

TRANSCRIPT: GAMERS ANONYMOUS

BY SHALEEM THOMPSON

HE'S 23 YEARS OLD, SLOUCHED IN FRONT OF THE TV IN A RUMPLED T-SHIRT AND BAGGY JEANS. HIS HANDS GRIP THE GAME CONTROL. HE'S HAVING A CONVERSATION, BUT HIS EYES NEVER LEAVE THE SCREEN.

HEMESON: I'M KENNEDY HEMESON...I AM A GAMER. I LOVE TO PLAY GAMES AND RIGHT NOW I'M PLAYING A VIDEO GAME.

IT'S 4 O'CLOCK ON A SATURDAY -- HEMESON COULD BE HANGING OUT WITH HIS FRIENDS LIKE HE USED TO. BUT SEVEN MONTHS AGO HE GOT AN X-BOX.

HEMESON: EVER SINCE I'VE HAD IT...I'VE BEEN CHILLING IT'S BEEN TAKING MOST OF MY TIME...LIKE 7 OR 8 HOURS A DAY.

SO IS KENNEDY HEMESON ADDICTED? IS THIS ACTUALLY AN ADDICTION? MANY PSYCHOLOGISTS SAY IT IS AND HEALTH PROGRAMS HAVE SPRUNG UP ACROSS THE U.S. TO TREAT IT. ONE OF THEM IS AT THE MENNINGER CLINIC IN HOUSTON, TEXAS. JOHN O'NEIL IS HEAD OF THE PROFESSIONALS OF CRISIS PROGRAM THERE. HE BELIEVES GAMING ADDICTION STARTED TWENTY YEARS AGO, WITH GAMES LIKE THE MARIO BROTHERS AND DONKEY KONG. HE SAYS THAT AS GAMING TECHNOLOGY IMPROVES, THE NUMBER OF ADDICTS HAS GROWN. AND HE SAYS THE ADDICTS HAVE NOT JUST PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS.

O' NEIL: CARPAL TUNNEL, EYE STRAIN, HEADACHES, DRY EYES, BACK ACHES.

THEY ALSO HAVE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS.

O' NEIL: THEY MIGHT STRUGGLE WITH DOING SOME OF THE NORMAL EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES. WHEN THEY ARE REQUIRED TO STOP OR THEY NEED TO STOP FOR SOMETHING ELSE THEY BECOME IRRITABLE, FRUSTRATED, DEPRESSED, ANGRY.

AND HERE'S HOW BAD THINGS CAN GET. IN 2001, ELIZABETH WOOLLEY OF HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA WATCHED HER SON SHAWN GET SUCKED INTO AN ON-LINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME CALLED "EVERQUEST."

WOOLLEY: MY SON BECAME ADDICTED TO THE EVERQUEST COMPUTER GAME AND AFTER PLAYING IT FOR A YEAR AND A HALF HE ENDED UP COMMITTING SUICIDE IN FRONT OF THE COMPUTER WITH THE SCREEN ON IT. WELL, I FOUND HIM AND IT WAS DEVASTATING TO ME AND I SAW HIM SITTING IN FRONT OF THAT COMPUTER AND MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS HE KILLED HIMSELF BECAUSE OF THIS GAME.

WOOLLEY IS NO STRANGER TO ADDICTION, HERSELF. SEVERAL YEARS EARLIER, SHE WENT THROUGH THE FAMOUS 12 STEP PROGRAM OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS. AFTER SHAWN DIED, WOOLLEY STARTED THE WEBSITE ONLINE GAMERS ANONYMOUS.

WOOLLEY: PEOPLE GO IN THERE AND READ WHAT OTHERS HAVE WRITTEN AND THEY FIND OUT THAT IT'S NOT JUST THEM AND THAT THEY CAN GET HELP.

HILARY CHASE IS A PSYCHOLOGIST AND FOUNDED THE INPATIENT GAMING CLINIC "REALITY QUEST" IN REDMOND, WASHINGTON. SHE BELIEVES CHANGES MUST BE MADE BY THE GAMERS, THEIR FAMILIES AND HEALTH INSTITUTIONS THAT RECOGNIZE THE DISORDER.

CHASE: PARENTS NEED EDUCATION, THEY NEED SUPPORT IN SETTING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES WITH THEIR KIDS AND THEN THE KIDS NEED THEIR OWN SUPPORT AS WELL AS THEY MAKE ADJUSTMENTS TO HOW IT IS GOING TO BE DIFFERENT IN THEIR FAMILY FROM HERE ON.

AS FOR WOOLLEY, SHE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT MANY FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO GAMING ADDICTION. BUT SHE ALSO SAYS THE GAMES ARE DESIGNED TO BE ADDICTIVE.

WOOLLEY: A LOT OF TIMES YOU CAN'T LEAVE THE GAMES. YOU CAN'T EVEN EAT. THERE IS ONE GAME WHERE IF YOU CAPTURE THIS PRISONER YOU HAVE TO GET UP EVERY FOUR HOURS AND FEED THEM AND PARENTS HAVE NO IDEA THEIR KIDS ARE DOING THIS.

AFTER WOOLLEY'S SON COMMITTED SUICIDE, JOHN SMEDLEY, THE CEO OF SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT AND ONE OF THE CREATORS OF EVERQUEST CALLED TO EXPRESS HIS CONDOLENCES BUT IN A STATEMENT HE SAID, "THERE'S JUST NOTHING TO SUGGEST THAT EVERQUEST HAD ANY ROLE IN HIS DEATH. EVERQUEST IS A GAME. I DON'T SEE ANY CONNECTION BETWEEN A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT AND SOMEBODY'S TRAGIC SUICIDE." A REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION COULD NOT BE REACHED FOR COMMENT HOWEVER RESEARCH PUBLISHED ON THEIR WEBSITE, "SIXTY-ONE PERCENT OF PARENTS WITH CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 18 SAY THAT COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES ARE A POSITIVE ADDITION TO THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES."

WHOEVER'S TO BLAME, THE GAMES ARE OUT THERE AND BOTH CHILDREN AND ADULTS, LIKE KENNEDY HEMESON, CAN GET HOOKED.

HEMESON: SEE IF I DON'T HAVE MONEY TO PAY MY MONTHLY FEE FOR MY X-BOX LIVE ONLINE. I FEEL SAD.

AND WHEN HE GETS THE MONEY, HE RE-SUBSCRIBES AND GOES BACK TO GAMING.

FOR INTERN EDITION, I AM SHALEEM THOMPSON IN WASHINGTON, D.C.