

# JUST A GAME?

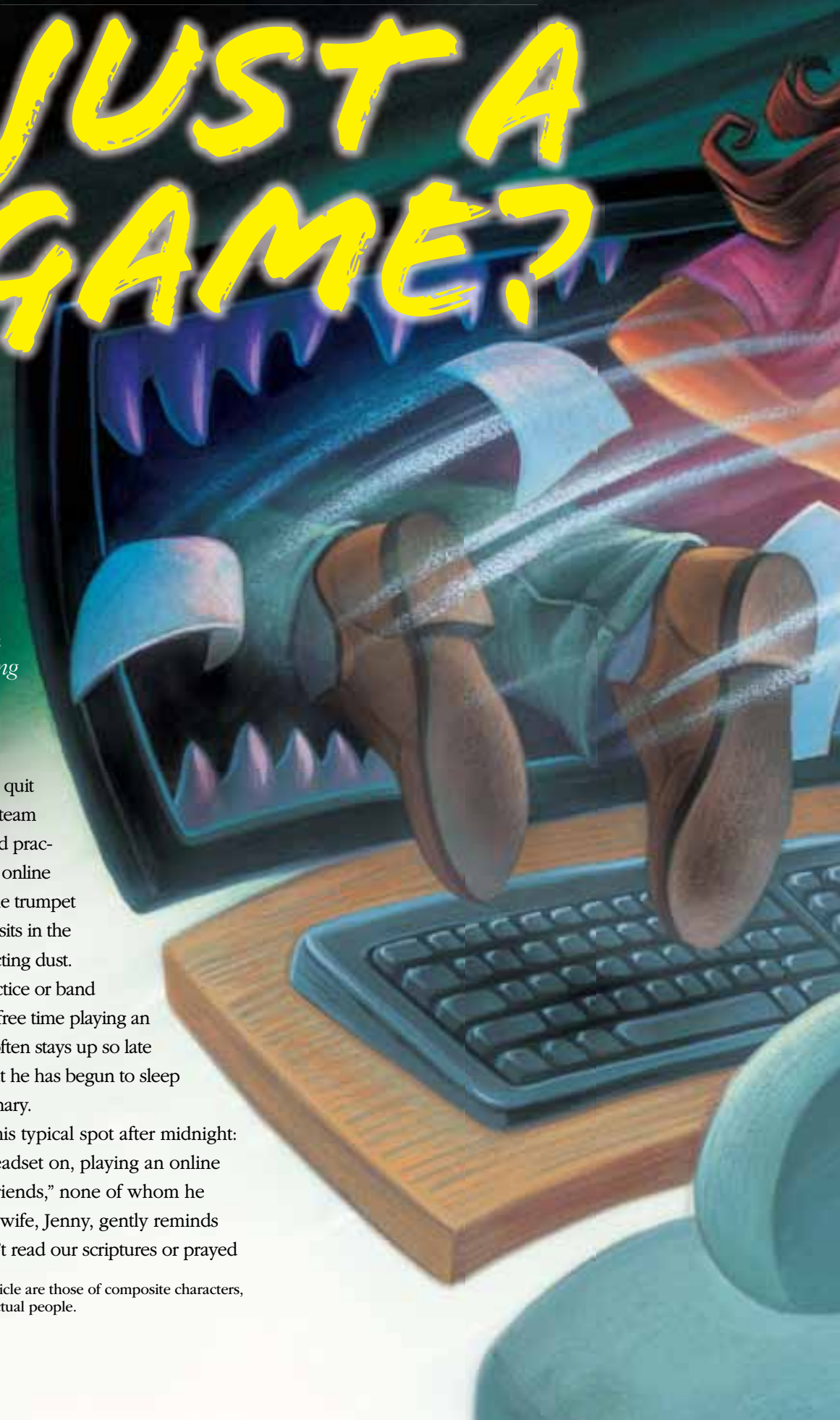
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*Online role-playing games may be more than a way to pass the time. For some, they can become addictive, leading to lost spirituality, lost opportunities, and lost relationships.*

Two weeks ago, Jason\* quit the high school track team because the meets and practice times conflicted with his online “guild quests” and “raids.” The trumpet he used to love to play now sits in the corner of his bedroom collecting dust. Instead of being at track practice or band rehearsals, Jason spends his free time playing an online computer game. He often stays up so late at night playing his game that he has begun to sleep through early-morning seminary.

