Video Games - Harmless Entertainment or Social Menace?

Picture a student returning from school after a gruelling day of maths and social studies. There's homework to do, but it can wait. What's needed is a total break from the boredom. The machine's already set up and on stand-by, so it's just a matter of flopping onto the bed with the controller and loading the program. Mum isn't keen on video games, claims they are a bad influence, but she's not back from work till five. Dad's around somewhere - his last day off before the new shift starts. He might even be playing the latest version himself. Not well, of course: too old and too slow. In less than a minute, the school uniform has been traded for camouflaged battle dress, the tedium of suburbia overshadowed by a virtual reality...

A grey, moody ambience pervades the area which appears deserted. It has been under fire, though, which is obvious from the damaged, smoke-charred buildings and rubble in the streets. A blood splatter on a nearby wall is evidence of at least one casualty. Drips and smudges lead from it, forming a trail that disappears through a doorway. Important or not, it needs investigation. A cursory glance confirms armaments are ready and fully loaded, as they were just moments ago. So, why check again? Just in case - it's always best. And a choice has to be made: grenade or silenced semi-automatic? A nervous scan of the street fails to detect any movement, but the enemy could be hiding, waiting, watching. If they are, an explosion will make no difference and would be the safer option; but if they are still unaware that their defences have been breached, the silent approach might be better. Forget the grenade - go with the gun.

The narrow hallway is empty, the house quiet until a board creeks underfoot. A breath is snatched and held, fingers tighten on the pistol grip as eyes roam the corridor from one door to another. No-one comes out, so maybe they didn't hear - maybe. The blood trail turns left into the second room. Why the second? If you were wounded, wouldn't you take the closest hiding place? Then again, the first door is closed and the knob might be impossible to reach if all you could do was crawl. Anyway, the injured one can wait - this room needs checking out before proceeding. Some nervous moments later confirm it is occupied, but only by corpses, four of them. Moving very cautiously to the next doorway finds the casualty just inside, face down on the floor. Is he dead? It always pays to make sure. The pistol comes up and sights on the back of the head. Then all hell breaks loose. The chatter of automatic fire is deafening and bullets are flying. A brief glance is enough to realise the mistake - the ones assumed to be dead were only feigning and have closed the trap. A bad day becomes the worst when the blood-trailing casualty turns on his back and fires. The scene flashes red and freezes. Killed again! Stuff it!

There's little wonder that some people regard video games as psychologically dangerous if this is the kind of example they base their opinions on. Many claim them to be a social menace, time-wasting corrupters of immature minds, desensitising agents which portray violence and death as an acceptable resolution to problems great and small. Others, however, suggest the playing of them increases awareness and mental skills while helping to relieve tension and stress by pushing the imagination to the limit in a virtual reality where no real harm is done. Having mixed feelings myself, I preferred not to pre-judge until I had given the world of video games a fair go.

They weren't entirely new to me, at least not the more sedate ones. A few years ago we downloaded one for my sister. Suffering from MS, she was losing mobility and spent much of her day solving crosswords. We'd come across "Chuzzle" along the way and it seemed an ideal alternative for someone who liked puzzles and still retained sufficient dexterity in one hand to operate the mouse, which was all that was required. It might, we thought, make a pleasant change for her. Was it ever! Very soon the crosswords had taken a back seat as she Chuzzled hour after hour, day after day. She became so addicted that conversation with her was at best spasmodic when the laptop was on. Knowing full well that I could never be so captivated, I decided to try it for myself. How wrong could I be?

After a while, and perhaps because there was no way that I could better my sister's phenomenally high score, I sought out other games from similar stables, graduating from cute fuzzy balls to picture tiles. "Jewel Quest" was something of a favourite, mainly with the adult set, and it was certainly more of a challenge. About this time, my wife deigned to have a go and we would spend many an hour in deep concentration, matching identical tiles within puzzle grids, talking to the game as we progressed through our respective ones. When I say 'talking', my chit-chat was laced with acid comments and complaints prompted by an eventual conclusion that my game had an annoying tendency to cheat! While my wife went on to greater things, completing all her quests, even in the expert mode, I conceded defeat and went in search of a new challenge more suited to my temperament.

There were a number of "hidden-object" games on the market, some incorporating the now-familiar "match-three" element. Prior experience with these puzzles gave me something of an advantage and I did enjoy success of sorts. The hidden-object part, though, became boring. Looking for items and shapes secreted within a scene was a clever innovation, but reminded me of those spot-the-difference drawings you get in newspapers - when you've done one, you've done them all.

