



# Can online games be as addictive as heroin?

After a mother is punished by the courts for neglecting her children to play a fantasy computer game for 22 hours a day, that's the question being asked by more and more experts

Young Person Technology Addiction Service at the Capio Nightingale Hospital in Central London, this pattern of behaviour is typical.

'The adolescent world is intensely pressured, and gaming can offer sanctuary,' he says. 'Studying for your GCSEs or working on a relationship with someone is a fundamentally slow process. Video games — especially online ones like World Of Warcraft — offer an opportunity to acquire prestige and success relatively quickly. Real life becomes dull in comparison.'

Further, the online aspect of the games means that players are able to communicate with each other to create complete 'second lives' within the gaming environment.

'In these games, you often belong to a clan or a guild, and adolescents in particular are very groupish and like to belong to gangs or cliques,' says Dr Graham. 'Some of these cliques are very demanding about how much time you devote to them. There is a complete absorption in

the gaming experience, to the extent that life outside holds little pleasure.'

The more involved the individual gets, the harder it becomes to break free. Parents who attempt to force their children to stop playing are often subjected to outbursts of aggression because they are so desperate to get back to their computers.

One patient whom Dr Graham came into contact with threatened to harm himself when his games console broke down.

'He couldn't bear the sudden intense anxiety and agitation he was feeling because he was unable to access this game,' he says.

'It's almost akin to a withdrawal reaction — like the addict using heroin who can't get that next fix gets into a desperate state because it is so unpleasant and distressing to experience the withdrawal.' While young men seem more at risk of developing such an 'addiction', young women are also being drawn

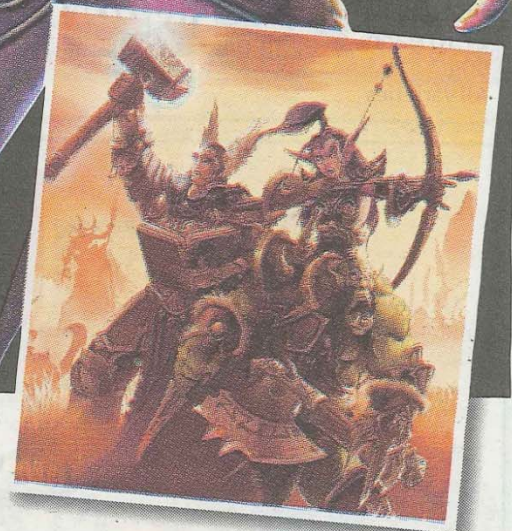
into these virtual worlds. It is something that 24-year-old Kate Flanagan is all too familiar with.

In a typical week, the call-centre employee from North Shields reckons she spends up to 70 hours gaming or on social network sites such as Facebook.

She uses her iPhone on the bus to work and then, in between answering calls, switches to her Nintendo DS hand-held game console. On returning home from work, she will play games for six hours a night.

Not surprisingly, the amount of time she spends gaming has impacted heavily on her life. In the past few years, she has gone from a size eight to a size 12 through lack of exercise, and admits she often cannot find the time to shower or look after her appearance. On one occasion, Kate's excessive gaming left her with a damaged wrist, forcing her to attend a friend's wedding wearing a sling. Her doctor told her to modify her playing habits, but once the pain had gone she con-

Internet hit: World of Warcraft



tinued as before. She says she is addicted, comparing it with smoking.

'I know smoking isn't good for me, I know game playing isn't either,' she says. 'But I've never tried to give up either of them because I enjoy them too much and because the thought of it makes me feel anxious.'

While some experts reckon that 5-10 per cent of Britain's 46.6 million web users may be addicted to their computers, within the psychiatric world it is not yet officially recognised as an addiction.

That may change with further research and is also set to be tested in the American courts.

Last month, Craig Smallwood, a 51-year-old from Hawaii, was given the go ahead by an American judge

to proceed with a negligence lawsuit against the company behind an online virtual-world game called Lineage II.

He claims to have played the game for 20,000 hours between 2004 and 2009, becoming so addicted that he is 'unable to function independently in usual daily activities such as getting up, getting dressed, bathing or communicating with family and friends'.

He is seeking compensation on the grounds that there were insufficient warnings about the alleged 'addictiveness' of the game.

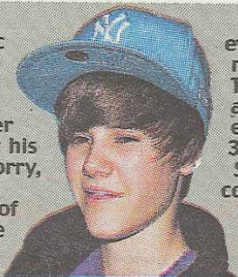
As for the 33-year-old woman from Kent, having had her children taken into care, she stopped using her computer and cleaned up the house. After pleading guilty to three charges of child cruelty and two of animal neglect, she was given a suspended sentence and banned from using the internet again.

With manufacturers insisting their lucrative products are nothing more than harmless fun, perhaps the last word should go to Judge Jeremy Carey. In summing up, he concluded: 'Your life went very badly wrong when you became obsessed with a computer game.'

The tragedy is, there are growing numbers like her whose lives are going equally awry as they are sucked into the online world.

place. Discovered after a music executive saw him singing in home videos on YouTube two years ago, Bieber has gone on to become the star of the most viewed video ever on the site. (The music video for his single Baby has been endured — sorry, enjoyed — 246 million times.)

Still not impressed? Well, a search of his name on Google produces more than 100 million results — more



even than Madonna. Oh, and he has more than five million followers on Twitter, where he is mentioned on average 60 times a second. It's estimated that he accounts for 3 per cent of activity on the site.

So where did this phenomenon come from? Born in Ontario to 18-year-old office worker Pattie Mallette, young Justin taught himself to play the piano, drums,

trumpet and guitar at an early age. So began Justin's assault on the charts — his debut album, My World, sold more than 3 million copies. He has since sung with rap stars Usher, Sean Kingston and Kanye West.

Still, none of this seems to have phased him. He is currently headlining a tour, will star in an episode of CSI and a 3-D movie is thought to be in the works. So what's next for Mr Bieber? It can only be total world domination...

ANNA DUNLOP