Or consider Michael, at his typical spot after midnight: in front of the computer, headset on, playing an online adventure game with his “friends,” none of whom he has actually met. When his wife, Jenny, gently reminds him, “It’s late, and we haven’t read our scriptures or prayed

\* The names mentioned in this article are those of composite characters, based on the experiences of actual people.







together,” he replies, “I can’t come right now. We’re right in the middle of a raid, and my guild needs me.”

Then there’s Sara, who discovered online gaming\*\* about a year ago. She was a top salesperson in her department, winning prizes and earning bonuses for outstanding performance. Online gaming, however, has negatively affected her work. She now plays most evenings and weekends, and she has stopped attending singles activities in her stake to make more time for gaming. She often leaves church early so she can continue her online adventures.

Jason, Michael, and Sara are representative of the growing number of people who demonstrate compulsive behavior in playing massive multiplayer online role-playing games (or MMORPGs). In these games, social networking meets virtual computer fantasy to bring players into exciting, collaborative quests. Tens of millions of players are active worldwide, with new players joining every month.

\*\* The term gaming may appropriately refer to either gambling or computer game playing. In this article, we address only computer game playing.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG NEWBOLD

## DON'T WASTE THE DAYS OF YOUR PROBATION



*“One of the ways Satan lessens your effectiveness and weakens your spiritual strength is by encouraging you to spend large blocks of your time doing things that matter very little. I speak of such things as sitting for hours on end watching television or videos, playing video games night in and night out, surfing the Internet, or devoting huge blocks of time to sports, games, or other recreational activities.*

*“Don’t misunderstand me. These activities are not wrong in and of themselves (unless, of course, you are watching salacious programs or seeking out pornographic images on the Internet). Games, sports, recreational activities, and even television can be relaxing and rejuvenating, especially in times when you are under stress or heavily scheduled. You need activities that help you to unwind and rest your minds. It is healthy to go onto the soccer field or the basketball court and participate in vigorous physical activity.*

*“But I speak of letting things get out of balance. It is not watching television, but watching television hour after hour, night after night. Does not that qualify as idling away your time? What will you say to the Lord when He asks what you have done with the precious gift of life and time? Surely you will not feel comfortable telling Him that you were able to pass the 100,000-point level in a challenging video game.*

*“One devastating effect of idling away our time is that it deflects us from focusing on the things that matter most. Too many people are willing to sit back and let life just happen to them. It takes time to develop the attributes that will help you to be a well-balanced person.”*

**Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Be Strong in the Lord,” Ensign, July 2004, 13–14.**

The growth of the activity shows that an increasing number of men and women enjoy MMORPGs as a relaxing, recreational activity. But some people (like Jason, Michael, and Sara) are letting recreational, virtual life interfere with their actual lives.

Although many online gamers do not become addicted or even compulsive players, prophetic warnings about the use of our time in this mortal life indicate that online gaming is an activity that warrants caution. Of course, MMORPGs are not the only form of recreation that have the potential to cause problems. There are many activities that can become so absorbing that they rob participants of spiritual, intellectual, and social development. We hope that the explanations, suggestions, and prophetic counsel included in this article may be helpful to individuals and families as they seek the guidance of the Spirit in finding balance in their lives.

### Why Are These Games Cause for Concern?

Professional counselors are seeing an increasing number of individuals “hooked” on video and computer games, especially the online “quest” variety. Individuals most commonly seek help at the urging of friends or

family members who are concerned with the excessive nature of their game playing. Many of these players recognize the emerging imbalance in their lives and earnestly seek help to restore a healthy balance. Others resist the idea that their online gaming is a problem, insisting that they are only relaxing, or that since they play with other people, it’s a social activity. Still others argue that since it’s a game, it cannot be addictive.

The fallout from compulsive gaming can be temporally and spiritually devastating. News reports include stories of broken marriages, lost employment, failed health, even children removed from parents because of criminal neglect caused by the parents’ excessive online gaming.<sup>1</sup> We personally know of young men who have forfeited mission

opportunities because, they say, their online gaming group needs them, and they simply cannot be gone for two years.

### How Are Online Role-playing Games Different Than Other Video Games?

MMORPGs are different from traditional stand-alone computer or console games in two primary ways:

- The virtual world of the game moves in real time. When a





## AM I ADDICTED?

player logs off, the game continues. There is no pause key.

