Video Games: Could They Be Hurting You?

Prepared by

Alexandra Grosset
OA1040
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Alexandra Grosset

Nicole Menzies

OA1040

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Twenty-first century children and youth in America spend 53 hours on average a week surrounded by media and technology. "This generation spends more time in front of screens than any other single activity including school, family, sports, or even sleep!" ("Media and Advertising" 1). Of course, while there are both advantages and disadvantages for children spending their leisurely time playing video games, studies suggest more harm is done than good ("Media and Advertising" 1). Playing video games has a negative effect on an individual's behavior, health, and social relationships.

To start with, we must define what addiction is. Psychologist Professor Mark Griffiths has established a relationship between online gaming and gambling addiction. Although not as common as traditional addictions, gaming addiction is a very serious problem in today's society ("S Korean dies" 1). Unfortunately, there is very little help available for this addiction today because it is not taken seriously yet, Griffiths states. He considers individuals who play more than 80 hours a week to be "excessive" users. He explains that "healthy enthusiasm" and "unhealthy addiction" are two different responses to video game playing. When it comes to addiction, however, it is the "extreme players" who leave their jobs and abandon their partners and loved ones ("S Korean dies" 2). For example, a 28-year-old South Korean man played a computer game for 50 hours straight. What seemed to be a harmless hobby led to an untimely end for this young man since he

died of heart failure shortly after. Not surprisingly, he had been terminated from his job due to his excessive video game playing ("S Korean dies" 1).

In addition to losing one's employment and isolating oneself from the family, desensitization can also occur in users. Counselors and therapists use this method to help their clients overcome their personal fears and phobias (Sabella 1). After this process, the individual no longer reacts to the source of fear and can essentially ignore it. This process is helpful for medical students to become effective surgeons, for example. Being exposed to "distressing sights, sounds, and smells of surgery" makes them more familiar to medical environments and more competent as surgeons (Sabella 2). Unfortunately, however, desensitization can mean negative consequences, too. To measure a child's degree of desensitization, we observe the heart rate, secretion levels, and breathing rate while the child faces the stimulus. Shockingly, only twenty minutes of violent video game playing can cause a person to become less physiologically aroused by real violence. This means that the child will not develop appropriate negative feelings when exposed to violent situations in real life. For instance, if a person is attacked in the street, the child may be quite passive and unwilling to help. Likewise, if a child constantly plays violent video games, he or she is more likely to act out violently. This can be detrimental for a child's personal growth and development because of the sophisticated design of video games intended for adult gamers. As he or she gets older, the portrayal of violence in these games appears to be "more realistic, sophisticated, and vivid" (Sabella 2).

In order to truly understand the issue of addiction and investigate its consequences, we must first ask the following questions: Why do people get addicted to playing video games? What is so engaging about this activity that gets people "hooked"?

There are three needs that video games aim to fulfill and they are competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Rigby and Ryan 13). "It is precisely because today's games have developed the ability to satisfy multiple needs so well (and are continuing to get better at it) that they engage us so compellingly" (Rigby and Ryan 15). The video game industry is a thriving, diverse business. Like any other business, its main goal is to invite a wide and diverse range of people and win them over with their product. A video game not only must entice the video game player but it also must engage them for long periods of time. If video game players understand the psychology of human needs, desires, and thought patterns, they will be more successful in creating a positive, interactive experience for users time and time again.

As humans, we feel good when we feel we have accomplished something at the end of the day. Rigby and Ryan identify this as the "need for competence or mastery" (15). This is constant all our lives—from the moment we are born right up to adulthood. Interestingly enough, Rigby and Ryan have likened video games to sports in that they both "evoke strong feelings of excitement, achievement, and mastery" (17). Players seek challenges so they can continuously reach new levels of mastery and like sports players, they will continue even if pain or injury occurs. This can include anything from an injured hand to a full bladder in order to reach their goal or the next level in the game. Like sports players, video game players feel ecstatic when their goal or score is reached. Because of the competitive nature of both activities, players will brag or boast when a certain level or skill is mastered.

