The Many Benefits, for Kids, of Playing Video Games

Written by Peter Gray.

Quite a few parents have asked me, at talks I've given, about the advisability of their limiting their kids' computer play. Others have told me that they do limit their kids' computer play, or their total daily "screen time," in a tone that seemed to suggest that any reasonable parent would do that.

People who have been reading this blog can probably guess my reaction. I have a very high opinion of children's abilities to make good choices about how to use their free time, as long as they really have choices. Some kids go through long periods of doing what seems like just one thing, and then some adults think there's something wrong, because they (the adults) would not make that choice. But in my experience, if kids are really free to play and explore in lots of different ways, and they end up playing or exploring in what seems to be just one way, then they are doing that because they are getting something really meaningful out of it. For a nice example of this, you might watch the film on the home page of the Sudbury Valley School website, where a young man describes his year of doing almost nothing but computer play.

It is always a mistake, I think, to tell kids what they must or must not do, except in those cases where you are telling them that they must do their share of the chores around the house or must not do things that hurt you or other people. Whenever we prevent our kids from playing or exploring in the ways they prefer, we place another brick in a barrier between them and us. We are saying, in essence, "I don't trust you to control your own life." Children are suffering today not from too much computer play or too much screen time. They are suffering from too much adult control over their lives and not enough freedom (see essay on rise of depression and anxiety).

Kids who are really free know what is best for them, especially concerning how they should spend their free time. Every kid is different, just as every adult is, and we can't get into their heads and find out just what they are getting out of something that we don't understand. I know well a kid who, for years, spent hours per day watching television shows that I thought were really disgustingly dumb; but, over time, I discovered that she was getting a lot out of them. They were making her think in new ways. She understood all the ways in which the shows were dumb, at least as well as I did; but she also saw ways in which they were smart, and she analyzed them and learned from them. They contributed greatly to her abilities as an actress (she eventually had major parts in high-school plays), because she acted out the parts vicariously, in her mind, as she watched. They also contributed to her fascination with certain aspects of human psychology. She now wants to go into clinical psychology as a career.

I've also known kids who spent huge amounts of time reading–just sitting and reading, "doing nothing!" for maybe 10 hours a day. There were always some kids like that, even when I was a kid. I could never understand why they would want to just sit and read when they could go fishing with me instead. What a waste of time. However, I've never known a parent to limit their kids' reading time. Why is it any better to limit TV or computer time than to limit book-reading time? Why do we worry about a kid's spending maybe 4 or 5 hours a day at a computer screen, doing what he wants to do, but don't worry about the same kid sitting at school for 6 hours a day and then doing homework for another couple of hours–doing what others are forcing him to do? I ask you to consider the possibility that the kid is learning more valuable lessons at the computer than at school, in part *because* the computer activity is self-chosen and the school activity is not.

Computers are the most important tools of modern society. Why would we limit kids' opportunities to play with them?

Why would we want to limit a kid's computer time? The computer is, without question, the single most important tool of modern society. Our limiting kids' computer time would be like hunter-gatherer adults limiting their kids' bow-and-arrow time. Children come into the world designed to look around and figure out what they need to know in order to make it in the culture into which they are born. They are much better at that than adults are. That's why they learn language so quickly and learn about the real world around them so much faster than adults do. That's why kids of immigrant families pay more attention to the language spoken by their new peers, in the new culture, than to the old language spoken by their parents. That's also why, whenever there's a new technological innovation, kids learn how to use it more quickly than their parents do. They know, instinctively, what they must learn in order to succeed.

Why do we keep hearing warnings from "authorities"–including the American Academy of Pediatricians–that we must limit kids' computer play? Some of the fear mongering comes, I think, from a general tendency on the part of us older folks to distrust any new media. Plato, in *The Republic*, argued that plays and poetry should be banned because of their harmful effects on the young. When writing came about and became technically easier, and was enthusiastically seized upon by the young, some of their elders warned that this would rot their minds; they would no longer have to exercise their memories. When printed novels became available to the masses, many warned that these would lead the young, especially girls and young women, to moral degeneracy. When televisions began to appear in people's homes, all sorts of dire warnings were sounded about the physical, psychological, and social damage they would cause.

Video games have been under attack by the fear-mongers ever since they first appeared, and the attacks have not diminished. If you Google around the Internet using *harmful effects of video games* as a search phrase, you will find all sorts of frightening claims. One

site warns that video games can cause depression, physical aggression, poor sleep, somatic complaints, obesity, attention disorders, and … the list went on. The only malady they seemed to have left out was acne.

The most common complaints about video games are that they (1) are socially isolating, (2) reduce opportunities for outdoor activities and thereby lead to obesity and poor physical health, and (3) promote violence in kids, if the games have violent content. On the face of it, of course, the first two of these claims should be truer of book reading than of video gaming. Concerning the third claim, I don't see any obvious reason why pretend murder of animated characters in video games should be any more likely to provoke real murder than, say, reading Shakespeare's account of Hamlet's murder of his stepfather. Yet we *make* kids read Hamlet in school.