- Characters in the game are controlled not by the computer but by actual people scattered around the world. Most online role-playing games encourage the formation of teams, or “guilds,” that band together to carry out quests or challenges. Membership in a guild creates social pressure on players to be present when other guild members are playing.

These unique characteristics make the games more demanding as well as more socially stimulating, which has led to greater addictive tendencies.

### **Why Are Online Role-Playing Games So Compelling?**

One reason that online role-playing games may potentially be more addictive is that they are essentially a social network with an exciting graphical interface. They fill social needs that may be unmet in the real world. For instance, a teenage boy may not feel popular or successful at high school, but in the online world, he gets a fresh start and a new set of friends. His problem-solving skills and intelligence make him socially important in his virtual community. He steps into a role in

**A** good measure to use when determining the value of a hobby is if it adds to or takes away from your sense of balance. Healthy activities help you feel revitalized, refreshed, and ready to tackle your challenges. Destructive activities leave you feeling drained and empty inside and less able to cope with the struggles of real life. Destructive activities also tend to leave you feeling compelled to continue rather than feeling in control of your decisions.

Although there is no specific test for addiction to online gaming, the following are factors that, taken together, may indicate an unhealthy involvement or addictive tendency.

- Do you play compulsively?
- Do you play for long periods of time (often longer than you had planned)?
- Once online, do you have difficulty stopping?
- Do you play as often as you can?
- Do you sneak or violate family rules in order to play, even when facing punishment or loss of privileges for doing so?
- When you are not playing, do you obsess about the game, plotting and planning your next opportunity to play?
- Do you sacrifice real-world things for your online world?
- Is your gaming negatively affecting your relationships with family members or other non-gamer friends? For instance, if you are a parent, does it cause you to neglect your children’s needs? If you are a child, does it cause you to distance yourself from your parents and siblings?
- Do you consider other online gamers (even those whom you’ve never met in real life) to be among your best friends?
- Is your school or work suffering because of the time and energy you spend gaming?
- Are you having a difficult time deciding to serve a mission because of the extended break from the game that will naturally result?
- Do you neglect personal hygiene?
- Have your sleep patterns changed since you became involved with online gaming? Are you staying up extremely late or getting up in the middle of the night to play?

which he feels needed and successful.

Another draw is that online gaming provides an unending source of goals or objectives. Unlike games installed on a home computer, MMORPGs prevent players from ever actually winning the online game because each victory brings yet another task, goal, quest, or skill level to be obtained.

Moreover, as players perform quests and rise in their achievements, the time investment for each skill level normally rises. So while players may gain 5 or 10 levels in their first few days playing, the next week may bring only one or two new levels, with each new level after that requiring longer and longer time investments. Players who have spent significant time attaining a certain skill level tend to be reluctant to walk away from the game and lose their investment.

Finally, the collaborative nature of online role-playing games can result in a strong form of peer pressure. Each person’s involvement matters

not only to himself or herself but also to guild or team members, so a player who cuts back on playing time or fails to show up at agreed-upon times may face criticism or rejection from fellow gamers.



### **How Do I Avoid Problems?**

A critical element in avoiding problems is to understand the importance of balance in our lives. Leaders of the Church have been clear in their counsel about doing things in “wisdom and order” (Mosiah 4:27). For example, Elder Donald L. Staheli of the Seventy has warned: “Distractions and discouragement are some of Satan’s most effective tools. He finds ways to help us make excuses about why we can’t do this or that. He gets us involved in wasting our time and resources in things that lead us away from improving our lives and developing our talents. He blurs our focus by diverting our attention. This can happen to the very best of you.”<sup>2</sup>

One way to protect ourselves is to follow the counsel given by Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: “We need to limit the amount of time our children watch TV or play video games or use the Internet each day.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, this counsel to limit the time we dedicate to media applies to parents as well! We can do this by establishing reasonable time constraints for online recreational activities. Then, if the attraction of the activity begins to pull us beyond our own guidelines, we can recognize a potentially dangerous situation and stop participating in the activity. As Elder Ballard counseled, “Virtual reality must not become [our] reality.”

