study. You can contact them by calling the Department of Applied and Professional Studies at 806.743.5050. For questions about your rights as a subject or about injuries caused by this research, contact the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Office of Research Services, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 70409. Or you can call 806.742.3884.

By selecting "I consent" below, you are affirming your agreement to participate in this research study. This selection indicates that you are voluntarily making the decision to participate in this study after having read and understood the information presented.

1) Do you understand the above statements and consent to participate in this study?

> ❍ I consent
> ❍ I do not consent

C. DEMOGRAPHIC ITEMS

2) Please enter a pseudonym, or fake name, so that I can distinguish you better (e.g. "Bob S." or "Janet" or "MJ").

_____

3) Please provide a secure email address that I can use to contact you for follow-up questions and member checking.

_____

4) Gender

- ❍ Male
- ❍ Female

5) Age

_____

6) Ethnicity (check all that apply)

- ❑ African American
- ❑ Asian
- ❑ Caucasian
- ❑ Hispanic
- ❑ Native American
- ❑ Other (please specify)

If you selected other please specify:

_____

7) What is your religious affiiliation?

- ❍ Buddhist
- ❍ Catholic
- ❍ Jewish
- ❍ LDS
- ❍ Muslim
- ❍ Protestant
- ❍ I do not affiliate with any religion, but I am a spiritual person
- ❍ I do not affiliate with any religion; I am not a spiritual person
- ❍ Other (please specify)

If you selected other please specify:

_____

8) What is the highest level of education you have attained to date?

- ❍ High school graduate or less
- ❍ Attending/attended college 1 - 3 years
- ❍ Graduated from 4 year college

❍ Postgraduate study or degree

9) Which of the following best describes your present employment status?

❍ Employed full-time (35 hours or more per week)
❍ Employed part-time (less then 35 hours per week)
❍ Not Employed

10) If Employed: What is your current job title or position within your organization (Please be specific. For example: Vice President of Operations, etc.)?

_____

11) What is your marital status?

❍ Single
❍ Married
❍ Separated
❍ Divorced
❍ Widowed

12) How many years have you been married (if less than 1 year enter "0")?

_____

13) What is your spouse's gender?

❍ Male
❍ Female

14) What is your spouse's age?

_____

15) What is your spouse's ethnicity? (check all that apply)

❑ African-American
❑ Asian
❑ Caucasian
❑ Hispanic
❑ Native American
❑ Other (please specify)

If you selected other please specify:

_____

16) What is your *spouse's* religious affiliation?

❍ Bhuddist
❍ Catholic
❍ Hindu
❍ Jewish

❍ LDS
❍ Muslim
❍ Protestant
❍ My spouse does not affiliate with any religion, but is a religious person
❍ My spouse does not affiliate with any religion
❍ Other (please specify)

If you selected other please specify:

_____

17) What is the highest level of education your spouse has attained to date?

❍ High school graduate or less
❍ Attending/attended college 1 - 3 years
❍ Graduated from 4 year college
❍ Postgraduate study or degree

18) Which of the following best describes your *spouse's* present employment status?

❍ Employed full-time (35 hours or more per week)
❍ Employed part-time (less then 35 hours per week)
❍ Not Employed

19) If Your Spouse Is Employed: What is your spouse's current job title or position within his/her organization (Please be specific. For example: Vice President of Operations, etc.)?

_____

20) If known, what MMORPG does your spouse currently play most (e.g. EverQuest, World of Warcraft, Star Wars Galaxies, etc.)?

_____

21) If known, what MMORPG did your spouse play when you first began to realize that it was a problem?

_____

22) How many hours a week would you estimate your spouse plays MMORPGs?

_____

23) Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statement: "I believe my spouse has an addiction to MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games)."

❍ Strongly Agree
❍ Agree
❍ Neutral
❍ Disagree

❍ Strongly Disagree

D. QUALITATIVE ITEMS

24)
For the following questions, please be as thorough and complete in your responses as you can. You have unlimited room for your responses, so please elaborate as much as possible. If you need to take a break, you can return to the survey later and pick up where you left off.

In your own words, please describe your experience as the spouse of an online video game addict.

_____
_____
_____

25) How do you define "addiction" and when did you first realize that your spouse had an *addiction* to MMORPGs?

_____
_____
_____

26) How has the addiction affected *intimacy* (emotional, physical, and otherwise) between you and your spouse?

_____
_____
_____

27) How has the addiction affected communication in the relationship?

_____
_____
_____

28) How has the addiction affected conflict in the relationship?

_____
_____
_____

29) How has the addiction affected you and/or your spouse's *marital roles* (in other words, which one of you takes care of different responsibilities within the household and/or the relationship)?

_____
_____
_____

30) How has the addiction affected feelings of jealousy and/or resentment in the relationship?

_____
_____
_____

31) How has the addiction affected your family's finances?

_____
_____
_____

32) How has the addiction affected you and/or your spouse's social lives?

_____
_____
_____

33) How has the addiction affected your overall stress level?

_____
_____
_____

34) What kind of other developments in the relationship (positive or negative) have come about as a direct or indirect result of the addiction?

_____
_____
_____

35) What has kept you in the relationship so far? What would cause you to leave?

_____
_____
_____

36) How do you feel about Massively Multiplayer Online Games?

_____
_____
_____

E. KANSAT, QUANTITATIVE ITEMS, AND CLOSING STATEMENT

37) How satisfied are you with your marriage?

○ Extremely Dissatisfied
○ Very Dissatisfied
○ Somewhat Dissatisfied
○ Mixed
○ Somewhat Satisfied
○ Very Satisfied
○ Extremely Satisfied

38) How satisfied are you with your partner as a partner?

○ Extremely Dissatisfied
○ Very Dissatisfied
○ Somewhat Dissatisfied
○ Mixed
○ Somewhat Satisfied
○ Very Satisfied
○ Extremely Dissatisfied

39) How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?

