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Video Games: Virtue or a Curse

While answering the question whether video games are a mostly positive or negative presence in our lives will take some time, it is possible to state off the cuff without a single doubt that video games have become a new tour de force in the world of entertainment, having captured the minds of millions of people around the planet. Video games have become one of the mightiest industries in the IT sphere, around which cyber sport leagues are built, brands release new equipment to ensure that the games could be run in the highest quality possible and the premieres of some games surpass the first showings of major film releases. The production of video games evolves at a remarkable pace, and it is astounding to compare the games from early 2000s to the games of nowadays, which often look like a motion picture, in which one can take direct part at the convenience of the gamer. The usefulness of some games is undeniable as they develop motor functions, logic, the ability to think out of the box, and to solve various problems to advance further. Some games go even as far as to offer an ethical dilemma to the gamer, allowing him to pass the game either violently or peacefully, rewarding the gamer with the respective ending to reflect the gamer's choices. At the same time, many video games can be rightfully deemed as highly addictive and thus detrimental to human existence, as the life of some gamers starts to revolve around some aspects of the given game, having to devote much time to it, being unable to live life fully and engage in such form of entertainment responsibly. Both positive and negative sides are equally apparent nowadays when it comes to video games

and seeing that the industry still evolves and obviously has not reached its peak yet, it remains to be seen what the ultimate consequences of video games are. So far, it is the responsibility of any human being to treat video gaming experience responsibly to ensure that this form of entertainment does not take over life in general.

Video games can be entertaining for numerous reasons. First of all, they offer challenges, which have to be overcome in order to advance either to another level or to go further in the plot. The challenges can vary immensely depending on the genre of the game too. For instance, one would have to kill all enemies on the level to proceed to another. Another possible challenge is to solve a puzzle in order to advance to some other location. Some other challenges include evading obstacles and pitfalls that might result in the virtual death, fulfilling a quest to help an NPC, collect enough points or virtual money for some purchase, winning a race, and many others. The types of challenges are limitless, and their number will never be finite as long as the game developers are still in possession of their fantasy and imagination. The raw barebones concept of video games can be described in the following over-simplistic formula: there is a challenge or a series of challenges; overcome them and receive access to another level or to better equipment or more effective means to solve future challenges; when all challenges have been passed successfully – the game can be considered passed or beaten.

Initially, video games were simplistic. Ms. Pac Man was a simple game with a yellow circle going around a small labyrinth eating as many crumbs as possible while three ghosts follow her wherever the yellow eating circle goes, trying to stop it. There was the good old game of trying to shoot as many alien ships out of the sky as possible, and playing ricochet with the artificial intelligence (henceforth referred to as AI), which was basically an electronic version of table tennis. These games were encased in huge automates that resembled juke boxes. They

were not portable and could only be enjoyed in public places. The video games were brought home with the help of the so called consoles introduced by various brands on the verge of the 80s and 90s including Nintendo and PlayStation, which became household names quickly enough. The only thing these boxes required was a TV set. Hence, the term 'video games' which by now has clearly lost its accuracy and remains something akin to a symbol of the times and reminder of the video games' genesis as we currently know them. In parallel, together with the growing power of personal computers (henceforth referred to as PCs), different games started to become cross-platform being released for PCs and consoles alike. By the early 2000s, personal gaming within the comfort of the home became more widespread and usual, albeit still not as mainstream worldwide as nowadays.

The addictive nature of video games can be different. One can offer interesting challenges, to which one would want to return and replay them again and again. Other games are simply difficult to beat thus evoking within human beings the desire to go through towards the very end thus providing the gamers in the end with the sense of accomplishment. Most importantly, however, video games sometimes offer escapism and an opportunity to try a completely different role, which has nothing to do with the real life. Perhaps, this last aspect is where the primary reason for addiction lies. The opportunity to assume a different role is mostly inherent to role playing games (RPGs), real time strategies (RTS), and immersive simulators, which allow the gamer to play a role, carry out decisions often burdened with ethical dilemmas. They allow a person to feel like someone else at no expense whatsoever. The raised emotions would be real, but they will have no impact on the real life anyway, thus making such experiences interesting, attractive, and addictive in the long run. Another major segment of addictive games can be found online. Online games offer a remarkable opportunity to play with

