

**T**wo years ago, Eddie Werner, aged 11, was sexually assaulted and strangled to death by a disturbed teenager, Sam Manzie, while selling candy for charity door-to-door in his home town of Jackson, New Jersey. The murder shocked America, not just because of the violence involved, but also because it highlighted the dangers of interactive internet chat rooms. Sam Manzie was obsessed with the net.

His problems began the previous year, when he met a 43-year-old paroled paedophile, Steve Simmons, in a chat room hosted by internet service provider America Online. They agreed to meet at a local shopping mall, and soon afterwards started having sex.

Their liaison lasted a year. After Manzie confessed to the affair, the local police mounted an undercover investigation into Simmons. According to Manzie's mother, Dolores, they put pressure on Manzie to co-operate and to testify against Simmons. Manzie became increasingly unstable and was put on sedatives. His parents tried to get psychiatric help but the district court ruled that he did not need it.

A few days later Manzie snapped. Unfortunately little Eddie Werner knocked on the wrong door at the wrong time. He was sodomised, strangled, bundled into a suitcase and dumped behind some houses. Manzie was sentenced to 70 years, although an appeal to reduce the sentence is pending. The case against Simmons will be heard later this year.

The internet had been the catalyst for the whole tragic series of events leading up to the murder. Dolores says her son, then 15, was on the net virtually 24 hours a day. He dropped out of high school because of it. Speaking with the benefit of hindsight, she says: "I think letting your kid go on the internet is a bit like

## Encouraged by anonymity, deceit is rife in the chat rooms, but this leads to horror in real life

dropping them off at a playground and saying: 'I'll see you tomorrow'.

"Eight months ago I went on-line to see what it was all about. Within 10 minutes I had all this really sexual stuff coming through. I can't understand how any kid can go there and not get involved with it."

Internet service providers say that it is the parents' responsibility to control their kids. That may ultimately be true but, as Dolores observes: "If you build a car without brakes and someone gets killed you have to assume some responsibility for what has happened." Manzie's story illustrates a growing problem which is being conveniently skirted by many of the internet service providers. Last month an American psychologist published research suggesting that the internet can be as addictive as alcohol, drugs and gambling, disrupting people's lives in much the same way. It is estimated that six per cent of net users — 11 million people worldwide — could be affected.

Dr Kimberly Young, who runs the specialist Center for On-Line Addiction in Philadelphia, reviewed more than 400 cases of internet addiction and found that, contrary to the traditional stereotype of computer nerds, those

# CAUGHT IN

If you're addicted to drugs or alcohol, there are clinics galore. But internet addicts have nowhere to turn. Pete Sawyer investigates

most likely to develop an addiction were middle-aged women and unemployed people, both men and women, although all ages and social groups featured in her study.

Many admitted using the Internet as a way of escaping from day-to-day problems, and to lying to friends and colleagues to conceal the extent of their involvement. Specific addictions ranged from obsessions with porn-sites, compulsive online gambling, shopping, web-surfing and database searches, and creating online friendships in adult chat rooms to the exclusion of real-life friends. The enormous rise in popularity of the chat room over the last three years has pushed the potential for net addiction to new heights. Dr Young herself got interested in the subject after seeing a friend's husband get addicted to internet chat.

The obsessive — and in some cases perverse and anti-social — behaviour encouraged by

America Online subscriber, it was not so much a case of You've Got Mail as You've Got Syphilis. Seven members of the chat room contracted the disease from sexual partners they had met through the room.

The mixture of intimacy and anonymity created a major headache for the San Francisco Health Department when trying to trace others who might have been put at risk. Some of the men knew their partners only through the computer handles they had used. America Online refused to reveal the real names of the chat room members to protect their privacy. But, after posting messages in the chat room, the health department traced their sex partners. The seven had had 99 partners between them in the previous three months, one having had 47. Five of the seven were HIV-positive.

Punch donned latex gloves and paid a visit to some of the adult chat-rooms on AOL and its upmarket sister-service, CompuServe, to find out why they were so popular, and what motivated the people who were there day in, day out. Many admitted to being unhappy, bored, lonely, isolated, or damaged by traumatic events. Others were simply looking for sex. Far from all were addicts. Encouraged by the anonymity of the handles, deceit was rife in the chat rooms, sometimes wreaking havoc in people's real lives.

The lying usually began as an attempt to secure some kind of emotional commitment for a virtual relationship. It could be minor, like lying about age and weight, or something more serious, like lying about marital status. In one case, an Englishman fell in love online with a woman from Texas, who claimed to be separated from her husband. She said she was planning a divorce. He made plans to visit her and bought a ticket, while she booked a hotel for the two of them for a fortnight.

