

Are Video Games The Problem With Today's Kids?

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It was undoubtedly with great effort that local parents earlier this month pried their slack-jawed and twitchy-thumbed children away from their newly unwrapped video games and sent them back to the boring by comparison live-action world of school and homework. Johnny and Emily are returned to the classroom, where teachers are laboring tirelessly to repair the brain damage done, in time for the next long weekend or school vacation.

Or so non-gamers believe. But skepticism of new media is a tradition as old as ancient Greece, when Socrates worried that relying on written texts, rather than the oral tradition, would “create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories.”

Criticism of video games is merely the latest example of the tendency of older generations to demonize new and unfamiliar forms of entertainment. Waltz music and waltzing were condemned in the 19th century as “intoxicating” and “depraved”. Novels were once considered to “poison the mind and corrupt the morals of the young, who waste their time on sofas immersed in dangerous fantasy worlds.” Films were denounced in the early 20th century as “an evil pure and simple, destructive of social interchange.” And in the 1950s rock ‘n’ roll music was said to turn people into “devil worshippers”, and comic books were accused of turning children into drug addicts and criminals.

Today it is hard to see what all the fuss was about.

Every generation of adults sees new forms of media and entertainment – and the social changes they stir – as a threat to the rightful order of things. There is always this pattern: old stuff is respected, and new stuff is junk. Young people adopt a new form of entertainment, and older people are spooked by its unfamiliarity and condemn it. Eventually, in every case, the young grow up and the new medium becomes accepted, even passé, at which point another new form of “shocking” entertainment appears and the cycle begins again.

Despite their widespread popularity – most gamers are adults – video games remain, in the minds of many, brainless or, worse, brain-destroying junk. Rather than harmless fun, many see video games as a digital menace that is sexualizing our children and turning them into bloodthirsty zombies. While legitimate reasons exist for concern – too many children are indeed gaming with games intended only for adults – those opposed to video games might be surprised to learn that not one of the ten best-selling games for the PlayStation and Xbox consoles in 2006 were shoot ‘em ups. Most were, in fact, sports titles.

Non-gamers often assume that video games, like so many electronic media, are designed to deliver instant gratification. The opposite is the case. The best video games are brilliantly designed puzzles. Finishing them requires players to construct hypotheses, solve problems, develop strategies, learn the rules through trial and error, maintain discipline, juggle several different tasks, evaluate risks and make quick decisions. All much like the ultimate game of life itself.

The usual video game structure teaches players that the best course of action is always to accept the in-game system and to succeed within it. Even critics acknowledge that video games are in ways instructing children. They’re learning to analyze complex systems with many interacting variables, to find and validate information within vast databases, and to build and maintain extensive social networks crossing both virtual and real-world environments. It is rather the sometimes violent and sexually explicit content of this instruction to which critics rightly object.

And yet, during the period in which gaming has become widespread in America, violent crime has fallen steeply. If games really did make people more violent, it ought to be obvious, given that at least half of Americans play computer and video games. Perhaps, as some observers have suggested, gaming actually makes people less violent, by acting as a release valve.

Nonetheless, games should be age-rated, just as films are, and retailers should not sell adult-rated games to children any more than they should sell them adult-rated films. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for keeping graphic violence and sexuality away from the naïve eyes of children falls upon parents, who by and large in this respect are falling down on the job. Most mature games played by children are bought for them by their parents.

So are games inherently good, or bad? Actually, they are neither, like books, films, music, the internet, or any other form of entertainment. All can be used to depict sex and violence. All can be used to educate or inform.

The largest problem inherent with video games and other forms of modern media is not so much what children are seeing, it is with what they are not doing, tethered for endless hours to their electronic gadgets and mesmerizing screens. They are not having conversations. They are not having family meals. They are not reading. They are not playing outside. They are not building, creating, or pretending. They are not taking time to just veg. And they are not getting to bed on time, or sleeping enough. It's not so much that video games rot the brain – it's what our children are not doing that is going to rot their life.

Like most anything in life, age-appropriate video games played in moderation, and with parental supervision, are largely an okay thing. Kids need balance in their lives: surfing and gaming, alongside school and homework, and old-fashioned reading and playing and imagining and creating.

But for children such balance is not always intuitive. It must be modeled and molded by parents, many of whom in today's overscheduled world are searching for it themselves, all the while asking video games and television to baby sit their children while they look.

Video games are not the "problem" with today's kids. Lack of balance in our lives and by extension those of our children is the problem. Video games will ultimately become just another accepted medium, alongside books, music and films. And in a few decades graying gamers will click their tongues at some new evil that threatens to destroy the younger generation's moral fiber.