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Gaming Smart

What comes to mind when thinking of the stereotypical video gamer? Is it the image of a teenage boy playing Xbox in the basement, yelling at the online player who just hit his character with a headshot? Or is it a ten-year-old logging on to *Minecraft* after coming home from school, getting back to work on the giant treehouse they've been building? Or it might just be a young adult playing a mobile game on the train to work. Whatever image pops up first, it is clear that gaming is becoming more and more integrated into our society, becoming a staple for most households and entering children's lives at and before 4 years old (Blumberg 72). However, as gaming culture grows, so does the debate surrounding its effects. Society is split on whether video games are helping gamers or harming them. Some, like technology journalist Jack Flanagan, argue that gamers are trivializing the harmful effects that violent video games can have: "the psychology of all this isn't uplifting: Violent video games are linked to real-world violence, and we should stop pretending otherwise." Others, like reporter Andrew Leonard, find this to be a close-minded view of a very diverse picture. He believes that "video gaming culture should not, cannot, be reduced to young men screaming profanities as they play *Grand Theft Auto V* on their dedicated consoles. Gaming, today, encompasses much, much more." The truth is that neither of these viewpoints are necessarily wrong, but they fail to see the whole picture. In fact, the effects of video games on gamers' thoughts and actions are as diverse as the games and

the gamers themselves. Not only is much of gaming culture focused around games that do not promote violence, the effect of the games vary heavily depending on the gamer, not just the games themselves.

Of course, the biggest and most divisive question in this debate is whether violent video games actually cause violent behavior. There have been many, many studies attempting to answer this question, and they have produced mixed results. One study found no link between violent games and violent thoughts when the subjects self-reported their feelings after playing (Ferguson), and another found that when using a different, association-based test to measure levels of aggression, there was a significant link between violent games and aggressive thoughts—but only for boys (Zheng and Zhang). Both of these studies noted that the violent games caused negative but submissive emotions, such as stress and fear, in girls. It was an intriguing result, especially considering the fact that the “stereotypical” gamer is portrayed as a man the vast majority of the time. The latter study, conducted in southwest China by a pair of researchers, went a step further. They sorted the children in their experiment into two categories: ones with a history of aggression and ones without. They found a statistically significant increase in aggression in kids that already had relatively high aggression at the start of the experiment, but not in kids that were not considered aggressive. Clearly, the effect this game had on the kids was dictated by the kids’ existing temperaments. Knowing this, it suddenly makes more sense that neither study found girls to be more aggressive after playing the violent game. After all, media and societal trends have always conditioned boys to be more pushy and assertive, and that has translated into a higher level of aggression in boys. On the other hand, girls are conditioned to be more meek and gentle, and so they are rarely as aggressive as young boys. The violent game

heightened the boys' already present feelings of aggression as well as the girls' already present feelings of submission. It seems clear, then, that violent video games aren't the cause of violence, but they can magnify it. They need to be looked at with a critical eye, but part of that criticism is making sure to not reduce the effect they have down to "they make people violent". The psychological effects of violent video games are variable, and potential gamers should be mindful of the potential effects of these games without caving into the paranoia surrounding them.

But then, of course, not all video games are violent. And when they do have combat or action elements, for many games that isn't the focus. Many Nintendo games, such as *Pokémon* or *The Legend of Zelda*, contain cartoon action, but it would be a stretch to call them truly "violent". That is because the message of these games is not "killing will get you to your goal", it is "friendship conquers all" or "everyone deserves kindness" (with the occasional "defeat the monsters attacking your home" sprinkled in). These games are a bit of a gray area when it comes to defining "violent" video games, but it is safe to say that they do not carry as heavy a risk as the quintessential violent games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*. And besides, there are still plenty of games that carry no elements of violence whatsoever. An overlooked yet extremely influential part of the gaming industry is mobile gaming, and many of the most popular mobile games are purely based around things like puzzle-solving, reaction times, and creativity. Even ignoring that category, there is still the nonviolent game that has been so wildly successful that it seems to have become the poster face of gaming for kids and young teens: *Minecraft*. As of April 2016, the LEGO-style building game had over 100 million registered players and had become the third-best-selling game in history, selling 10,000 copies per day (Thompson). *Minecraft* is

virtually the opposite of the infamous violent video games, and yet it is a staple of every young gamer's game library. The game focuses on building, experimenting, and exploring. Although there are a few elements of action in the core game (such as hunting animals and defeating monsters like zombies and skeletons) there is no blood, no imagery coming anywhere close to graphic, and no player-versus-player combat in the singleplayer version of the game. A common mistake that people against video games make is reducing the industry down to its most violent, which causes them to fail to see the impact of all of the other types of games out there and renders their view of gaming culture inaccurate.

So what effects do these less violent games have on their players? As expected, it depends on the game. One study found that playing the popular mobile game *Bejeweled* improved reaction time and attentiveness (Stroud and Whitbourne). First-person shooters, despite tending to have violent or graphic content, do have positive effects as well, namely that they have been found to actually improve a player's eyesight (Collins). And cyberpsychologist Bernie Good has theorized that gaming in general satisfies the innate human need to feel accomplished, and that multiplayer games fulfil the need for meaningful interactions with others (Blagburn and Wells). Of course, with every benefit comes risk, and when it comes to gaming, the biggest risk is overplaying and becoming addicted. One international study observed that kids that only played games in moderation fared somewhat better in regards to problem-solving and math skills than kids that did not play at all, but kids that played too much or often played online games (which are known for being a larger time commitment than single-player games) suffered a drop in school performance (Bingham). And, of course, there is the ever-present risk of violent games

making certain types of players more aggressive. But when gamers are mindful of the games they choose to play and how much to play them, the benefits of gaming outweigh the costs.

Video games' psychological effects are as numerous and diverse as the games and the gamers themselves. The skeptical journalist Flanagan was right when he said that we should not dismiss the harm that video games can potentially do, but the optimistic journalist Leonard was also right when he stated that they also do not have to be necessarily dangerous. The key to productive gaming is "gaming smart", or being aware of the kinds of games they are playing and what the possible effects of those games are; being aware of the possible benefits and risks allows gamers to minimize the possible consequences while maximizing the positive effects and still enjoying themselves. One of the important aspects of "gaming smart" is also recognizing why, exactly, we choose the games we do. After all, the link between an increase in aggression after playing a violent game and the already present aggression indicates that video game violence may be, in fact, more of a symptom of aggression than a cause. And the same study that found video game addiction caused academic problems noted that it was often disadvantaged boys that were heavily gaming. If we are to see the full picture of the effect of video games, we need to look at ourselves and find the ways our psychology is shaping our style of gaming. Only then can we gain a more complete and detailed understanding of how the games we play affect each of us.

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