real life people. Therefore, such games as World of Warcraft, Lineage, or Overwatch contain double potential for addiction by not only being role-playing but also online. After all, playing with real people is always far more interesting than with the AI as the gaming process becomes more logical, swifter, and collaboration is always a must to beat some complicated adversary (usually referred to as a ‘boss’) in solitude. Team work often evokes positive feelings and thus also contributes to the appearance of addiction. Some researches indicate that gamers, regardless of the age group, find gaming enjoyable due to the possibility of either collaborating with teammates or competing against friends while stress relief and the potential challenges occupy second and third place respectively within the list of priorities (Whitbourne et al., 894).

It is time to turn our attention to the virtues of video games, which are plenty. First of all, the extent of video games’ effect on someone’s brain has not been scientifically proven yet. It is uncertain whether video and online games directly affect the brain and behavior (Bavelier et al., 763). Yet there have been researches, which indicated that some video games, which cannot be perceived initially as useful such as action “kill ‘em all” shooters as Unreal Tournament actually may have a highly positive effect by demanding fast way of thinking. Such shooters have high speed of action, high perceptual and motor load, unpredictability and an emphasis on peripheral processing thus resulting in a person’s more effective perceptual processing, multiple object tracking, spatial resolution, and central and peripheral attention skills (Bavelier et al, 764). Other researches back up the hypothesis that shooters increase neural processing and efficiency as well as the cognitive mechanisms which allow controlling attention allocation (Granic, 68).

According to Granic’s research, another important trait which can be developed by video games is enhanced creativity and better problem solving skills (69).

Another interesting application of video games can be found in medicine. A research has been published which indicates that Wii platform for games can be used for rehabilitation after surviving a stroke. Wii is a particular branch of Nintendo consoles, which is based on physical movement. It is filled with different games, often the well-known bowling or golf, when a controller has to be swung in a particular way to achieve the desired result. Such video games are easier to play than the real life counterparts and involve far less pressure than having to play well in front of real people since such gaming happens within the comfort of one's home. It has been shown that there was increased intensity of rehabilitation associated with better motor recovery for stroke patients who were playing regularly Nintendo Wii games (MD Conference Express, 22). Indeed, more research has to be done in order to establish whether such influence of physical gaming has direct impact in numerous instances within different groups of people. Nonetheless, such a way cannot be harmful and at the very least can bring relaxation and enjoyment. The great thing about such rehabilitation is that is fully safe, feasible, and potentially effective in enhancing motor function among patients suffering an acute stroke (MD Conference Express, 22).

Another important useful part of video games can be found in the positive increase of the ability to solve moral and ethical dilemmas from a more human perspective. Even though countless researches have tried to prove that violent video games contribute to the more violent way of thinking among children, some researches, based on about 16 000 subjects, have illustrated that despite the fact of the video game being "just a game" and taking place in a magic circle separate from real world considerations, only less experience players are prone to mindless violence of shooting anything and everyone they see or doing other unethical actions. Otherwise, more experience game players tend to use moral reasoning during game play, thus supporting the

idea that the magic circle is indeed porous, and that people remain humans after all regardless of the freedom offered by video games (Krcmar and Cingel, 99). Moreover, the games of newer generation such as Dishonored offer complete freedom for the gamer in the sense that it is possible to go through every single level with maximum bloodshed or... completely peacefully, without murdering a single person. Moreover, if one chooses to do so, one can go throughout the entire level not noticed by a single guard and receiving a reward for this. Hopefully, this tendency will continue as such games offer complete freedom and make the gamers face themselves with the understanding of what kind of personalities they are and how violent they are while being given a chance to not be violent at all.