Restoring proper balance in our lives is something we

decide to do. As Elder Donald L. Hallstrom of the Seventy has taught, “When we are out of balance, we have a choice. We can delay making changes and experience the tragedy of a failing family or the sorrow of losing our own spirituality; or we can be attentive and continually nudged by the whisperings of the Holy Spirit to make necessary adjustments. Seeking balance among the essential responsibilities of life is preparatory to salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

The choice to overcome a distraction or diversion may be very difficult because an addiction is much more than a “bad habit” to be overcome by willpower alone. In fact, “many people become so dependent on a behavior or a substance that they no longer see how to abstain from it. They lose perspective and a sense of other priorities in their lives.”<sup>5</sup> President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught this idea when he said, “Addiction has the capacity to disconnect the human will and nullify moral agency. It can rob one of the power to decide.”<sup>6</sup>

As you think about the compelling nature of online role-playing games, you might also consider your own potential for addiction. Some studies have shown that online gaming addiction may be correlated with other emotional challenges.<sup>7</sup> In addition, if you have struggled with other forms of addiction, including Internet-related addictions (such as pornography), you might be more vulnerable than others to an online gaming addiction.





### Where Can I Find Spiritual Help and Hope?

But even cases of addiction are not without hope. The scriptures teach that the Atonement of Jesus Christ is sufficient to help us overcome the “natural man,” whatever unhealthy or unbalanced forms our “natural” tendencies may take. (See Mosiah 3:19.)

President James E. Faust (1920–2007) taught, “While some addictions require professional clinical help, let us not overlook the spiritual help available to us through priesthood blessings and through prayer. The Lord has promised us, ‘My grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them’ (Ether 12:27). Let us remember that the power to change is very real, and it is a great spiritual gift from God.”<sup>8</sup>

Spiritual help is available through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Such a promise can be especially poignant for those caught in a trap of obsessive online gaming. Hope in the Atonement, coupled with the guidance of the Holy Ghost and counsel from inspired leaders, will help individuals as they seek to apply principles of balance and move toward a life—an actual one and not merely a virtual one—that is rich and full. ■

**Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles recently spoke at a Church Educational System Fireside about the influence of technology and media. See “Things as They Really Are,” available under the firesides link at [ldsces.org](http://ldsces.org).**

## HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WHO IS STRUGGLING?

If someone you love is struggling with a compulsion to play online games for inordinate amounts of time, recognize that the person’s problem is real and that the risks are significant, even though it is “just a game.”

Consider spending time with your loved one while he or she is playing the game, paying particular attention to the communication taking place between players. (Many games use a “chat” form of communication, similar to instant messaging. Others support the use of headsets with built-in microphones for real-time audio communication between players.) If you are looking to find out more about the game your son plays, you might, for instance, ask him about how the game is played, the nature of his role or character, his interaction with other players, what he likes about the particular game he plays, and how he feels when he plays it. Spending time and asking questions will not only help you be educated about the nature of the game, it will also help your son feel understood. If he refuses to let you see the game being played, it may be that he feels defensive around you or is embarrassed by the nature of the game (or both).

If your loved one plays excessively, to the point of neglecting important aspects of his or her life (such as school, work, family life, church attendance, and church service), intervention may be merited. Seek counsel from priesthood leaders or professional counselors to know how best to approach your loved one. Since every situation is unique, these people can be a valuable resource as you prayerfully seek the Lord’s help.

**Professors in the Brigham Young University School of Family Life recently published a study, “More Than Just a Game” in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, available at [springerlink.com](http://springerlink.com).**

### NOTES

1. Please see the following URLs for examples: [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/26/AR2006052601960.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/26/AR2006052601960.html); [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/17/AR2006081700625\\_2.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/17/AR2006081700625_2.html); <http://virtualmentor.ama-assn.org/2008/01/jdsc1-0801.html>; [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19354827](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19354827).
2. Donald L. Staheli, “Achieving Your Full Potential,” *Ensign*, Feb. 2009, 58.
3. M. Russell Ballard, “Let Our Voices Be Heard,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2003, 19.
4. Donald L. Hallstrom, “Seeking a Balanced Life,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2003, 57.
5. LDS Family Services, *Addiction Recovery Program: A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing* (2005), page v.
6. Boyd K. Packer, “Revelation in a Changing World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 14.
7. Please see the following for examples: “Shyness and Locus of Control as Predictors of Internet Addiction and Internet Use,” Katherine Chak, Louis Leung. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 5 (2004): 559–570. See also “The Relationship between Online Game Addiction and Aggression, Self-Control, and Narcissistic Personality Traits,” Eun Joo Kim, Kee Namkoong, Taeyun Ku, and Se Joo Kim. *European Psychiatry* 23, no. 3 (2008): 212–218.
8. James E. Faust, “The Power to Change,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 124.