○ Extremely Dissatisfied
○ Very Dissatisfied
○ Somewhat Dissatisfied
○ Mixed
○ Somewhat Satisfied
○ Very Satisfied
○ Extremely Satisfied

40) Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

I believe that my spouse would prefer to spend more time playing MMORPGs than with me.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

41) My spouse's MMORPG addiction has improved intimacy between us.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

42) Ever since my spouse developed an MMORPG addiction, I believe that the quality of communication between us has improved.

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

43) My spouse and I fight more often because of his/her MMORPG addiction

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

44) I find that I have to compensate, or "pick up the slack," for my spouse in different ways because of his/her MMORPG addiction.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

45) I experience feelings of resentment towards my spouse because of his/her MMORPG addiction.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

46) Our finances have been negatively affected by my spouse's MMORPG addiction.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

47) My spouse's MMORPG addiction has improved our social lives.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

48) My spouse's MMORPG addiction contributes to feelings of stress in me.

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral

❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly Disagree

49) Overall, my spouse's MMORPG addiction has affected me in a good way.

❍ Strongly Agree
❍ Agree
❍ Neutral
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly Disagree

50) I plan to stay committed to my spouse regardless of his or her gaming addiction.

❍ 1 - Strongly Agree
❍ 2 - Agree
❍ 3 - Neutral
❍ 4 - Disagree
❍ 5 - Strongly Diagree

51) I think Massively Multiplayer Online Games are harmless.

❍ 1 - Strongly Agree
❍ 2 - Agree
❍ 3 - Neutral
❍ 4 - Disagree
❍ 5 - Strongly Disagree

Thank you for your participation in this study. You will be contacted soon via email for follow-up questions. Again, if you have any questions please email me at jason.northrup@ttuhsc.edu.

Sincerely,

Jason C. Northrup, Ph.D. Candidate, LMFTA, LPCI

F. SAMPLE JOURNAL EXERPT

Sterling and I met with Tom and he had some good suggestions for the interview questions I had written so far. One thing he said was that instead of asking a yes/no question and then an open-ended one, I should just reword it so that it is one big open-ended question. This makes a lot of sense, because they could otherwise be tempted to just leave a yes/no and then let that stand as their response. Not good for a qualitative study. He also suggested that I operationalize some of the terms for the participants, such as "intimacy" or "sexuality." I am torn on this because it may be more useful for the participants to define these terms themselves. He suggested too that I have separate questions addressing communication and conflict, instead of including them in the same one. That makes sense, but I don't want to ask too many questions. We also discussed the idea of asking questions regarding children in the family, but not every participant will have kids so we decided to leave these out. Maybe a future study will look more specifically at the impact of the addiction on children, but this is really the first study that I know of that even bothers to assess what damage is done to the family of the MMORPG-addict. Anyway, I have to revise the Methods section to reflect these changes. More writing to do, which is going to be tough because we just had to schedule Kirsten's C-section. It will be hard to focus on writing with all of this going on!

4/23/08

It's been a couple of months since I last wrote. There are 2 main reasons for this. The first is that I'm a new dad! It is a joy and a privilege, but it sure is distracting! The second is that I found out last month that my mom has lung cancer, stage 4, and the prognosis is not good. It has been nearly impossible to focus with these things going

G. IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
Research Services

May 28, 2008

Sterling Shumway
Center for the Study of Addiction and Recovery
Mail Stop: 1210

Regarding: 501371 The Phenomenological Experiences of Spouses of Online Video Game Addicts: Insights for the Therapy Community

Dr. Sterling Shumway:

The Texas Tech University Protection of Human Subjects Committee has approved your proposal referenced above. The approval is effective from May 20, 2008 through April 30, 2009. This expiration date must appear on all of your consent documents.

You will be reminded of the pending expiration approximately eight weeks prior to April 30, 2009 and asked to give updated information about the project. If you request an extension, the proposal on file and the information you provide will be routed for continuing review.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Cogan

Rosemary Cogan, Ph.D., ABPP
Protection of Human Subjects Committee

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
Research Services

June 27, 2008

Sterling Shumway
Center for the Study of Addiction and Recovery
Mail Stop: 1210

Regarding: 501371 The Phenomenological Experiences of Spouses of Online Video Game Addicts: Insights for the Therapy Community

Dr. Sterling Shumway:

The Texas Tech University Protection of Human Subjects Committee has approved the amendment to the project referenced above, requested in your memo of June 23, 2008. The approval is effective until April 30, 2009.

If the project extends beyond three years from its original date of approval, you will be asked to incorporate all approved amendments into a single, complete, up-to-date document.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Cogan, Ph.D., ABPP
Protection of Human Subjects Committee

H. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: ANN

Ann is a 38-year-old Caucasian woman who works as an assistant. She has been married for 19 years to her 40-year-old Caucasian husband who works as in the software industry. Ann states that her husband currently plays two MMORPGs, *World of Warcraft* and *Age of Conan,* though he played *EverQuest* when she first started noticing his gaming becoming problematic. She estimates that he plays 38 hours a week. She strongly believes that he has an addiction to MMORPGs. For her, addiction is defined as something that takes away money as well as time from a person's friends or family. It is also about *choosing* the object of addiction over important relationships. "Addiction is when you choose time with [the addiction] rather than bike rides with family or birthday parties with friends," she writes. She states that she is somewhat dissatisfied with her marriage and her partner, and very dissatisfied with her relationship with him.