With all of the above, it is impossible, naturally, to ignore that video games can have negative and detrimental consequences for certain types of human personalities. However, it has not been proven scientifically that some games result in negative influencing under all scenarios. For instance, the research in Taiwan showed that people become addicted to online gaming for numerous reasons. Psychological needs and motivations, considering the real life to be “dark” and “boring,” the opportunity to be a virtual self instead of the real self, compensatory or extensive satisfaction, and self-reflections – all of these factors have been proven to be instrumental in the appearance of the addiction (Chin-Sheng, Wan, and Chiou, 763-764). This finding establishes that video games can be addicting, but it also indicates that the issues are within the investigates subjects’ lives, which leads to their experience of online gaming being addictive for them, thus technically making games not at fault within the framework of this research. Other reasons for gaming include playing for fun, out of boredom, for the sake of making new acquaintances, and the fact that some friends are already engaged in a game and it thus become a way to spend free time together (Ružic-Baf, et al 98- 99).

The already mentioned action shooters can be beneficial in certain instances, but can also result in the increase of ADHD-related behaviors such as listlessness and discontent in slower-paced, less stimulating academic, work or social environments. Moreover, gamers can treat life with lesser responsibility by skipping school, and other outdoor social activities important for the development of one's personality (Bavelier 764). Some of the games with the simplified game play and constant necessity to neutralize adversaries also may deteriorate one's way of thinking, making a gamer concentrate on mindless destruction where there is no place for creativity or logical thinking. So far, there has been no encompassing research that would determine whether action shooters are more prone to develop useful functions of cognitive perception or dumb down one's vision of the world significantly. The correlation of positive and negative consequences has not been established yet through scientific research.

Another negative trait of video games is the often present instances of not only violence but also sexism. Sexism comes through in numerous forms from RPGs where female characters are by definition almost naked with their bodies never fully covered to games like Grand Theft Auto where women are often shown to be treated unjustly without an ounce of respect. It has been proven to an extent that the already mentioned GTA series has the potential to reduce empathy for female violence victims, at least in the short-term. Moreover, such reduction in empathy occurs due to GTA's attempts to increase masculine beliefs that "real men" are tough, dominant, and aggressive thus helping gamers to identify with the shown misogynistic game characters (Gabbadini, 12). This is an important finding, particularly taking into account that males are more likely to play video games.

It is important to mention the ESRB system as it remains one of the most effective blocks for younger children towards content unsuitable for them. So far, it seems to work well enough

as such by indicating correctly which games are suitable for certain age groups. Regardless for the system, however, countless children play the cruelest games including Grand Theft Auto V where one does not only shoot prostitutes but also has to torture a person to get out information. Parents often do not take heed of the ESRB system, thus making it their problem rather than that of the rating system, which cannot fully shield younger minds from shocking content. The responsibility to do that is de facto on the parents.

Despite so many findings, it is, unfortunately, impossible to arrive to some new conclusion that would differ from the thesis in the first paragraph. The prime reason being that video games have not existed long enough and have never stayed the same so that some clearly defined scientific tendencies could be singled out through research. This is not to mention that video games have not been researched enough so that some clearly defined tendencies could be established with certainty. There has not been sufficient proof yet that video games tend to make people more violent or dumb down cognitive functions. What has been established, as has been illustrated with the researches above, the games only have the potential to make things better by developing motor and cognitive skills alike. Interestingly enough, it has been established in one of the researches that prosocial video games do lead to a humanized perception of the self while the perception of negative traits of humanity were unaffected (Greitemeyer, 506). This is yet another nail in the coffin of the hypothesis that violent games only lead to more violence. All of these researches fail to understand that a game is a simulation. If there are some huge troubles within a person, most likely they have developed from some other aspect of life rather than being directly caused by virtual reality, which has never had an impact on a human's life. A long time has to pass before some long-term conclusions can be made. Otherwise, we have to wait and see where the development of the industry takes us. So far, the quantity of negative and positive

influences of video games is at most equal. Otherwise, far more researches have established that video games imply positive influence on a person rather than negative. If there is negative influence, it most likely indicates problems in real life of the given individual rather than issues directly forced and caused by a video game.

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