

# Beneficial or Brainwashing? The Impact of Videogames

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A discussion on the real impact of video games in youngsters and looking deeper in to the question that many gamers ask themselves and their parents: are video games all that bad? Dedicated to my dad. Part of my Higher English folio work.

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It started with Pong, the 1972 computerised game in which two rectangles bounce a square between each other, in a basic simulation of a tennis match. Ten years later, Nintendo takes the world by storm, selling three video games every second between 1983 and 1995. The creators of Pong surely couldn't have predicted the capacious number of writers, programmers and graphics specialists that are itching to be the next Jesse Stern (Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2), Martin O'Donnell (Halo) or Dan Houser (Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas), feeding their violent and uncannily realistic games to the greedy (and potentially underaged) children. But what are the effects of these video games? PacMan wasn't made to cause any harm, but many discerning parents are fretting endlessly about the aggressive behavior and mood changes that these modern first-person shooters could influence their child to gain. Are they just being over-protective of their potential prodigy, or do they actually have a point?

There have been hundreds of social experiments to try and find the conclusive answer to this question. Unfortunately, due to conflicting results, no decisive answer can be given. Cooper and Mackie's study into the changing behavior of ten year old girls after playing a computer game found that it gave the sweet, innocent girls a sharp and savage edge. A year later, in Graybill's study into the changing behavior of 7-11 year olds recorded no change. However, there is the possibility that the person playing the game is already of an aggressive nature. The child that plays contact sport as a vent for built-up anger could also perhaps benefit from stealing cars and killing people in a virtual city. Real people can be hurt in playing sports, in games mere pixels are being obliterated. But as humans, we learn what we do most often, and if what we do most often is put bullets into the heads of scantily-clad women, then it can only be assumed that that is what we shall do as we walk to get our morning paper. In fact, the American army has developed a video game to train their new soldiers, the (elaborately named) America's Army, which uses the advanced graphics available today and realistic situations to put them through intense training - without the bruises.

Now, America's Army can be safely called one of the most violent video games out there, and in comparison PacMan is nothing, right? Wrong. When it was released, the tiny yellow circle was seen as a bad influence, taking pills, then taking bigger pills that allow him to eat ghosts. If it's put like that it allows a different perspective to be taken on it, and it seems worse than it is. It sounds ridiculous, but it was the first video game that involved any form of destruction. The Nintendo hit, Super Mario Bros. was like watching a beheading in terms of video games when it was released, as the protagonist - an overly-optimistic Italian plumber - jumps on the heads of his enemies and breaks blocks to get money or power-ups from them. No matter how unrealistic the game is, someone is going to find something violent.

Just as Mario is rewarded for his efforts in the form of the beautiful Princess Peach, the player of something like Bioshock, a first-person shooter in which the character is trapped in an underwater art-deco gangster-run drug-addicted city (which is as strange as it sounds), is rewarded with weapons and power-ups, or punished with a battle with a giant submariner with a drill for an arm. This immediate feedback can teach what is wrong and what is right (although shooting people is not right, the point stands), and so can be taught to be rewarded for doing good and punished for being bad. Video games also give the player a whole cacophony of skills - it was found that the number of hours a laproscopic surgeon spent playing video games was a better measure of surgical skill than hours of training or number of real surgeries performed. Synapses (brain connectors) are strengthened through repetition, a necessity for a good memory. Gamers make better surgeons, pilots, can make choices and act on them six times a second, think about six things at once (two more than the average person), have better peripheral vision and better contrast sensitivity. So not all changes to the brain from gaming has to be bad.

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But, unfortunately for the millions of gamers out there, games do have bad effects. Studies have shown that playing video games increases aggressive behaviors, thoughts and feelings in the short and long term. One of the more scientific of these studies was done by Akio Mori of Tokyo's Nihon University. He detected alpha and beta waves in the prefrontal part (that controls moods, communication and concentration) both gamers and non-gamers. Alpha waves are frequent when the brain is resting, and beta when the brain is active, feeling liveliness or tension. In the gamers, beta waves were never detected, thus showing they never used the prefrontal region of the brain. This underuse of the prefrontal region can cause "video-game brain", where the lack of use results in severe mood swings. Games also have an effect on autonomic nerves, which control involuntary organ processes such as breathing and blood pressure. The autonomic nerves raise blood pressure during a game in response to a real danger, and so the perception of danger has changed. This "desensitization" to danger has been shown in the General Aggression Model (GAM), which gives the effects of video games on aggression and also the extent of desensitization in the brain. The GAM states that when the only way of succeeding is killing armed people or deformed beings then that can lead to antisocial behavior in the players of the game. Although this model is based on video games, the tolerance of violence has been completely changed due to the rest of media, not just video games, but movies and television, and perhaps even books, if I were to be totally cantankerous. So don't go blaming the writers of computer games for giving your children something that they can enjoy. Or at least if you do, blame the other guys, too.

Of course there is the argument that video games can be "educational". Noah J. Stupak of the Rochester Institute of Technology says that video games give a child problem-solving abilities, perseverance, pattern recognition, hypothesis testing and estimating skills. They can also be beneficial to parents in recognising the talents their child has, as the child will almost always be better at the game than the parent. (These arguments, I might add, most definitely will not be based on a four year old's performance in Call of Duty).

So yes, video games have their benefits and they have their downfalls, but they are created for fun and enjoyment, and if they succeed in doing that, then I don't see a fault with them. Although if your child is locked in their room from when they wake until when they sleep, only stopping to eat, it would be advised that they express some form of interest perhaps outside of gaming. Everything in moderation.

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