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24/02/2007 16:56 - (SA)

When it becomes more than just a game . . .

IT is easy to succumb to another world when it is right in front of you, when you can be the hero, control the characters and wield your power with a mere press of a button.

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At times, reality may even fade away to the realm of the dream world, replaced by the screen, the joysticks and game.

Though Jimmy Ledwaba is only 11 years old, he has already been lured into this world.

He got the Sony Playstation II for his ninth birthday and he admits to playing for hours at a time. "My mum says I spend the whole day playing."

If someone has to talk to him while he is playing, he says he does answer them, but carries on playing.

His favourite game is wrestling: Smack Down versus Raw.

Sihle Nkosi's* favourite is Fifa 2007. He was also nine years old when he got his Sony Playstation. Now the 12-year-old boy plays for two to three hours at a time, when he has it.

There have been a few times when he was so engrossed in the game at hand that he skipped supper and ate only after the game was over.

His mother, Grace Nkosi* says that she bought the game because he was quite bored when they moved from Daveyton to a quieter area in Tshwane. "I was trying to address his boredom; after all he is the only boy in a house with three girls."

She says he does focus a lot on his games, playing for long hours, but she discourages it and interrupts when she can.

"Sometimes I have to repeat myself when he is playing games. At other times I resort to shouting at him."

And even though he enjoys playing the video game of soccer, he plays it in real life too. In that way he gets to play in sunshine with real friends instead of just being hunched over a console.

According to Dr Ian Opperman, a clinical psychologist based in Kensington, it must be stressed that "a little bit of fun playing computer games does no harm, as long as it is controlled and time limited".

Nkosi says one of the rules in her household is not playing any Playstation during the week. The frequency of use is a very fine line between being a fan and an addict.

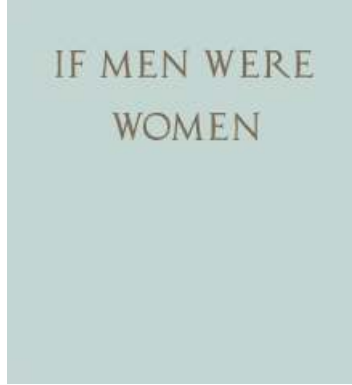
Tarun Javer totally immerses himself in this world on certain weekends. There are even times when he has spent the entire night playing games. "But it only happens about once a month," says the 22-year-old IT technician, who sometimes plays for three to four hours at a go.

Opperman says that any addiction can only occur through use. "Regular and unbalanced playing of games can eventually become an addiction."

In general, people more prone to addictions, according to research, are those who have low self-esteem and struggle to form and maintain relationships and therefore experience social isolation.

"Research shows that the overwhelmingly majority of video game addicts are males under 30," says Opperman.

He says that according to the Centre for On-line Addiction, warning signs include playing for increased amounts of time, thinking about gaming during other activities, gaming to escape from real-life problems such as anxiety or depression, lying to friends and family to conceal gaming and feeling irritable when trying to cut down gaming.



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But there is a brighter side to playing games as well. "Children who play computer games develop computer skills and games are a way to get children interested in computers," says Opperman.

This is the case with Javer, who was introduced to games when he was six years old.

Back then, he had the Nintendo, only to progress to the Sega 16 Bit, then to the Sony Playstation I, and when that became outdated he got the Sony Playstation II.

When he was a student, he says it was a big distraction from his studies, and now that he is working in IT, he has the time to play a bit more.

Opperman adds that there are games that are not violent and can be used in a constructive and educational way.

All the players – Javer, Sihle and Ledwaba – say the main reason for playing is entertainment.

And entertained they shall be. No matter how old they seem to be, boys and their toys are static across time.

- * Not their real names

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