Research refutes the frightening myths about harmful effects of computer games.

If you look into the actual research literature, you find very little if any evidence supporting the fear-mongers claims, and considerable evidence against those claims. In fact, systematic surveys have shown that regular video-game players are, if anything, more physically fit, less likely to be obese, more likely to also enjoy outdoor play, more socially engaged, more socially well-adjusted, and more civic minded than are their non-gaming peers.[1] A large-scale study in four cities in Holland showed–contrary to what I assume was the initial hypothesis–that kids who had a computer and/or a television set in their own room were significantly *more* likely to play outside than were otherwise similar kids who didn't have such easy and private access to screen play.[2] A study by the Pew Research Center concluded that video games, far from being socially isolating, serve to connect young people with their peers and to society at large.[3] Other research has documented, qualitatively, the many ways that video games promote social interactions and friendships.[4] Kids make friends with other gamers, both in person and online. They talk about their games with one another, teach one another strategies, and often play together, either in the same room or online.

Concerning violence, meta-analyses of the many studies designed to find effects of violent video games on real-world violence have concluded that, taken as a whole, there is precious little or no evidence at all of such effects.[5] It's interesting, also, to note that over the decades in which violent video gaming has been steadily rising, there has been a steady and large decline in real-world violence by youth.[6] I'm not about to claim that the decline in real-world violence is in any significant way caused by the rise in violent video games, but, there is some evidence that playing such games helps people learn how to control their hostility. In one experiment, college students were presented with a frustrating mental task and then were assessed for their feelings both of depression and hostility. The significant finding was that regular players of violent video games felt less

depressed and less hostile 45 minutes after the frustrating experience than did otherwise similar students who didn't play such games.[7]

I have to admit that I personally hate graphic depictions of violence, in games or anywhere else, but I claim no moral virtue in that. I'm just squeamish. My wife and step-kids, who are every bit as nonviolent in real life as I am, tease me about it. They talk about screening movies for me, and they have gotten used to going to certain movies without me.

Video games have been shown to have many positive effects on brainpower.

Quite a few well-controlled research studies have documented positive effects of video games on mental development. Repeated experiments have shown that playing fast-paced action video games can quite markedly increase players' scores on tests of visuospatial ability, including tests that are used as components of standard IQ tests.[8] Other studies suggest that, depending on the type of game, video games can also increase scores on measures of working memory (the ability to hold several items of information in mind at once), critical thinking, and problem solving.[9] In addition, there is growing evidence that kids who previously showed little interest in reading and writing are now acquiring advanced literacy skills through the text-based communication in on-line video games.[10]

When kids are asked, in focus groups and surveys, what they like about video games, they generally talk about freedom, self-direction, and competence.[11] In the game, they make their own decisions and strive to meet challenges that they themselves have chosen. At school and in other adult-dominated contexts they may be treated as idiots who need constant direction, but in the game they are in charge and can solve difficult problems and exhibit extraordinary skills. In the game, age does not matter, but skill does. In these ways, video games are like all other forms of true play.

The special benefits of MMORPGs

Over time, video games have become increasingly complex and multifaceted. Perhaps the most interesting games today are the so-called Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft*, which are even more social than were previous video games and offer endless opportunities for creativity and problem solving.[12]

In these online games, players create a character (an avatar), which has unique physical and psychological traits and assets, and, with that character, enter a complex and exciting virtual world that is simultaneously occupied by countless other players, who in their real-life forms may be sitting anywhere on the planet. Players go on quests within this virtual world, and along the way they meet other players, who might become friends or foes. Players may start off playing solo, avoiding others, but to advance to the higher levels they have to make friends and join with others in mutual quests. Making friends within the game

requires essentially the same skills as making friends in the real world. You can't be rude. You have to understand the etiquette of the culture you are in and abide by that etiquette. You have to learn about the goals of a potential friend and help that individual to achieve those goals. Depending on how you behave, players may put you on their *friends* list or their *ignore* list, and they may communicate positive or negative information about you to other players. The games offer players endless opportunities to experiment with different personalities and ways of behaving, in a fantasy world where there are no real-life consequences for failing.

Players in these games can also join special-interest groups called guilds. To join a guild, a player (or, more accurately, the player's avatar) must fill out an application form, much like a job application, explaining why he or she would be a valuable member. Guilds generally have structures that are similar to companies in the real world, with leaders, executive boards, and even recruitment personnel. Such games are, in many ways, like the imaginative sociodramatic games of preschool children, but played in a virtual world, with communication by online text, and raised up many notches in sophistication to fit the interests and abilities of the older children, teenagers, and adults who play them. Like all sociodramatic games, they are very much anchored in an understanding of the real world, and they exercise concepts and social skills that are quite relevant to that world. In fact, a study commissioned by the IBM Corporation concluded that the leadership skills exercised within MMORPGs are essentially the same as those required to run a modern company.[13]

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