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GOOD VIDEO GAMES + GOOD LEARNING

Collected Essays on Video Games,
Learning and Literacy



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The Wild West and space were seen as new frontiers. Video games and the virtual worlds to which they give birth are, too, a new frontier and we don't know where they will lead. It would be a shame, indeed, not to find out because, like any frontier, they were fraught with risk and the unknown. But, then, I have already admitted that all of us in the complex modern world are frightened of risk and the unknown. But that, I will argue, is a disease of the soul that good games can help alleviate, though, of course, not cure.

Some people may say, well, he's really arguing it's all about escape from the perils and pitfalls of real life. But, then, I will say there are escapes that lead nowhere, like hard drugs, and escapes like scholarly reflection and gaming that can lead to the imagination of new worlds, new possibilities to deal with those perils and pitfalls, new possibilities for better lives for everyone. Our emotions and imagination—our souls—need food for the journeys ahead.

CHAPTER 2

Video Games, Violence, and Effects

Good and Bad

"Much of the contempt for social conventions for which the rising generation is blamed is due to the reading of this poisonous sort of fiction." "The harm done . . . is simply incalculable. I wish I could label each one of these books 'Explosives! Guaranteed to Blow Your Boy's Brains Out.'" These quotes are from the early 20th century and the dangerous books are books like *The Hardy Boys* and *The Rover Boys* (Rehak 2005, p. 97). No one today, I hope and suspect, finds the *The Hardy Boys* threatening and there is no outcry against Nancy Drew, even when she's in a computer game.

There is, of course, an outcry today against violence in video games. Here, in my view, is what we know from the research on this issue thus far: Under contrived laboratory conditions, people who play, say, *Castle Wolfenstein*, will, afterwards, blast a competitor in a button pushing task with a noise blast .21 seconds longer than someone who played *Myst* (Anderson & Dill 2000: the

researchers don't say whether or not the *Myst* players fell asleep or were so becalmed that their energy level was lowered). Additionally, it is pretty clear that video games can make young boys, in particular, aroused for a short period of time after play, an effect that seems to follow from pretend-play as super heroes as well, if schools that ban super-hero shirts are to be trusted (Anderson & Bushman 2001; Sherry, Curtis, & Sparks 2001). Finally, despite some claims to the contrary, the fact of the matter is that the effect size of video-game play on aggression is smaller than the effect size for television (Sherry 2006), thereby rendering the claim that there is something special about the interactivity of games as a source of aggression suspect. None of this is to say that future research won't discover other additional information, pro or con.

However, none of the current research even remotely suggests video games lead to real-life violence in any predictable way. As a good many people already know, since it has been repeatedly pointed out by conservative politicians and policy makers as a sign of the effectiveness of their social policies (e.g., Fukuyama 1999), there has been a pronounced decrease in violent crime since the earlier 1990s, the very time when violent video games were introduced, e.g., *Mortal Kombat*, *Doom*, *Quake* (Sherry 2006: p. 231). Even more to the point, if playing violent video games leads to a statistical increase in violence we should see a rise in violent crime, say, after QuakeCon each year, an event which draws thousands of gamers to play violent games. And the streets of L.A. should be awash with violence each year after E3. So far no one has found any such thing. On the other hand, some researchers have argued that video games have beneficial effects in regard to violence: for example, that teens use violent games as a way to manage feelings of anger or as an outlet for feelings of a lack of control (e.g., Gee 2005; Kestenbaum & Weinstein 1985).

Finally, let me point out one problem that stands in the way of keeping M-rated games away from children. Carding purchasers of M-rated games might seem like a good idea, until you realize parents of young children today are fast becoming young enough to be gamers themselves. Indeed, I have found, in giving talks to school children, that often they have access to M-rated games because their parents have purchased them to play them themselves. As this trend continues, carding would be less than fully effective and education will be the most effective tool to solve the problem, as, in reality, it is today and has been in the case of cigarettes. Of course, controls on advertising to young children are intelligent as well.

We know that human beings respond to media—movies, for example—as if what was happening on the screen was actually happening in the world (Reeves & Nass 1996). That's why people cry at movies. People are this way because their evolutionary past had no screens and screens have not been around long

enough for people to have evolved a different set of emotional responses to virtual realities as they have to real ones. This effect has long been known, is well studied, and has long been exploited in the market place. It has also long been known that people can choose to suppress this effect and that, of course, poorly designed media can ruin it.

That we respond emotionally to media as if they were real—and that, indeed, this is part of what makes media powerful to us humans—does not imply that people will go so far as to leave the movie theater and act out or respond to the events in the film. If this were so, our streets would be full of movie-inspired sex, violence, and comedy. What is striking, in fact, is how vanishingly few humans actually act out the emotional responses they have had to media. The reason is relatively simple: action requires the cooperation of our affective (emotional) responses and our higher-order thought processes and, at the level of conscious control and awareness, all but the very sick know a movie or a game is not reality. What is equally striking is that certainly a great many more people have acted out their emotional responses to books—at least “sacred” ones like the Bible—in the real world, often in terms of violence, though, of course, also often in terms of doing good, than have ever done so in regard to a movie or a video game (though *Birth of a Nation* comes to mind as an example of a movie that inspired real world violence, perhaps because people “read” it as a documentary).