Ann believes that MMORPGs affect her husband in many ways. For one thing, she sees him as being more isolated from friends and family. "He enters his own world when playing," she writes. She also indicates that he is obsessed with the game, constantly upgrading and even attending midnight release parties for expansion packs. He goes out of his way to play the game, and she believes that he feels a strong sense of loyalty to his online friends. Also, she notes that he often becomes frustrated or angry, especially with people that take his attention away from the game. She writes, "Our children talk *to* him, not *with* him, and they *might* get an answer, [but] they usually get him mad [emphasis added]." If she attempts to talk about the game as addictive with him, then he denies this, saying that she is jealous of the game and does not understand him.

Clearly, their marital relationship is suffering. Ann states that she no longer feels emotional support from her husband. As far as physical intimacy goes, she states that since the addiction began he only wants it on his terms. She states that he is not even helping out with basic household tasks like laundry, cleaning, or lawn care. She states that it is impossible t to communicate with him while he is playing. Ann believes that her husband's gaming is even taking a toll on their financial well-being. She sees the monthly fees and the costs of expansion sets as outrageous.

Ann believes her husband's relationship with their children is suffering as well. For one thing, the quality of their communication has been negatively impacted. When they attempt to talk to him while he is playing, it is a one-sided affair. He often becomes angry with them. She states that they have lost respect for their father since the addiction started, and do not like him any more. Ann believes that MMORPGs are genius from the manufacturer's standpoint, but "damning for families."

Ann has personally experienced a number of negative emotions due to her husband's addiction. She resents him a great deal and she is embarrassed by his addiction. She has also experienced a tremendous increase in stress. In fact, she reports that she had two TIA (Transient Ischemic Attack) strokes that she attributes to her increased stress. She is afraid that if she tried to leave her husband she would lose money or even her children. She is also afraid of being alone.

Today, Ann simply tries to ignore her husband and the game as much as possible. She has learned to make mental notes of important things to discuss after he is done playing. For now she has decided to stay in the relationship, though this is not an easy choice to make.

I. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: ARBY

Arby is a 50-year-old Caucasian woman who stays at home. She takes care of one of her children, who is autistic. She has been married for 16 years to a 50-year-old Caucasian man who works full-time as the manager of a yacht club. Unlike Arby, who is Jewish, he does not claim to affiliate with any religion or spirituality. Arby estimates that he plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW) 60 hours a week. He started playing over five years ago, also playing the games *Savage* and *Guild Wars*. She strongly believes that he has an addiction to MMORPGs. For Arby, an addiction means that he has made gaming his only priority, beyond even sleep, work, and family.

Arby states that she began to realize that he had an addiction about five years ago. He began playing the game as something to do while recovering from debilitating back surgeries. Arby helped him through his recovery and through withdrawals from pain medication, and she says that prior to his gaming they were close and intimate and he was attentive and helpful. When he started playing, however, he quickly became absorbed. Gaming became his main priority. He began sleeping only a couple of hours a day to facilitate longer hours of game play. His work ethic began to suffer, and his productivity at work began to decline, as did his income. At one time he had an in-game online affair with a fellow gamer's wife (who also played), though this relationship eventually ended. On one occasion following a bad argument, he was able to go for two weeks without playing and was "good, no great," but he relapsed and continues to play long hours.

Arby's husband has become increasingly isolated within his family. He hardly interacts with his children any more. Now they no longer turn to him for help. His

oldest daughter no longer speaks to him unless she is spoken to. Arby's oldest son, who has considered her husband to be a father figure in the past (they are not biologically related) as lost all respect for this man. He has an autistic son who Arby has worked with (without help from her husband) to help become high-functioning. This son has actually asked Arby why she married a man who loves his computer more than his family. Their younger son plays the game, but Arby limits his time. When he plays with his father, he is often yelled at for making mistakes. Only the couple's youngest daughter seems to have any affection for this man. She tells him she loves him, and his only response is a sing-song "You do?" As far as friends go, he has never been very extroverted, socializing only with Arby's friends. Now he does not even do that.

Arby's relationship with her husband has suffered in numerous ways. As mentioned earlier, the family's finances have taken a severe hit. "[He] pays all bills late [and] gets monthly calls from creditors" Arby says. Initially, she argued with him about his gaming. Now there is no longer any conflict. In fact, there is hardly any communication at all. "There is no communication other than 'hello' when he gets home from work and 'bye' when he leaves," she says. There is also a decline in intimacy, including physical intimacy. She says there is "no kissing, hugs (even with [the] children), no sex, not even innuendo." Perhaps the most noticeable difference in the relationship is the inequitable division of labor within the household that has resulted from her husband's gaming. She says he has "no household role, [e.g.] lawn care, home repairs, [he] walks over bags of trash instead of taking [them] to [the] cans

when leaving home, [he] only does home repairs when [an emergency, such as] leaks."

Arby feels a myriad of negative emotions. She feels resentment towards her husband, and significant stress. She feels bitter about the relationship. "It is constant revulsion, disappointment, loneliness, and fear," she says. And she hates MMORPGs.. She would like to see software developed that would limit a person's playing time to a few hours a day, but she believes that this will never happen. She would like to leave, but thus far she remains in this relationship.

J. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: DAWN

Dawn is a 28-year-old Caucasian female who works full-time as a controller/treasurer. She does not claim any religious or spiritual affiliation. She has been married for six years to her 29-year-old Caucasian husband, who works part-time as a registered nurse. She says that he also claims no religious or spiritual affiliation. Dawn estimates that her husband plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* for about 45 hours a week. She came to the conclusion in the last few months that he is addicted to online gaming. Dawn admits that she does not know what the criteria of a formal definition of addiction would include, but she defines it as something that involves a consuming priority. "I would define it as something that takes over your life," she says, "something that the addict sees as more important than anything else in life and sacrifices anything to get/do more of the addictive behavior or substance."

