

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

Sicard: I am a video-game widow

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Like many modern married women, I've been saying for years that I'm a video-game widow. After all, it's only by the occasional bursts of faux gunfire, faintly audible from the other room, that I know that my husband is alive and well.

While I often suffer in stoic silence, this time of year is hard for me. This is football season — bowl season — and the heart-wrenching problems of the football widow hog all the media attention.

Ah, the football widow — how I envy her. She only has a few months of torture, while her spouse sprawls silently on the sofa, swilling beer and sporadically, spiritedly cheering his team on. The football widow knows that, worst-case scenario, the trauma ends with the Super Bowl. Her travail is transitory. For the video-game widow, the trauma never ends.

It's been only recently that video-game abuse at our house has become critical. After years of steady but manageable game use, with games such as "Diablo" and "Half-Life," my husband has recently developed an excessive enthusiasm for the Web-based war game "Halo Online," which involves staying online for hours, playing virtual "capture the flag" with teams of strangers.

Halo is a "first-person shooter" game, where the person playing the game has a view of "his" arms and hands as he kills other people — over and over and over again.

My husband has been playing so much "Halo" that recently, after a long Saturday online, he nearly jumped out of the way of cars moving at the far end of the large and empty Central Market parking lot, just like he'd have to in the game. He's been playing so much Halo that I now associate the "beep, beep, beep" that you hear in some crosswalks — signaling that it's OK to cross the intersection — with the "beep, beep, beep" of the "Halo" respawn, when a character comes back to life. He's been playing so much "Halo" that I think of the computerized voice repeating "red team has the flag" as a sort of audible tracking device. When I hear that, at least I know where my husband is and what he's doing.

To cope with this ongoing domestic problem, I visited a Web site of what I assumed would be others in a similar situation. I was expecting earth-shaking problems such as guys who brought their laptops along on their honeymoons, or who asked their sweeties to dress up as video-game characters. Yet this was not the case. As much as I complain about my husband's game playing, things are much worse for others.

At the group EverQuest-Widows, a Yahoo group with more than 6,000 members, I read about what happens when people spend too much time playing the online role-playing game "EverQuest." (It is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, where you create your own character in a fantasy world.)

Among these widows, many of whom refer to the game as "Evercrack," I read stories that sadden and horrify me. One woman (and it is mostly women) wrote about her husband's "EverQuest" addiction, "His guild and their stupid raids come before any plans he has with me or his babies."

Among the "EverQuest" widows, many say their spouses spend 30 to 40 hours a week gaming. There is much discussion about what these people should do — leave their spouses, throw out the computer or take other real-life measures.

In comparison, and in a slight state of shock, I realized that things aren't so bad at my home. Sure, my husband goes straight to his computer when he comes in from work, but he comes straight out again when his chow hits the china.

He's fine as long as I warn him how long he has until he has to stop playing the game. Telling him "dinner is in 15 minutes," or "your plane leaves in an hour," are generally enough to pry him from the computer. In the parlance of other addictions, I'd have to say he's a heavy social gamer. Yet any time I go away for a weekend, I know he'll go on a "Halo" binge.

So, in comparison to the problems of others, I guess I have little more to complain about than the average football widow. Things could always get worse. He recently revealed that he's been playing well on the servers where one of the best competitive "Halo" teams recruits new players — which means he could get picked up by the "Halo" big leagues. That would be OK, unless he gets a full-arm "Halo" tattoo like one of the guys playing on his server did.

Still, if you run across "Thumper" in "Halo" online, please tell him it's time to head back to reality. Unlike football, there's no money in high-level "Halo," and I still have gutters that need cleaning.

Sicard is a freelance journalist and Austin resident.

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