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In the early 1990s the Internet suddenly began to enter the homes of mainstream America, and barely fifteen years later it is a ubiquitous part of American culture. Experts such as Helen Cothran, editor of *The Internet:: Opposing Viewpoints,* confirm that communication via the Internet is the most rapidly adopted technological advance in history (14), making it a provocative topic of study. Sherry Turkle, is a licensed clinical psychologist interested in the relationships that develop between computers and people; in *Life on the Screen,* she discusses individuals deeply involved in Internet role-playing games known as Multi User Domains or MUDs. Turkle notes that it is not unusual for some players to stay logged on for up to twelve hours a day (184) and her clinical observations suggest that their quality of life may be suffering as a consequence of too much time on the Net. According to Keith W. Beard, "The concept of Internet addiction has been proposed as an explanation for uncontrollable and damaging use of the Internet" (7). If excessive Internet use can qualify as an addiction, then it must share many of the same characteristics as the more conventional addictions, such as compulsive gambling and shopping, that take place offline, which suggests that there may be devastating consequences such as job loss, failure in school, emotional instability, and divorce. However, not all experts believe that a preoccupation with the Internet should be classified as an addiction, and the validity of the concept of Internet addiction is currently being debated.

Many in the mental health community, the academy, and the media are addressing the issue of Internet addiction. According to Cothran, any person who spends too much time online runs the risk of becoming a "cyberjunky" (17). Online shopping, gambling, computer games and chat rooms can lure an unsuspecting user into spending more and more time online and away from their responsibilities. Dr. Kimberly S. Young, a pioneer in the field of Internet abuse, was one of the first professionals to recognize the addictive potential of the Internet. In her book *Caught in the Net*, she reveals that her three-year study of Internet abuse suggests that that "[t]he Internet just might be emerging as the addiction of the millennium" (13). Yet there are others, like Steven Levy, who are skeptical about the possibility of addiction to a machine. "Forget those scare stories about being hooked on the Internet," he wrote in a *Newsweek* article, "The Web is not a habit; it's an indelible feature of

modern life" (Young 6). Levy's position is supported by Janet Farrell and Marc Redfield, editors of *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, who assert that addiction is "a twentieth-century notion" and "primarily an Anglo-American one. It has now become a commonplace that "any substance, any behavior, even any effect may be pathologized as addictive" (4). Similarly, Sara Keisler, a professor of computer science and computer-human interaction at Carnegie Mellon University, believes that Internet addiction is no more than a "fad illness." In "Hooked on the Web," Keisler writes that "The Internet . . . can be quite absorbing, but calling it an addiction demeans really serious illnesses" (G1) such as addiction to drugs or cigarettes. Notwithstanding the opinions of Levy, Keisler, Brodie, and Redfield, there appears to be substantial evidence to support the idea of Internet addiction. Furthermore, my research suggests that there is no stereotypical "cyberjunkie." Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) appear to have an addictive potential for both men and women, and for both the young and the old, and that Internet abuse is pervading our homes, schools, universities, and the workplace.

Students, particularly those in college, often find their academic and social lives inextricably tied to the Internet because the academic community increasingly relies on Web resources as an invaluable tool for gathering information and utilizing study aids. When the Internet is used in this way it can enrich a student's life; however, many students find that they are spending too much time online and that the college environment is contributing to the problem. Students are required to use online resources for their coursework, which makes the student population particularly vulnerable to the lures of cyberspace. Barbara Jamison, a contributing writer for *WebMDHealth* notes that, "[e]ven innocent inquiries can become obsessions in a medium where information is limitless" (Jamison). Inevitably, too much time online means that a student is not attending to homework, studying for exams, or getting enough sleep. Ultimately, the result is failing grades, suspension, or, in extreme cases, expulsion from school.