Dawn says that her husband's gaming addiction causes him to be largely absent from her life in an emotional sense. "In many respects, being the spouse of a gaming addict is like not being married at all," she says, "That is why we refer to ourselves as widows. While playing the game, your spouse is there physically but not mentally or emotionally." His gaming addiction requires a tremendous time commitment. Dawn is sure that his long hours sitting in front of the computer have had a negative impact on his health as he never exercises any more or goes on walks with her in the evening as they used to. His focus on gaming has also at times led to him neglecting other commitments, such as social engagements, family outings, or even taking care of their 3-year-old son at home. When life does intrude on his gaming, he sometimes becomes angry, especially when the intrusion involves their son. "My husband is too smart to snap at me while he is playing, he knows I would

not put up with that for a second," she writes, "But he does snap at our son and constantly complains that our THREE YEAR OLD can't play by himself for very long. Duh!!" Dawn says that this anger is not like her husband, and that he has changed in other ways as well. At one time she felt confident that his family was his main priority. Now, if given an ultimatum, she is not sure which he would choose. She has caught him lying about how much time he played when he was supposed to be watching their son, and he has even called in sick to work to play more. She states that he lives in denial about the amount of time he plays and the effects it has on their family. He does not seem to be aware of the fact that he is in danger of losing his wife and son.

Dawn's husband's addiction has negatively impacted their relationship in numerous ways. For instance, she feels that his gaming has indirectly contributed to missed financial opportunities for their family. "He could easily work more hours, take care of our son more which would reduce daycare expenses or do more housework which would mean we no longer need to pay for a housekeeper," she says. Also, they rarely do anything together anymore; he even eats at his computer. Communication between them has sharply declined. Despite the fact that she works full-time and he works part-time, she still does the bulk of the housework and childcare. Initially, they used to argue about this and other consequences of his gaming, but not anymore. "In some ways we are beyond conflict," she says, "I can't have a fight every single day." Physical intimacy has declined as well. She says that part of the problem is that his gaming often means that he does not go to bed when she does. But a more significant reason for this is the fact that she does not want to be

physically intimate with him. For one thing she does not want "to feel like a toy or a puppy that is just waiting around for the moment he decides he has time to spend with me." For another thing, she says, "I am angry and frustrated all of the time and I feel like if I was intimate with him, I would be validating or rewarding his horrendous behavior." Emotional intimacy is also suffering. Part of the problem is the lack of communication. "How can you have emotional intimacy with someone that you barely talk to?" she asks. But she admits that her feelings about his gaming make it difficult for her to allow herself to be emotionally intimate with him. "I think I have built a wall between us so that even when we are talking, I always have anger and resentment for the game hovering in my mind," she writes.

Dawn has been personally emotionally impacted in a number of ways. Anger and resentment are just the beginning of her emotions. She also feels lonely and hurt by her husband's actions. "It is heartbreaking to constantly have someone you love choose a video game over you," she writes. She also feels hopeless, as if she is stuck in a lose-lose scenario; she believes that she must choose to either stay in her current predicament, married to a man addicted to a video game and unlikely to change any time soon, or take her son and leave her husband. She is also more stressed out for several reasons, including the work that she has to do to make up for her husband and the constant emotional strain she experiences. She is also concerned about the effects that her husband's gaming must have on their son. "It can't be good to see your dad ignore you for hours on end while staring blankly at a computer screen," she writes. While Dawn believes that nothing positive has come from her husband's gaming addiction, she does not blame the games themselves. "In the Gamer Widow groups,

we have a heated discussion about whether to hate the players or hate the game. I am on the side that the game itself is not the problem," she writes, "Alcohol and gambling don't cause everyone to be addicted and we shouldn't ban them just because a few people do get addicted."

Dawn believes that she has to make a choice on whether or not to stay in this relationship soon. So far she has stayed in the relationship for many reasons. She stays for the love of the man that she married. "I miss my best friend and hope he is still in there somewhere just waiting to wake up," she says. If he is there, she wants to help him overcome his addiction. She also stays out of a sense of commitment to the marriage and for the sake of stability for their son. She also admits that she is afraid of leaving. But she knows that she will leave if her husband makes no efforts to change. She will also leave if his neglect ever puts their son in danger or if he ever becomes verbally abusive. She would also leave if he ever had an online affair with another gamer. She plans to issue him an ultimatum to him soon and she is nervous about it. She has been tracking the amount of time he plays and will write him a letter about the effects his gaming has had on the family. Armed with these facts, she will give him a choice: "He either stops playing, cuts down his time significantly (if he can, which I doubt) or I take our son and leave," she says. At this point, she does not know what his decision will be.

K. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: JANE

Jane is a 31-year-old Caucasian woman who is a stay-at-home mother as well as an independent distributor. She has been married for 12 years to her 36-year-old Caucasian husband who works in technical support and data recovery. They have two boys, ages 5 and 12. Jane says that her husband currently plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft,* though he played *Tribes* when she first started noticing his playing was problematic 10 years ago. She estimates that he currently plays around 35 hours a week, though she also states that he has cut down his gaming time. She strongly believes that her husband has an addiction to online gaming. For her, addiction involves making something a priority over other aspects of one's life such as eating, sleeping, family, etc. It is also something that causes one to lose perspective, such as when one does not realize how much they are playing the game.

Jane says that this addiction has affected their relationship in many ways. Their social lives have declined dramatically, as he spends most of his time playing and she is too embarrassed to have to tell people why he is not coming to social events. Even church attendance was affected. Jane writes, "We even stopped going to church for a while because I couldn't answer the questions about where my husband was (he was sleeping because he stayed up all night gaming)." Financially, the gaming has become somewhat of a burden as he has purchased an expensive laptop to facilitate playing, as well as several headsets and keyboards, which he often breaks in fits of rage when he is losing. He will not tell her how much he spends on the game itself. Also, she used to work at night, but quit her job because he was not helping out with any of the housework or supervising their children. He spends most of his time

playing the game, which has lead to inequitable roles in the house; she does almost all the housework and childrearing.