Two days before he was due to leave, she

these rooms has led to broken homes, disease clusters, financial and personal ruin, stalking cases, and, as in the case of Manzie, murder charges. The chat rooms allow relative strangers to develop an intimacy with each other quite quickly, and this can lead to what has been termed "cyber sex", a bit like phone sex except it is done via a keyboard. Often the real identity of the persons present are hidden by fanciful computer nicknames, or handles.

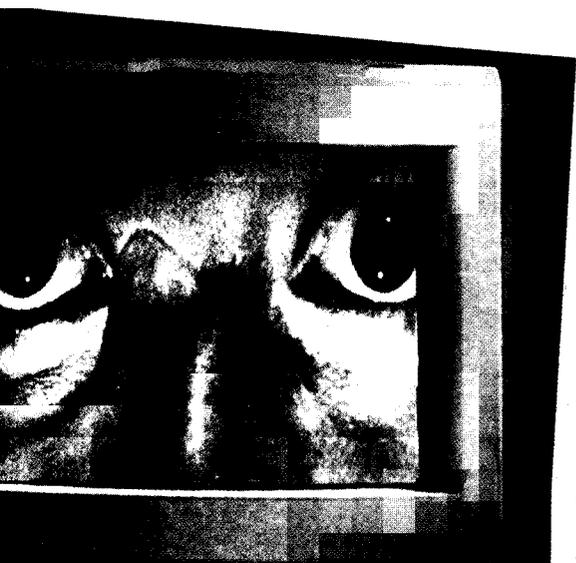
Young estimates that one in five net addicts suffers from what she calls cyber-sexual addiction, either to porn (mainly men) or to erotic chat (mainly women). "Cyber sex is highly arousing to people as the sex is mostly mental rather than physical," she says.

The ability to meet other people online easily through the rooms, together with ever-cheaper flights has in turn created a real-life culture of swinging easy sex among some chat room users, with alarming consequences. Some may be looking for romance, but many more are flying all over the world just for a shag.

The whole process was romanticised in the film *You've Got Mail*, starring Meg Ryan. However, for the members of a San Francisco gay chat room called SFM4M, created by an



# THE MOUSE TRAP



cancelled the meeting. There was no divorce. She had never been separated.

We were told the story of a girl from Georgia and a man from Canada who met in a chat room, fell in "cyber love" and started calling each other. The man always whispered because he said he didn't want to wake his flatmate, a girl. The affair blossomed and they agreed to meet in real life. But soon afterwards, the flatmate logged on to the chat room with devastating news. She said the man, who had said he worked for a soft drinks company, had been killed in a car accident in South Africa. His online lover from Georgia was devastated, but one

or two regulars in the chat room didn't fall for the story. They investigated and found that the man had never worked for the soft drinks company and had never lived at the address he had given. The Canadian embassy in

South Africa knew nothing of the death. Eventually they found out that the flatmate was a lesbian. When it had become too real, with the threat of an imminent visit, the woman had shut down the affair.

We found gender- and sexuality-swapping to be surprisingly common in the adult chat rooms. Gay men said they would pretend to be women to lure unsuspecting straight men. Someone who claimed to be a bisexual man said he frequented the chat rooms for gay sex because he "couldn't get away with doing it in real life". He apologised for typing so slowly. "I am typing with one hand," he pointed out.

Another person, who said she was divorced, told me: "I have two boys that need me and I don't have time to find someone nice. I work two part-time jobs and I go to college."

Asked how many online lovers she had a day, she said: "Usually one in the morning and one at night."

"Different ones?"

"Mostly. If my regulars don't message me, I find someone who is looking for it."

Her comments were typical of many who were seeking out virtual online friends. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a lot of unhappily married men and women and divorcees — often with children — trawl the internet looking for online sex or affairs. It provides an escape route.

In America, the Center for On-Line Addiction (Cola) increasingly gets called in to provide expert witnesses in divorce cases where "cyber affairs" are alleged to be the cause of the marriage breakdown.

Another specialist centre in America, the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery (IIAR), has treated parents who have spent so much time on the net that they neglected their children's well-being and were charged with child abuse and neglect.

The internet service-providers supply the means by which the drug is delivered, and stand to make millions out of their customers' compulsive behaviour. America Online and its up-market sister CompuServe alone, between them, have more than 20 million subscribers worldwide. They blame the problems created by their chat rooms, and any resultant internet addiction, on individuals, Rachel O'Neill, public relations manager for the UK division of America Online, says: "We don't see it as a problem amongst our members. We believe that being online should enhance your life and not dominate it." So it is left to organisations like Cola and the IIAR to counsel the growing number of people affected. As yet there is no equivalent organisation in Britain.

The internet is, and always will be, a fairly accurate reflection of every corner of the human psyche, good and bad. The chat rooms are highly profitable, and the truth is — as with any addiction — there is money to be made out of the addict. □