Here is something else we know. As previously mentioned, movies, books, television, or video games—i.e., technologies—do not have any effects, good or bad, all by themselves. The question as to whether video games (or computers, or television, or what have you) are good for you (or children) or bad for you (or children) is actually meaningless. Technologies have effects—and different ones—**only as they are situated within specific contexts** (e.g., Gee 2004; Greenfield 1984a and b; Gauntlett 1998). So we always have to ask—though reporters rarely do—how the technology was used and in what context it was being used. For example, we have known for some time that television is good for children's cognitive growth if they are watching it in a reflective state of mind; for example, because an adult is interacting with them and discussing what they are watching with them (Greenfield 1984a and b). If the child is just passively consuming the television, then it is not necessarily of any great use. It is also clear that children raised in a culture of violence or abuse may consume media—not to mention their real-world interactions—as fodder for their anger and confusion. In these cases, we would hope, of course, that policy makers would speak to the real-world culture of violence or abuse and not just the virtual images the child sees.

People have the idea that video games are somehow more potent than movies or books because the player does things in the virtual world via his or her avatar. This is akin, I suppose, to the claim that because I have planted lots of

corn in *Harvest Moon* I will run out and plant corn in my back yard—in reality we have as little real corn from *Harvest Moon* as we have real killings from *Grand Theft Auto* (which is not to rule out the rare case of either—given enough time even low probability events occur—though, of course, by definition, rarely). In my view, the power of video games is not in operating an avatar *per se*. Rather, it is in situating one's body and mind in a world from the perspective of the avatar, whether this is a policeman in *S.W.A.T. 4*, a waitress in *Diner Dash*, or a young farmer in *Harvest Moon*. What video games do—better than any other medium in my view—is let people understand a world from the inside. What does it feel like to be a *S.W.A.T.* team member? What's it like to act like one? To accept for a time and place the values of one? What do ideas and words mean from the position in which *S.W.A.T.* team members stand? Do I like this way of looking at and being in the world or not? What all this means is not that I will run out and pretend to be a *S.W.A.T.* team member—or even sign up for real training—it means, first and foremost that *S.W.A.T. 4* is primarily a tool for *understanding*. The emotional response *S.W.A.T. 4* triggers—thanks to our human response to media—deepens that understanding.

This is the source of a video game's great pleasure—for me, it is just exhilarating to be in the world as Solid Snake, actually to see and act on the world as he can and does: to play in the world by his rules. But this is, in my view, also the great potential that video games hold. They are new tools for letting people understand from the inside out the worlds other people inhabit or worlds no one has yet seen (Gee 2003, 2004, 2005). If we have a *Full Spectrum Warrior* that lets me see and be in the world as a soldier, why can't we have a *Full Spectrum Scientist*? Of course, we will never get one as long we demonize and trivialize the medium of video games. Understanding does not lead to acceptance or action—we humans are still choosers, but real understanding can lead to better choices. I enjoyed *Operation Flashpoint* immensely and it made me sure I would never want to be a soldier if I could ethically avoid it. Ditto for *S.W.A.T. 4*—I couldn't even take the pressure in my living room, let alone want it in my real life, but it is a great game and I really appreciate and admire *S.W.A.T.* team members now.

There IS a danger here, in my view, though. The danger exists if games show, or kids see, only one world, one world view, only one narrow type of game. Real intellectual and ethical growth comes from having been in many worlds, some of them different enough to get you thinking for yourself. So I would not ban games—ban worlds—but mandate lots and lots of them. Again, too bad, there is no *Full Spectrum Astronaut*, *Biologist*, *Urban Planner* (oops, there's *SimCity*), *Community Activist*, *Doctor*, *Craftsman*, or *Public Health Official* (scouring the world for viruses before they kill us all). For that matter, there should be a *Full Spectrum Virus*, so we all know what the world looks and feels like from the perspective

of a virus. But none of this means we should get rid of *Metal Gear Solid*, *Thief*, *S.W.A.T. 4*, *Grand Theft Auto*, or *Diner Dash*. It does mean, perhaps, that we should all think about how to deepen the moral dimensions of all these games, enrich them yet more as thinking/reflective spaces—my prediction, by the way, is that this will make them more fun. But, then, witness *Shadow the Hedgehog*, where the (even young) player can choose moment-by-moment to support one side or another while seeking to find out what exactly constitutes in this world being good or bad—which, after all, often involves, even in the real world, trying to find out what the “big picture” is.

Good video games are thinking tools. Their deepest pleasures are cognitive. The “drug” the video game industry discovered was learning—humans love it when it's done right. We need to discuss the content of games—just as we do the content of books and movies—as a society. We need to ensure that there are lots of different worlds on offer. We need to educate parents about the good games can do their kids when their content is appropriate for their age and the game is part of effective adult-child interactions—just as with books, television, and movies. We need to educate how, under other conditions, games, like books, television, and movies, can waste their children's time, even if they are not violent. But, the most important thing, in the end, is that we educate ourselves about how to draw the most good from this new and powerful technology, one that has so captured our children and, for some of us, ourselves.