Emotionally they have become distant and he does not notice when she needs his support. There is often tension and conflict in the home, which she sees as directly tied to his game play. They rarely discuss important matters any more because of his long hours playing the game. Their spiritual intimacy is non-existent, as they no longer pray together. The only type of intimacy that he seems to be somewhat interested in is physical intimacy, but even this comes second to his game playing. Jane knows that this is not right, but is willing to accept it because of the brief connection with her husband it affords her. She writes, "Our physical intimacy is okay because we are still intimate on a regular basis, but it revolves around his playing time. I'm just so excited to get attention from him that I rarely decline, even if I'm exhausted. I crave that connection to him because it seems to be all that's left."

For Jane, gamer widowhood is emotionally very difficult. She is often afraid of her spouse's rage when he is losing; he often shouts at her and their children, calling them names. She feels rejected by him and has increased her antidepressant medication dosage to cope with the sadness that this causes. She is often embarrassed when she has to make excuses for his absences. She is especially embarrassed when they find out the real reasons. She says that their neighbors "know why [my husband does not spend with them anymore] and like to make jokes about it, but it hurts and is humiliating." She struggles with feelings of resentment towards her husband, his gaming friends, and even the game itself. She describes her resentment towards the

game, saying it is like how "families of alcoholics hate alcohol and families of drug addicts hate drugs."

The addiction is not only difficult for Jane to endure, but for her children as well. When he is supposed to be watching the children, they are often neglected. He will tell them to watch television so they will be quiet. Their dinner is served in front of the television. They are told to go to bed without a bedtime story. They do not understand why their father does not spend time with them. They feel rejected and have begun attending therapy sessions to deal with the emotional pain and the resulting behavioral problems.

Jane believes her husband has been directly affected by his gaming. He does not seem to understand or care about the emotional pain his addiction is causing. His priority seems to be the game and his friends who play with him. He will cancel plans to play and even call in sick to work. He is also dishonest with Jane, telling her he is going to the computer to "check something" and then proceeding to play. She says that he will "let" her "sleep in," though Jane believes he really just wants to be able to play without being nagged. Jane admits that she often becomes angry when he prioritizes the game over their family, but she believes that her husband uses the resulting emotional distance to justify him playing more. "In my opinion [he distances emotionally] so that he can blame me for playing and not feel bad," she writes.

Jane has stayed in the relationship so far for a few different reasons. One is that her Catholic faith discourages divorce. Another is that she does not want to break up her family because she believes her children would suffer through that. Finally,

her husband has agreed to go to therapy with the family and she is hopeful that this will have a lasting impact. She says that the therapy has been helpful, but that her husband seems to take one step forward and two steps back. She believes that it is important that someone outside the family be able to point out the severity of what he is doing. Though she intends to tough things out, she admits that she has seriously considered leaving her husband because the gaming is becoming too much.

L. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: JD

JD is a 24-year-old Caucasian woman who does not subscribe to any particular religion, but considers herself a spiritual person. She works full-time as a job-coordinator. Her husband is a 25-year-old Caucasian man who, like his wife, does not participate in any one religion but still considers himself to be spiritual. He works full-time in the military. JD estimates that her husband plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* approximately 30 hours a week. She believes that her husband is addicted to this MMORPG. For her, the term "addiction" includes being obsessed with an activity, losing touch with reality, and ignoring others around you and the effects the activity has on others.

JD has watched her husband be affected by his gaming in various ways. For one, he does not socialize very much outside of his circle of gamer friends. This includes his next-door neighbor, who welcomes him over to his house to play at all hours of the night. "One night I woke up at 4 a.m. to find that my hubby was not home and next door [playing]," writes JD, "Man was I pissed." This incident also highlights the skewed priorities that JD's husband has, as he was willing to sneak out of the house in the middle of the night to go play.

The marital relationship has also been affected in numerous ways. For one thing, they hardly spend any time together any more. Even in those few instances in which he is not playing, spending time together is difficult. "When he actually decides to get off and spend time with me, he asks what I want to do, and I say I don't know," writes JD, "Sometimes I suggest the Wii or a movie, but mostly I don't know because I am so used to him playing that I don't [know] what to do with him." Socializing also takes place separately. While he primarily interacts with gamer

friends, she interacts with others. This is limited, however, because her husband's job requires them to move often. The intimacy between them has also suffered. On an emotional level, JD finds it difficult to share her with him often. They talk occasionally, but usually about superficial things. On a physical level, sexual intimacy has all but disappeared. "We cuddle and kiss," she says, "but sexual desire is gone." In addition, conflict between them has escalated as a result of the gaming. She says that smaller issues become much more important because of the fact that he is gaming. "[The addiction] is the conflict in our marriage. It makes little unimportant things a big deal, like the socks being on the floor." she says, "[It] pisses me off and I yell at him; they are there because he is playing." This example also illustrates how JD believes that she is overcompensating for his lack of work around the house. "He does a few things, but not much and if it does get done it is half-ass or takes weeks to do," she says. Financially, she says that his gaming has not affected them too badly. While he claims it is cheaper than buying a console game each month, she does not believe him. But in her mind the financial cost is still reasonable.