Secondly, humans desire autonomy. We seek choice, opportunity, and freedom in our lives and try everything we can to maintain it. "When people experience autonomy,

they are happier, healthier, and more motivated. And as with mastery experiences, people are naturally motivated to seek out and stay engaged with those activities that instill a sense of personal autonomy" (Rigby and Ryan 39). In reality, there are usually many things on our "to-do" list that can be quite wearisome, monotonous, and even boring. However, in the world of video games, your world melts away and for a little while, you can be someone else with a different list of responsibilities and opportunities. Scott Rigby and Richard Ryan explain this concept in more detail:

> Within the digital worlds of video games, … such constraints evaporate. The screen lights up and suddenly you become the center of the action. The characters in the game are waiting for you to speak to them, to decide what you [would] like to pursue and how you [would] like to spend your time. And the rules of reality that we all find so discouraging sometimes— the delayed gratifications, constraints, and unfair treatment—melt away. Rewards are freely and frequently given as we travel from one exotic locale to another nearly instantaneously. … Games have been designed specifically to provide us with a rich landscape of choice that is immediately available. (43-44)

This is a very significant breakthrough for games because video game players essentially feel that this activity is a very personal and rewarding experience. Some video game users may feel a loss of control or a sense of purpose in their lives and so, time spent embodying a fictional character in an alternate reality can fill a "void" in their lives.

Finally, the third need that we all have in common is our need for relatedness. We seek to connect and make friends with others in our daily lives, and so it is a natural

instinct ingrained in all of us. "We are simply evolved to connect and to feel like we belong" (Rigby and Ryan 65). Everyone needs to feel loved and we search for meaningful friendships and relationships in order to feel happiness. When this is taken away from us, we often feel devastated, lonely, and isolated. The same can be true for video games. Aside from evoking a sense of accomplishment and autonomy, video games provide a sense of community. Nowadays, video games are quite sophisticated in being able to link several users from around the world simultaneously. This provides a unique and enticing cultural experience for users and the argument that this activity makes individuals antisocial and isolated is quite outdated.

Having identified the reasons for addiction, there are negative consequences for this behavior. First of all, an individual can show early signs of aggression from playing violent video games. Some games provide the opportunity for children to make an obvious choice to engage in immoral, violent behavior and reward them for it (Arnett 79). The Electronic Software Rating Board or ESRB is responsible for rating electronic games. Alarmingly, "games rated E (Everyone) contain more than one violent interaction per minute on average, whereas games rated T (Teen) and M (Mature) contain more than four" (Arnett 80-81). Gamers typically embody characters using a variety of weapons to perform a myriad of violent acts. This usually results in the injury and even death of several victims, which can often be portrayed offensively. Furthermore, violence is usually rewarded—rarely, if ever, justified and almost never punished. Rigby and Ryan use the term "trait aggressiveness" to describe a person's overall aggression level (128). This term represents a person's tendency to be argumentative, how he or she deals with hostility, and how quick he or she is to anger. Consequently, psychologists have

discovered that people who are highly aggressive and hostile are more likely to choose a game with higher violent content (Rigby and Ryan 128). However, even for more aggressive individuals, more violent content within the game did not add to their level of enjoyment while playing. This basically means that they identify more easily with the role of a violent character—not necessarily with the actual game itself (Rigby and Ryan 129). Likewise, American students aged thirteen to fifteen who are more inclined to argue with teachers and engage in fights at school spend more time playing violent video games. The issue of the matter here is the chicken or the egg dilemma: is the child naturally violent or is the video game creating a violent child? Aside from being controversial, this is a tricky question to answer. However, there is substantial evidence that suggests that children directly learn behaviors by observing behaviors around them. For instance, university researchers L. Rowell Huesmann, Brad Bushman, Craig Andersen, and Douglas Gentile, and several others prove that violent matter promotes aggressive behavior. In their experiment, players may either choose to play a violent or nonviolent game. After this, they have the opportunity to punish someone. Consequently, researchers discovered that short-term exposure to video game violence is significantly linked to increases in aggression (Rigby and Ryan 132).