Excessive Internet use by students is gaining the attention of some college administrators. A 2003 study on Internet use in the student population at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, estimated the average weekly use to be 28.36 hours (Malaney). The study participants acknowledged that they spent more time online than they had planned to and that they easily lost track of time. More disturbing was the fact that more than thirty percent of the students reported

unsuccessful attempts to curtail their Internet use, with more than half of this group experiencing feelings of irritability and restlessness (Malaney). This estimate of weekly Internet use by college students certainly appears to be problematic. However, Professor Keisler is likely to disagree. Keisler, who has published numerous studies on Internet use, contends that there is "absolutely no evidence that spending time online. . . is the least bit harmful" (G1). Indeed, Keisler believes that excessive television viewing poses more harm than the Internet does. However, the Umass Amherst study needs another look because such a high number of respondents, thirty percent, reported problems limiting their time online. This finding suggests that excessive time on the Internet may not be as harmless as Keisler asserts.

Despite the evidence and a growing awareness among some academic professionals, Internet addiction is often overlooked in the college environment because students are not likely to report a problem with Internet use. According to the Web site sponsored by the McGauvran University Counseling Center, "Denial cuts especially deep in the college environment" as most students laugh off the idea that they could be psychologically dependent on the feelings they get from playing games, web surfing, and sending emails ("Getting Entangled"). For example, in a personal interview I conducted with David Ado, a Rutgers University student who does not believe that he is addicted to his Internet activities, I learned that, although Ado admits that he was instantly "hooked" on Internet gaming, he argues that his time online is not much different from a "good book that can not be put down." Furthermore, Ado asserts that the countless hours he devotes to online gaming are "challenging and rewarding." Like Ado, there are many students who enjoy their time online and find it difficult to believe that they might be addicted to something that they enjoy so much. However, university counseling centers like the one operated by McGauvran, are increasingly seeing students whose Internet activities have gotten out of control. Counselors at the University of Notre Dame note that students are seeking help for symptoms such as extreme fatigue, inability to concentrate, nervousness, apathy, and a general feeling of being unable to cope with life, but it is not until they are in counseling for a while that their excessive Internet use is revealed ("Lost In Cyberspace").

College students are not the only group of Net users that are vulnerable to becoming hooked on Internet communication. Keith Beard maintains that

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problematic Internet use can be found in any age, social, educational, and economic range and that applications that allow for two-way communication such as role playing games are the most likely to be abused (8). Sherry Turkle has interviewed numerous individuals who use MUDs as a way to connect with others in a non-threatening way. Many of these individuals are inordinately uncomfortable in social situations and the Internet provides them with anonymity and a chance to gain practice in developing personal relationships through the use of their online personae. According to Turkle, creating screen personae is an opportunity for "self expression" and "possibly personal growth" and "self knowledge" (184). However, when an individual is in desperate need of social interaction, then living and playing in the MUD world becomes an important part of daily life, and there are cases where the gamer stays logged on continuously (183). When this happens, it is arguable that playing in the MUD has become a pathological obsession and may even contribute to emotional instability. Such was the case for Turkle's client Stewart who spent so much time MUDing that he sometimes had difficulty keeping his online life separate from his real life:

> When I MUDed with the computer I never got tired . . . . Actually, it is
> very obsessive. . . It was my life. . . . I was like living in the MUD. Most
> of the time I felt comfortable that this was my life. I'd keep trying to
> stop. I'd say, "OK I'm not going on, I'm going to classes. But
> something would come up and I wouldn't to my class. I wouldn't do
> what I wanted to do. (201)

Stewart's case is a clear example of Internet use gone out of control. When an individual finds that he cannot spend any extended time away from the Net and he neglects important life activities, such as work and personal obligations, then he is no longer controlling the machine—the machine is controlling him.

Not so, claim researchers Brian D. Ng, and Peter Weimer-Hastings. In "Addiction to the Internet and Online Gaming," they conclude from their research that individuals who spend many hours in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) are "devoted to their game," but that "they are not addicted" (97). While critics of Internet addiction argue that they are only drawn to the "social aspects" of the game, there is evidence to suggest that there is more to it than that. Ann Weinstone, author of the essay "Welcome to the Pharmacy: Addiction, Transcendence, and Virtual Reality," asserts that virtual reality is

addictive because it offers "the ideal life and encourages a surreal feeling of immortality when one totally immerses [one]self in VR" (78). Furthermore, Weinstone maintains that the nature of the games that take place in cyberspace are based on fantasy and, therefore, are inherently addictive as they generate feelings of "disembodiment," "immortality," and "extra-human reproductive and generative powers" (78). Arguably, one of the alluring features of interactive role-playing games on the Internet is the offer of life as the individual wants it to be. This escape from real life— known as RL in the cyberworld—may explain Turkle's observation that addiction is a frequently discussed subject among online gamers (183).