JD has been personally affected in a number of ways. She feels much resentment towards her husband and the game. "When he actually is paying me some attention I'm just supposed to magically be happy, like I am supposed to be thankful or something," she says. "He shows me affection now and then, but then it's hard for me to reciprocate, since I have a lot of resentment built up inside." While she says she is not jealous of the game itself, she does hate it and feels that these games are a menace to society. She does worry that he will enter an inappropriate relationship with a female gamer, though. She feels angry, stressed, and frustrated with her

husband. She also feels emotionally unsupported by him. She says, "A fellow widow hit it right on the head…He's a good man. He works really hard...brings home a nice paycheck, etc., and I'm quite sure he loves me, but basically I'm gettin' nothing other than that." At times she feels guilty, as if it were her fault that she could not entertain him enough. Most of the time, however, she blames the game for their marital problems. She often feels regret for entering into this relationship in the first place. "I also feel that I should have known better [than] to fall in love [with him]," she says, "I knew he played before we married, even before we started dating, but at the time I had never known anyone that played WoW before, how could I have known that this was to be how my life would go. I knew that marrying him, I would need support from others, but for him being in the Army, not for a video game." She is so disappointed with her relationship that she is afraid to have children with her husband. "I want kids badly, but not if he will ignore them too," she says.

So far JD has stayed in the relationship because she loves her husband. She has hope that the hours he spends gaming will reduce. "I know he can not play, I have seen it," she says. In fact, they have made plans to reduce his gaming. They have designed a schedule for his gaming that is acceptable to both of them. If he is unable to follow this schedule, then JD plans to leave the relationship. "I love him and want him," she says, "but at what cost, my sanity?"

M. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: KAVIK

Kavik is a 29-year-old Caucasian female who currently stays home to care for her 9-month-old son. She does not affiliate with any religion or spirituality. She has been married for the past 11 years to a 30-year-old Caucasian man who works as a software engineer. Kavik says that he currently plays the MMORPG *Age of Conan* for 30 hours a week, though he played the game *EverQuest* when she began to notice his gaming becoming problematic. She believes that her husband has developed an addiction to online gaming. For her, this means that her husband feels compelled to play the game despite the adverse effects it has on his life (e.g. work) and their relationship. Kavik describes these problematic effects as cyclical, at times worse than others.

Kavik's husband's addiction to MMORPGs has affected their relationship in numerous ways. Their communication has greatly suffered, as Kavik is frequently ignored when she tries to talk to him when he is playing. She finds herself repeating herself often, which often creates an angry response in her husband. She feels that they do not talk as much any more because "it is hard to communicate with someone who is plugged into headphones and doesn't listen, ignores you or can't hear you." Her husband's absorption into the game also makes it difficult to spend time together just to do fun activities together or with others. She admits that having a baby recently has hurt their social lives as well, and that her husband has never been the social type. But she also states that she has to schedule times for him to play the MMORPG separately from time for them to go out on the weekend in order for them to have any time together at all.

Kavik states that the intimacy between her and her husband has suffered as well. She states that they have sex much less often than they used to, as he seems to have substituted gaming for sexual intimacy with Kavik. When she confronted him on this, he said that it was because he was trying to give her space since she had recently had a baby. She worries that this is not the whole truth, though. She also says that he is emotionally distant from her. Taking the place of this intimacy is increased conflict between them and an imbalance in marital roles. Kavik states that she has to compensate for his lack of participation in common household duties and childcare. The only aspect of their relationship that does not appear to be affected by the gaming is their finances. However, she believes that "if he was not playing a MMORPG he would be playing a single player game, which is probably more expensive the way he goes through them!"

Kavik says that her husband has always been an introvert and is afraid to try gambling because he believes he may become addicted to it. She says that he invests an extraordinary amount of time into the game. She states that he plays all hours of the night, even during weeknights. The game seems to be his main priority. He will not stop playing when she needs his help with their baby, and has even called in sick to work to play more. Unless she tells him they will be participating in some organized event on the weekend, he will likely be playing the game. She says that he resents her, however, whenever she prohibits him from playing. When he is playing, he seems to completely ignore her, instead devoting his attention to other members of his guild. He feels obligated to participate in raids. He becomes angry easily when she

tries to communicate with him and defensive when she suggests that his gaming is problematic. Sometimes she has to threaten to physically turn off the computer.

Obviously, Kavik feels frustrated being the partner of a MMORPG addict. It is difficult to spend time with her spouse. Part of this frustration comes from the fact it seems unfair to her that he devotes so much time to his hobby when she is unable to do the same because of the baby. She admits that before the baby it was not so bad, as she used the times he was playing to do other things she wanted to do by herself. Now, she states that "it can also be lonely, especially at the moment as I have a 9 month old son and don't get to talk to many people during the day, and then my husband plays in the evening." She says that her stress level has increased as a result of her husband's gaming. She reports having some pre-existing anxiety, "which has been exacerbated by having the baby and being at home by myself all day." Kavik says that she is jealous of the time and energy gaming takes from her husband, but does not have negative feelings towards MMORPGs themselves. Instead, she sees the constant competition within the games as the problem. "I think the idea of playing with other people is not bad in itself, but I find the intensity and competition and need to keep up with others (which facilitates the non-stop playing) to be a problem."

Kavik stays in the relationship because despite the problems from the gaming, she still sees many positive in her husband and their relationship. She still loves him and states that when he is not gaming, they have a lot of fun. She states that he is a "really nice guy" and is good with her dogs, "which are my hobby." She implies that there is some level of flexibility with his gaming. Recently he has agreed to take a couple of nights a week off from gaming. However, if this flexibility decreased it

could mean the end of the relationship. "If he was completely inflexible with his gaming and with my activities and did not help out with the baby it would be difficult to stay."

N. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: KELLY

Kelly is a 24-year-old Caucasian female who works as a math and science teacher. She is married to a 28-year-old Caucasian man who works part-time assisting others with computer problems. He is also attending college. Kelly estimates that her husband plays the game *EverQuest* for about 50 hours a week. Though she admits that she does not know much about MMORPGs as she has very little interest in them, she strongly believes that her husband has an addiction to them. She believes that an addiction involves an element of compulsion as well as significant time investment, saying it is "an unquenchable desire to something all the time." She compares MMORPG addiction to chemical addictions. "It's just as bad as illegal drugs…maybe more so because there isn't a lot of physical evidence on the addiction," she writes.