Secondly, playing video games can have negative consequences for an individual's wellbeing. Vision and eye problems can arise from watching a screen for extended amounts of time. A person's bones, joints, and muscles can start becoming stiff from sitting in one place for a long time. An example of this is carpal tunnel syndrome or repetitive stress injuries. Also, a child who is inactive and spends all their time playing video games puts him or herself at risk of becoming overweight or even obese. All of

these health problems can be avoided if video games are played in moderation. Youth must be taught to maintain balance in their lives (Sabella 4).

To illustrate the dangers of obsessively playing video games, consider the following case. On August 9, 2005, a South Korean man played the computer game, *Starcraft*, for 50 hours almost non-stop. He died of heart failure soon after. The man had barely slept and had not eaten much during this time. The man only halted playing when he needed to go to the washroom and to take the occasional nap. Police identified heart failure as the cause of death most likely because of the level of exhaustion the individual was in ("S Korean dies" 1).

Finally, playing video games can influence an individual's perspective on gender and stereotypes can begin to form in that person's mind, which can lead to the development of superficial, short-lived romantic relationships. When women are depicted in video games, they are often "hypersexualized" in their appearance. "They most often serve as victims or prizes and occupy stereotypical gender roles such as brazenly sexualized beings and objects of sexual desire" (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 809). In terms of appearance, female characters are often portrayed showing lots of cleavage with low/revealing necklines or sleeveless outfits. Most female characters are typically "non-playable, meaning that they cannot be played by the gamer—thus underscoring their secondary and exiguous status" (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 809). Even if she does serve a function in the plot and participates in the action, her defining feature usually is her sexuality. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro found that "video games often present exaggerated gender stereotypes (e.g., hypersexualized female body), communicate unrealistic standards for women's bodies, and encourage the treatment of women as

sexual objects" (810). Subsequently, exposure to these images has shown to have a negative impact on girls' and women's self-esteem. With unrealistic body types, women feel inferior about their physical appearance. Moreover, while playing, men view women as sexual beings primarily, often forgetting or ignoring other qualities they possess. The danger of this is that men may start pursuing romantic relationships primarily based on looks and nothing else.

While there is a correlation between excessive video game playing and an individual's violent behavior, some would say that there is none. In this case, an individual's personality determines his or her behavior and media has little to no effect. However, one has to realize that the media does play a significant role in shaping our values and belief system. The fact that people can be desensitized to violent video games and even violent movies agrees with the theory that if we frequently expose ourselves to violent, gruesome scenes and images we might actually emulate some of this behavior.

Additionally, some may argue with the idea of the gender stereotype within the video game's plot or the appearance of female characters. The reasoning behind this is perhaps that the people playing these games subconsciously already have fully formed ideas of female roles in society and their appearances. Again, however, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's study has refuted these ideas. As seen with the link between aggression and video games, the gender stereotypes inherent in (often violent) video games certainly influence both male and female perspectives.

As we have learned, there are several negative consequences for youth spending the majority of their time playing video games. Witnessing frequent violent acts and gruesome, bloody images too frequently can desensitize a person and can make them

passive and unwilling to help in real-life violent situations. What's more, sitting in front of screens all day can affect a person's eyesight. Also, gaining weight is likely to happen because of how inactive the individual becomes. Last but not least, the appearance of females in many video games is highly unrealistic, subjective, and overly sexualized. They usually play a minor, insignificant role or something to be "won". Male video game players start to have unrealistic expectations and may even start becoming sexist towards women. Female video game players usually feel inferior to the unrealistic body type portrayed in video games and suffer from low self-esteem because of it. They may even start to develop body issues and eating disorders.

All in all, it appears there are more disadvantages than advantages to playing video games. It can alter your mood, cost you your relationships, and even cost you your life. Something that should be light-hearted and fun may not be, after all.

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