# Notes

Edited by D'Arcy Jenish

Hooked on video games

There are no 12-step programs yet for kids who can't kick the video-game habit, but Brent Stafford suggests they may be coming. In a persuasive hour-long video, the recent graduate of the masters in communication studies program at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., documents the extent to which today's powerful, virtual-reality video games are purposely designed to engulf young minds in worlds that desensitize them to violence, even killing. Games appeal to a player's emotions through increasingly intense cycles of conflict, challenge and reward—what designers call "ingredients of compulsion." One designer even says on tape: "I like to make games that are addictive."

Stafford worries that the games lure children into what he calls "a digital nirvana, where the body succumbs to the virtual reality." Some of the 600 young players who participated in an SFU study of video games, Stafford says, reported symptoms of clinical addiction: withdrawing from friends, as well as other activities they enjoy, and being unable to stop playing. SFU research also shows that some hard-core players who prefer the most violent and realistic games "kill" as many as 1,000 "avatars" (on-screen characters) in a single night, often in scenes of gory realism. "Video games," Stafford concludes, "are training our kids to celebrate

Bayne Stanley for Maclean's
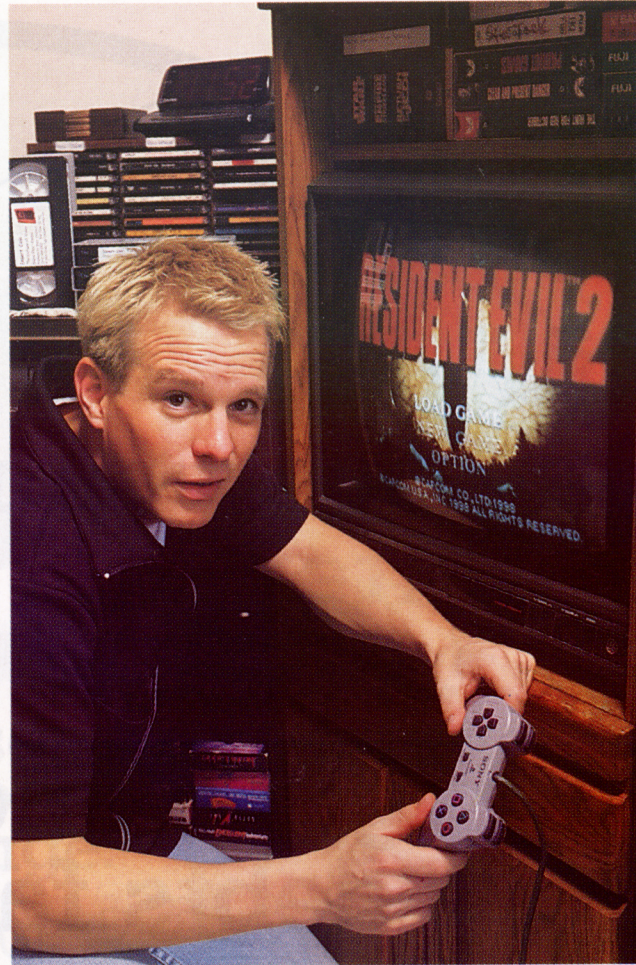
SFU researcher Stafford: a 'digital Nirvana' where the player submits to virtual realities often filled with spectacular 'kills'

violence." For some, he warns, "the repeated experience of killing is going to be translated into behaviour."

At the same time, Stafford says the $17-billion a year video-game industry—bigger than film and television combined—has become the number 1 form of entertainment for children. Parents, he says, should know what their kids are playing—and recognize when a game becomes a compulsion.

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