According to Kelly, this addiction has affected her husband in numerous ways.
She first started noticing that the gaming was becoming problematic when she saw that he paid more attention to the game than to her. She says that they would sit on opposite ends of their couch and "he would be typing away at the computer, and I'd be trying to talk to him...or watch a movie with him, or anything with him...and he would have no desire [to reciprocate]." Kelly has tried to point out that the gaming is a problem, but he does not seem to understand or agree with this assertion. She believes that the game is her husband's main priority, as their lives usually revolve around his playing time. She describes in one example how going to bed together and joint prayer have both taken a back seat to the game. "I usually go to bed before him," she writes, "and if I want him to go to bed and pray with me, I find myself in our room waiting, and waiting, and waiting for him to 'get to a stopping point.'" She

states that her husband has never really been a "social person," but feels very close to his online gaming friends. He has played the game for several years and says it is the one thing that makes him happy.

These kinds of statements fuel all kinds of negative feelings in Kelly. Of course, she is jealous of the fact that her husband states that the game—not her—is the one thing that brings him joy. Her husband's closeness with his online gaming friends concerns her, and she is scared for their safety. In her mind, they do not really know them, and yet he has let them in to their home. She hates the game and sees it as something that is destroying their marriage, though most people do not know the depth of her disdain. "Only a handful of people know my hatred for this game...and not even the fullest extent," she writes. She knows that their relationship could be so much more, but she feels that her husband has rejected her for the game. This saddens and frustrates her, especially his lack of participation in day-to-day responsibilities. "It's like I'm dog paddling keeping the tip of my nose barely out of the water," she writes. Her frustration has impacted her desire to build a family with him. She explains, "We don't have children. At this point in time, I can't bear to even entertain that thought...because right now, I feel like I would do it all myself...because he can't peel himself away from the game to help out."

The imbalance of marital roles is only one aspect of their relationship that has been hurt by Kelly's husband's addiction. Their disagreement on whether the game is problematic has also been the source of many conflicts. They rarely communicate about important matters face-to-face. "I can communicate with him more through instant messages while we're sitting next to each other on the couch," she writes.

There is hardly any emotional intimacy between them, as she admits that she stonewalls him because she feels rejected. In response, he retreats further into the game, where he can be "happy." The lack of emotional intimacy is further compounded by a lack of physical intimacy. "Sex just never fits in the [*EverQuest*] time table. It's not a 'good time' in the game. So sex...nope...don't have it!" she writes. In fact, the two hardly ever share any joint activities any more. The only area of their relationship that seems relatively unaffected by the gaming is their finances, as the costs have been accounted for in their budget.

Despite their problems, Kelly says that she loves her husband. This love has kept her in the relationship so far. As have her Quaker religious convictions. "My religion really presses on you how important it is to save your marriage. Divorce is never an option unless with marital unfaithfulness," she writes. She admits, however, that her husband's addiction could be conceptualized as an emotional affair. If it progresses into something worse, she is not sure how long her commitment will last. "I'm just not sure at this point," she says. There is hope, however. After taking the online survey, Kelly says that she and her husband had a talk about things that bothered them about the relationship. She brought up his gaming, telling him that the gaming was not the problem, but the amount of time spent playing was. They have agreed to schedule one night a week to enjoy a hobby together. Communication has improved somewhat, but she still worries for their future. They are about to move into a bigger house and will have an office where the computers will be kept. She writes, "If we have computers in a special 'office' room, will I ever see my husband? Only time will tell."

O. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: SASSY

Sassy is a 45-year-old Caucasian woman who does not subscribe to any particular religion, but considers herself to be a spiritual person. She works part-time as a supervisor's assistant. She has been married for 16 years to her husband, a Caucasian male who, like Sassy, does not subscribe to any one religion but considers himself spiritual. He works full-time as a warehouse worker. He started gaming while recovering from shoulder surgery. Now, Sassy estimates that he plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* about 55 hours a week. She strongly believes that he is addicted to online gaming. To her, addiction means not being able to stop oneself from doing something, needing that thing and craving it. When one cannot have it, one gets angry.

Sassy has witnessed her husband's gaming affect him in numerous ways. She believes that he has withdrawn from friends and family, choosing instead to engage in online game play. He will not even answer the phone if he is gaming. She believes that he has made the game his top priority. "The game is his life," she says. "It is all he does and wants to do." This is evidenced by the time that he commits to the game. "On his days off as soon as he wakes up he is online until he goes to bed," she says. "I will leave and he is sitting in his chair playing and when I get home he is in the same place." She believes that he is preoccupied with the game, and that his personality has changed as a result of his gaming. "He has turned into a different person that I no longer relate to," she says. Part of this change includes a decline in his work ethic. "I have to fight with him to mow the lawn or any house chores," she says. "He always used to enjoy them before." He has also developed a bad temper. "He is angry all the time and snaps at me and the family," she writes.

The marital relationship between Sassy and her husband has also suffered. Conflict between them has escalated, and it is often over the game or the effects of his gaming. Emotional intimacy between them has greatly declined, and physical affection is practically dead. "He used to be a kissy-huggy person," she writes. "He no longer touches me." Communication is also at a standstill. "He talks to his computer more than he does me," she says. He may not even realize these effects, however. Sassy writes, "I have left home and not told him and he doesn't even know I left." They no longer enjoy joint social activities. Sassy will go out to spend time with family and friends, but her husband usually chooses to stay at home. "I miss him and wish he would go, but I am not going to sit here and be ignored and watch him [play] that game," she writes. The distribution of household labor has also become inequitable. "He no longer will help out [until] I blow up and then he [does] things fast and [sloppy] to get back to his game," she says. Her husband's gaming has even created indirect financial difficulties for the couple. "He has been late on payments because he forgets to pay them because he is online playing WoW," she writes.

