



The real dangers of virtual gambling

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Randy is a thrill-seeker. But he doesn't need to bungee jump, ride a roller coaster or have a one-night stand to get his adrenaline rush. He can use his drug of choice at work or at home and no one would ever guess. Randy likes to surf the precarious wave known as on-line gambling.

"It's a thrill. I find when I play poker, I can actually feel my heart rate rise," he says, "As the stakes go up, you get a buzz out of it. It's like doing drugs, you get that adrenaline rush."

The 30-year-old Torontonion began gambling on-line about a year ago when The World Poker Tour television series piqued his interest. When he started, he knew "three guys who gamble on-line, now I know three guys who don't. It's gone that crazy."

Randy (not his real name -- all the gamblers in this story asked not to be identified) is one of the growing number of Canadians who are finding it difficult to ignore the flashing pop-up ads, promises of cash bonuses and the torrent of spam e-mail advertising easy on-line windfalls. More and more Canadians are being hypnotized by the neon glare of the computer, and succumbing to the temptation of the on-line gamble.

A computer with 24-hour Internet access is to a gambling addict what a well-stocked basement bar is to an alcoholic, a gambling-addiction expert says.

Bonnie Orvidas, program co-ordinator of problem gambling services at Addiction Services of Thames Valley in London, Ont., has seen a gradual increase of on-line gamblers who have run up their credit cards, and lost their homes and life savings. Six years ago, she might have had heard from only one person with an on-line problem. Already this year, she has had a dozen people ask for help. She says other gambling experts have noticed the same trend.

"For young men who like to take risks and who are spending a lot of time on the computer anyway, it's an easy leap to on-line gambling," she says, adding that men have earlier-onset gambling, especially now that it has become a trendy rite of passage.

"The reality is, what could be more accessible than your computer?" Ms. Orvidas says. "As the population ages and is familiar with computers, that will have an impact too." Addicts tell her, "I don't feel safe in my own home," she says. "There is no escape for them."

Experts predict a surge in gambling as more families purchase computers, develop a trust for the security of gambling websites and baby boomers become more computer-savvy. According to a February story in *The Globe and Mail*, the amount of bets in on-line poker rooms has increased to \$90-million a day from \$14-million in 2003.

A study conducted by Edward Adlaf and Anca Ialomiteanu of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health pegged the number of on-line gamblers in Canada at 5.3 per cent of the population in 2000. But less than 1 per cent of Ontarians who have gambling problems seek treatment, says Roger Horbay, a problem-gambling specialist and electronic-gaming expert.

What worries Ms. Orvidas is that the Internet does not discriminate from one web surfer to the next. Children can bypass legal age requirements by borrowing parents' credit cards. Parents of children 10 to 12 years old have called her to say their children have racked up thousands of dollars in debt, forcing them to remortgage their homes.

Fighting the temptation is a challenge even after addicts recognize they have a problem. Websites endeavour to lull gamblers into a trance, or what addicts call "the zone." The always accessible, endlessly tempting world of on-line gambling is a world unto itself.

"On-line, the only interactions are keystrokes. People easily dissociate when they are playing these machines. Newer games are quicker, they can speed up the game, and intervals between games become very short," Mr. Horbay says.

"Everything disappears, including everything that happens around you. You lose track of time, and money becomes meaningless. . . . At a casino at least there is a break where you have to walk away."

Toronto business-owner Samuel, 27, quit cold turkey when he found himself devoting an hour a day to poker and sports betting. He spent about \$500 a week. But it was hard to think of it as real money. Without the weight of cash or chips in hand, money becomes simply a "number on a computer," Samuel says.

David, 25, a software developer in Toronto first tried on-line gambling about a year ago. "I thought it was cool that you could play poker from your own house in your underwear."

But he soon realized that it was easy to fall into a trance. "You're just sitting there thinking that some big cards are going to come up," he says. Although he has only spent a couple of hundred dollars in total, he has friends who risk thousands. "I've seen one friend risk \$2,000 on a football game."

"They are usually loud during the wins and quiet when they lose," he says. "There is always something to gamble on, whether it is soccer, football, votes, which movie is going to be No. 1 at the box office."

As the numbers of on-line addicts increase, so do the efforts to break the habit. The good news is that there are new ways for gambling addicts to fight the temptation.

They can first assess their vulnerability to gambling addiction through a quiz at <http://www.gameplanit.com> [<http://www.gameplanit.com>].

Mr. Horbay, the president of Game Planit Interactive Corp., is working on a program with a partner company that will help players predetermine limits and flag risky gambling behaviour according to their financial means and personal background.

Ms. Orvidas recommends GamBlock, a program that can be installed to block gambling sites on computers.

Randy has his own strategies. He tried gambling with "play money" for a couple of months until he felt secure. But "once you make that switch from play money to real money, you can never go back. What happens is you begin to think you're good at it."

Now, he limits himself to spending about \$30 to \$50 at each sitting.

Randy says he will stop gambling if "I get up one morning and I don't have enough money to get to work."

Mary Nersessian is a Globe and Mail reporter.