**READING**

**ONLY A GAME?**

**Are computer gamers victims of addiction or prejudice?**

Computer games are the latest media scare. If you believe the hype, they are highly addictive and almost as dangerous as cigarettes or alcohol. Features on gaming dwell on the horror stories - the players who stare at a monitor for days, weeks or months at a time, barely pausing to sleep or eat, never mind study or socialize. Mistakenly convinced that gaming ruins grades and lives, parents and teachers then demand that teenagers immediately put down their joysticks and switch off their computers. Some even call for games to be banned! But is this concern really justified? Gaming is a hugely popular hobby, with millions of players worldwide. Surely not all of these people are hopeless addicts and loners?

Helen Mackay is one player who contradicts the stereotype. She is both a high-flying student at a prestigious US university, and a site administrator on *EverTalk -* a chatroom where fans of the online game *EverQuest* swap ideas and game cheats. But she wasn't always an enthusiast. "Until last year, my experience of computers was limited to checking emails and downloading music, and I prided myself on not being very technologically minded, in other words, not being a geek! I'd never even heard of EverQuest until my boyfriend Tom bought a subscription. Back then I didn't get the appeal and frankly, I thought Tom was too old for that kind of stuff. But I held my tongue, convinced he'd soon get fed up and log out for the last time."

"When months went by and he still showed no signs of losing interest, I got increasingly bothered. I even considered 'accidentally' spilling coffee over his keyboard so he'd be forced to stop - but I knew that would start a row and he'd only carry on playing anyway. And then I thought, this isn't me, why am I behaving like this? So I had a go in secret, in a bid to be more sympathetic. I didn't really expect to enjoy it. But after a few clicks of the mouse I was hooked!"

"The game was fun and surprisingly challenging. Every action has a consequence, so you have to think very carefully! Yes, the characters - or avatars as I've learned to call them - are rather silly (I´m an elf!). However, they´re liberating too. When you´re acting out a role in cyberspace, you can´t be judged by your looks, age or background. Through the game I´ve made friends with a skater-punk in Alaska and a 91-year-old Korean physicist. So-called ´reality´ could learn a lot from this virtual world."

Does Helen consider herself a computer addict? "Of course not. Tom and I play games for about ten hours a week. That´s much less time than the average American spends surfing the internet - or watching TV! I think gamers are often treated very unfairly. We don´t sneer at people in the same way for being sports fanatics, and compulsive readers are praised for being clever! But what´s the difference? Just because some hobbies have been around for longer doesn´t mean they´re necessarily better for you. Different things suit different people, that´s all."

However, anti-gaming prejudice may at last be starting to wane. Many professional organisations, including NASA, the Armed Forces and medical schools, are now designing computer game software especially for staff. Cynics have claimed that this is merely a gimmick to attract younger applicants. However, it seems more likely that employers have been influenced by the latest scientific research. Extensive studies have suggested that although playing computer games can´t significantly alter IQ, it does help people to become better at analysing details and working out solutions - all essential workplace skills. The fact that it also reduces stress is an added bonus!

Of course, as with any pleasure in life, you can have too much of a good thing. Devoting yourself entirely to one activity is never healthy, whether your passion is gaming - or studying! But maybe it´s time for the technologies to relax a bit? A few hours a week playing computer games might not be the end of the world, after all ...