Sassy feels stressed out by her husband's gaming. She says that she used to be an easy-going person, but now she is stressed all the time. She resents her husband and the game, but does not feel jealousy towards the game. She says that she has become much more irritable as a result of this addiction. She hates MMORPGs and her husband's gaming, but she is staying in the relationship now for financial reasons. "We owe too much debt," she says. She says she would leave, however, if her husband ever became physically violent with her. She believes that this will happen one day, but for now she chooses to remain in the relationship.

P. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: SIRENA

Sirena is a 40-year-old Caucasian female who identifies herself as Protestant. She works full-time as a teacher. She has been married 14 years to her 40-year-old Caucasian husband, who also identifies himself as Protestant. He works full-time in the military. Sirena estimates that he plays the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* approximately 30 hours a week. She believes that he is addicted to gaming. She believes that addiction involves investing unhealthy amounts of time into an activity and being obsessed with it, even when not doing it. Her husband has been gaming for over two years, and she first believed that he was addicted three or four months after he started.

This addiction has affected her husband in various ways. In addition to the considerable time he has invested into the game, Sirena says that he has a short temper. She states that if she tries to bring up the game, he avoids her by leaving and going to his work site (which is two hours away), staying there until he calms down. "The longest we have gone is four days," she says. "We didn't see each other or speak for that time all because of his gaming." Sirena also states that her husband's social life is all but nonexistent, though she admits that he might be trying to be a bit more social since she pointed this fact out to him in December 2007.

The marital relationship has also suffered. The couple hardly interacts any more. "I feel as though my husband is just a warm body sitting on the sofa," she says. They lead separate social lives, with Sirena staying active in her church and community while her husband stays home to play. When they do interact they are likely to argue. This becomes a vicious cycle for them. "We've had arguments upon arguments," she says. "Things will get better for a couple of days, once he has quit

pouting. Then it's right back at it." Communication in general has decreased. "I never start a conversation with him while he is playing," she says. "He would not hear most of it." While the couple's physical intimacy has not suffered, their emotional intimacy has been negatively impacted. Sirena also feels that household duties have become inequitable, with the majority of work falling to her. "I work full time then come home and work until I go to bed," she writes. Gaming has also put a strain on the couple's finances. "I can't even begin to count how much money we have spent on WoW or because of WoW," she states. "I can say this....we would be much better off financially if my husband had never heard of WoW."

Sirena has been impacted emotionally by her husband's gaming addiction. She is concerned about the example that her husband is setting for their children. She is often angry and resentful, though she tends to hide these emotions. When she does express them, however, they overflow. She feels lonely and bored by her husband's lack of presence, so she often finds herself spending more time on the internet to find things to do. She is tired of her husband's gaming habits, and believes that nothing good has come them. She does not blame the games themselves, though. She sees that they can be entertaining, but she also recognizes that they are designed to make people want to play more. For this reason, she does not play them herself.

Sirena is not completely sure why she has stayed in the relationship, other than that the thought of being a single parent scares her. She is also not sure what it would take for her to leave. She says that it would not take much at this point, though. She has had enough.

Q. TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION: UNMERRY WIDOW

Unmerry widow is a 46-year-old Caucasian woman who identifies as not religious, but spiritual. She is not employed, but stays at home to care for her children. She says that they have become her whole life, especially after she lost her oldest in a car accident. She has been married for 10 years to her 40-year-old Caucasian husband who is not religious either. He works full time as a lab technician. Unmerry widow estimates that he plays the MMORPG *EverQuest* approximately 35 hours a week. He started playing another MMORPG five years ago called *Baulder's Gate,* and at the time unmerry widow hoped that he was just going through a phase that he would snap out of. That has not happened, and now she strongly believes that her husband has an addiction to gaming. She defines addiction as involving obsession with something and prioritizing it to the point where nothing else in life matters.

Unmerry widow's husband has been affected by this addiction in numerous ways. He seems to prioritize this game above everything else. Unmerry widow does not believe that he cares that he his relationships with family members, including their children, are being strained. "He has alienated his kids because he would rather play a game than spend time with them," she writes. The relationship between her husband and their children is now characterized by conflict. Even so, she says that he refuses to admit that his gaming is a problem for him.

The marital relationship has also been strained. The couple's social life is practically non-existent now, other than occasional trips to the grocery store together. Household roles have become inequitable, as he no longer participates in childcare nor chores he used to do (e.g. mowing the lawn or shoveling snow) so that he can focus on his gaming. Intimacy has dwindled on every level. There is no emotional

intimacy or communication for that matter. "I talk, and he sits at the computer and grunts out the obligatory "uh huh" once in a while," she writes. Physical intimacy has also declined, though unmerry widow admits she has a role in this. "I refuse a quickie, just so he can hurry and get back on the game," she says. Conflict has intensified between them, and she admits that she is contemplating divorce now. The only aspect of their joint lives that seems relatively unaffected is their finances.

Unmerry widow has been impacted emotionally by her husband's addiction. She feels lonely from her husband's lack of presence, and exhausted from overcompensating for him. She feels resentment towards her husband and jealous of "normal" couples who do not have to deal with gaming addictions. Her stress level has increased and she feels angry. "I can not even look at his computer and see the characters logged on without feeling anger, rage and resentment," she writes. She feels so strongly about the danger of gaming addiction that she believes formal steps should be taken to protect individuals and families. "I believe that [MMORPGs] should carry warning labels, just like tobacco and alcohol," she writes. Despite her feelings, she has stayed in the marriage so far because of the effect it would have on her kids, who are her main concern now. She also admits that it would be difficult to support herself if she were to leave, because she has spent her entire adult life out of the workforce and therefore has no job skills.