

Our Twitchy-Thumbed Future: Male Youth and Their Video Game Obsessions

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For more than ten years my office colleagues and I have conducted a poll of sorts. Every eleven or twelve year-old once roomed and measured is given a questionnaire to complete while waiting for the doctor. Within a lengthy list of questions screening for signs of mental, physical, or academic stress is planted this question: what career aspirations do you have?

In other words, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Pre-teen girls have since the late 1990s varied little from a core group of responses: vet, nurse, teacher, doctor, engineer, writer, singer, actress, volleyball player. Sometimes they leave the question blank. Sometimes they answer “I don’t know yet”. These uncertain ones are given reassurance.

The boys, they worry me more and more. As someone who at this awkward age pined to be a professional baseball player, or failing that a star pilot the likes of Luke Skywalker, who was making the jump through hyperspace to join the rebellion during the fall just after my eleventh birthday, I understand that the career aspirations of a sixth-grader are poorly predictive of his eventual livelihood.

Nonetheless, I worry for our societal prospects – not to mention my retirement – when nearly half of eleven and twelve year-old boys answer “video game designer” or “video game programmer” as their life’s ambition, as has become the case in recent years. It appears our national hopes rest on an emerging market of a billion or more young Asian consumers with an unquenchable thirst for American-made video games for to occupy the coming glut of basement-living game designers with suspect hygiene.

You shouldn’t worry, you may be thinking, they’re just kids. Oh, but I do worry, over canaries and coal mines. Consider that the average school-aged child in the U.S. today spends forty-five hours each week screen-bound, watching inane programming or playing video games or, as is far more the case with girls, “chatting” on social media, and you too should be concerned.

They’re just kids, let them dream to be whatever they want, right? What difference is there between a dream of becoming a professional athlete and one of becoming a salaried video game designer? But for the tiniest sliver of the population, both are equally unattainable goals.

Yes, and yet the pre-adolescent or adolescent who has a sincere passion for becoming an elite athlete – be it dancer or gymnast or runner or football player – will train and train, sweat and toil, taste success and learn from failure year upon year to pursue a chance at glory. He will work hard at school to maintain his grades, because he won’t be allowed to compete otherwise. She will maintain her GPA so to remain in the chase for a collegiate scholarship.

The dedicated young athlete – or singer, or actress, or writer, and so on – will endure the long and difficult slog until their goals are met, or more likely until they change, in which case the learned lessons of tenacity and perseverance will serve him or her well towards new ends.

By contrast, the young person who spends countless hours living on imaginary cyber-worlds often lets his grades suffer. His homework and essays and projects go unfinished, or are completed slapdash at the last minute. Nights are sleep-shortened, and days kept alert by high-calorie energy drinks. Waistlines expand, and the circle of friends contracts. Curiosity shrivels, and future horizons shrink, as the social and academic skills requisite for adulthood success and happiness are not learned.

Of course, not every obsessive young gamer has so bleak a future, so dire a forecast. Some will snap out of it, and return to reality with advancing maturity. A few will truly become tech-savvy, and evolve their youthful gaming fixation into a technological vocation. The 21st-century does and will continue to need its computer nerds.

So too will the century continue to need its teachers, nurses, doctors, veterinarians, mechanics, engineers, architects, builders, welders, electricians, police officers, firefighters, soldiers, and, yes, even its lawyers. There will not be enough young women to fill all of these roles and more like them, roles essential to the function of society. It is for this reason we should fret that so many male youth today see their future as simply an extension of their twitchy-thumbed childhood.