Another sign that an individual is addicted to the Internet is withdrawal from relationships with family, friends, and loved ones in favor of social contacts on the Net. Young points out that an individual who withdraws from real-life relationships in favor of the virtual relationships found in cyberspace is exhibiting behavior similar to "alcoholics [who] prefer the company of fellow drinkers who will support them in their addictive behavior" (17). According to Amy Harmon, author of "Researchers Find Sad, Lonely World in Cyberspace," the "disembodied relationships" that form in the "vacuum of cyberspace" often damage the more meaningful relationships in a person's life. Dr. Dave Greenfield, psychiatrist and author of *Virtual Addiction*, councils many individuals whose personal lives have suffered because of excessive Internet use. In an interview with Greenfield on ABCNews.com one woman said:

> I spent almost all of my time on the Internet a few years ago. It ruined
> my marriage. I spent as little time as possible cooking, cleaning and
> paid my husband of 13 years no attention. It can happen. You won't
> even know it's happening until your husband is gone, your kids are out
> running around and suddenly you look up and you are the only one
> there. (Greenfield "Chat")

When individuals exhibit such devotion to their computers and cyberspace they are hurting themselves. They risk their families, their marriages, and sometimes their careers because of an uncontrollable attraction to life in cyberspace.

In addition to students and gamers, Internet addiction is having an effect in the workplace. Businesses all over the world rely on computers and the Internet, and consequently, many who work on the Internet as part of their jobs are vulnerable to the lures of cyberspace. For example, the mass media in America uses the Internet as a tool to meet our society's demand for a steady stream of information about events as

they are unfolding around the globe. Dr Gregory Jantz, in his book *Hidden Dangers of the Internet*, tells of journalist Joan Connel who found herself a victim of Internet addiction as a result of her work. Connel reported on her abusive relationship with the Internet for MSNBC, saying her behavior was like a "shark scenting fresh blood" (Jantz 100). As abstaining from Internet use may not be an option for students, it is also true for individuals who make their careers in the communications market. This observation has serious implications, since Internet   addicts need to break the cycle of cybersurfing, especially when surfing on the job has the potential to ruin an individual's career.

Experts who study Internet addiction in the workplace estimate that six to ten percent of employees are workplace "onlineaholics," and this trend is continuing to rise as more employees are given access to the Net in the workplace. Young gives the example of Ron, a product manager for a Pittsburg manufacturing firm, who found himself among the addicted when his employer supplied him with an Internet account to research new contacts. Unfortunately, Ron's new contacts were in sexually explicit chat rooms and cyberporn sites. With so much of his workday spent on the Net it was not long before his productivity suffered and his workplace behavior turned strange. His boss suspected personal problem and confronted him: "If only he knew that my addiction was to the Internet, and that he was supplying the dope!" (194). However, James R. Kincaid, a teacher at the University of Southern California, claims that the Internet is being blamed for problems that already exist (68), and many observers argue that excessive users of the Internet are not addicted to the machine, they simply use the Internet as a medium to pursue other addictions —addicts of gambling or porn may be addicted to the behavior and not to the Internet (Kershaw, Johnston, Cothran). Notwithstanding the semantics, Ron was fired when his boss decided to investigate further and found hard evidence of Ron's "cybershenanigans," thus demonstrating that Internet abuse results in the same negative life consequences that other addicts face (Young 200). In Ron's case it was the loss of his job.

Even if an employee only abuses the Internet at home it can still result in unintended consequences on the job when an individual spends so much time on the Net that it interferes with daily activities, including the need for sleep. In the workplace this translates into a decrease in productivity, an increase in mistakes, excessive fatigue, tardiness, and call-outs (Young 201). Employers take notice and

may suspect that an addiction is at work. This is a warning sign that the employee may soon be joining the ranks of the unemployed. Internet addiction that begins away from the job also makes its way into the workplace. This often happens to individuals who are hooked on MUDs or other interactive role playing games. As Turkle mentions, players can jump between windows in order to intersperse real-world activities on their computers with their games, thus making it difficult for some employers to detect (184). Furthermore, Greenfield is predicting an increase in the number of cases of Internet addiction in the work place as a result of software that is coming out to prevent the traceability of e-mail and Internet communication (Greenfield "Virtual").

As Beard maintains, addiction to the Internet is not limited to any particular age, gender, social or economic status, while Greenfield's statistics on Internet use in the workplace underscores the problem. In 2001, a whopping 60.7 percent of employees surveyed said they visit Web sites or surf for personal use while at work. The United States Department of the Treasury conducted their own investigation and found similar result: secretly monitoring IRS employees revealed that fifty-one percent of their work time was spent online for personal use. Although many at-work surfers site E-bay as a favorite, Greenfield's work also uncovered an Internet pastime that appears to be equally absorbing for some cybersurfers. Greenfield's cites data stating that seventy percent of Internet porn traffic occurs during the nine-to-five workday! These statistics are shocking because they reveal how pervasive the Internet is in the lives of many individuals.

Predictably, America's preoccupation with the Internet has precipitated a backlash from Corporate America. Many companies are utilizing software packages that track all Internet use. According to Young, one major company discovered that only twenty-three percent of the Internet usage was business-related (195). As a result of workplace "Internetomania" (Jamison), employers have instituted company policies that govern the use of the Internet in the workplace. Individuals that violate company policy as a result of their obsession risk their jobs. This can happen even when an employee with Internet addiction seeks help from the Employee Assistance Program, as the following excerpt from Young's case studies illustrates:

> Evelyn hadn't been legitimately at work for much of the time on her
> card . . . because for many of those hours she was actually engaged in
> Internet activity for personal use. Computer printouts showed more

than 50 percent of her alleged worktime had been eaten up by unauthorized use of the Net. She was dismissed from her job immediately. "I needed help, but they treated me like a criminal. I'm a sane person, I just felt compelled to keep using the Internet the way I did." (194 - 5)

Evelyn's inability to control her Internet use during work hours, which resulted in the loss of her job, is further testimony to the reality of Internet addiction and the negative life consequences that victims must face.

Arguably, the rapid growth of the Internet has resulted in profound changes to our society. Indeed, this technology is not neutral and it has affected us in ways that are both beneficial and harmful. Proponents of the Internet point out the many ways in which the Internet has improved our society. In Dave Healy's essay "Cyberplace and Space," he writes about the Internet's unprecedented ability for community building (60). Similarly, in "Looking for India on the Internet," Ananda Mitra argues for Internet communications as a means for recent immigrants to stay connected to the communities that they left behind. However, the desire for connectedness and relatedness has also brought the unforeseen problem of Internet addiction. The title of the article "It's Official: The Net is a Part of Life" certainly appears to be true. Recent estimates say that 189 million Americans use the Internet and there is room for more growth (Kershaw G1). As the Internet expands into the future, it remains to be seen what impact it will have on our society. As mentioned previously, experts currently believe that six to ten percent of Internet users are addicted. This estimate is troublesome, as research shows the potential for Internet addiction to spiral upward as technology continues to evolve. Take, for instance, the BlackBerry, a wireless e-mail device that can be used virtually anywhere. Users find it so addictive that it is better known as a "CrackBerry" (Kershaw G1). However, as Ng and Weimer-Hastings note, Internet addiction is not recognized in psychiatry as a diagnosable illness and this is posing a problem for individuals who seek professional help. Insurance companies are not likely to reimburse for services without an official diagnosis from the DSM IV, a diagnostic manual used to diagnose mental illness and substance abuse. Therefore, until Internet addiction is recognized throughout the medical community as a serious health problem, affected individuals in the workplace will continue to be vulnerable to dismissal, relationships at home will continue to dissolve, and students will continue to struggle in school.

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