There is no doubt in my mind that these puzzle-type games can be both entertaining and beneficial, especially for older players who are still far from decomposition, but whose brains are becoming lethargic through the conditioning of routine and practicalities of day-to-day living. Hand-eye co-ordination and timing improve, also awareness. Focus is one of the major skills which gets a dust-off, along with the planning of strategies, a talent that can fall into disuse once a person's lifestyle reaches a comfortably predictable stage. I'm not sure if playing video games helps stave off the onset of illnesses like Alzheimer's and Dementia, but it certainly keeps the thought process active. As for encouraging bad habits, one downside could be the number of hours glued to the screen, a practice not recommended for medical reasons. It can have a detrimental effect on relationships too, if partners and families are ignored in favour of one last try to beat the game. As there is no aggressive element involved, I can see little justification for declaring this type of pre-occupation an incitement to violence and moral turpitude.

Unsure where I should go from here, I took advice from my son who is a video-game developer and ought to have known what I might be able to handle. He claimed the more sophisticated first-person games were better played with a hand-held controller, which I didn't have. There were still some, he said, that I could play using the mouse, plus a certain amount of keyboard work, and he proceeded to give me a plastic shopping bag full of old games that I could hone my inadequate skills on. He recommended I try "Harry Potter" first, it being relatively simple and something an

old codger might be able to get his head round. Once home, I swallowed back my trepidation and loaded the DVD, or thought I had. The initial cinematics provided an animated introduction to a world of magic and wizardry. I watched and waited, my trusty mouse gripped tightly in my right hand, and I listened. Perhaps my mind was elsewhere, I don't know, but my memory seemed to retain nothing of what I had seen or heard, so when I was eventually switched to an interactive scene, I had no clue what I was supposed to do. Not that it mattered - the screen froze and I had to shut down. Some minutes and a DVD scratch-repair later, I gave it a second go.

It wasn't quite as bewildering as I had imagined, and I was comforted to be reunited with digital facsimiles of characters I'd seen in the movies. I was further encouraged by winning an introductory battle with the Dementors - I later discovered that there was no glory in this because the result was fixed! Following this "toy" conflict, I found myself within the confines of Hogwarts and it soon became clear that a certain amount of prior experience was a definite advantage. Not having any in the role-playing arena, I was incompetent to say the least. Moving my character, Harry Potter, through a bewildering maze of corridors and stairways wasn't too difficult, as long as I followed the red footprints which magically appeared ahead of me. Without them, I would have been hopelessly lost. There was even a training session, instructions on casting spells with the wand by using the mouse. I thought I'd mastered this most-important skill but, like the earlier defeat of the Dementors, the outcome of the practice was rigged too. In ignorance of this minor deception, I continued on in the belief that I was well prepared for my first quest. It wasn't until I was in the library trying to levitate a book from the top shelf that my self-confidence bottomed out. My wand refused to behave the way it had in the training session. I did manage to blow a few readers off their chairs, but the book stayed put. Even as a student wizard, I was a miserable failure. Thus, for the sake of sanity, I decided to quit magic school for a more down-to-earth apprenticeship.

This time I was a special agent charged with undermining an oppressive regime. My weapons were guns and explosives; and I needed them, although I never quite worked out which of the many at my disposal was best for a particular occasion. Nevertheless, I accepted a few missions, some of which I succeeded in, two or three tries later. This, of course, was after being previously killed, an irrelevant inconvenience in the virtual world where resurrections are an accepted asset. I was never quite sure which faction I was actually allied to, accepting jobs from all quarters, dubious or not. When someone fired at me, I figured they were the enemy at the time, so I shot back. That I annihilated many of the opposition was plain from the corpses littering the ground before me, but I felt no remorse - they were, after all, merely digital representations of people.

The disturbing realisation, however, that my own character was becoming increasingly real to me seemed to endorse the fears of anti video-game critics, and I found myself asking the same questions. Was it possible for game-players to be so indoctrinated that they became closet avengers and vigilantes? Could they reach a point where they might employ the same aggressive force and belligerence in real life situations as they needed to survive in their games? I'd like to think that the virtual reality of most games is recognised as such, but I have my doubts. Face-to-face conflict and brutality, even against an opponent clad in pseudo-medieval armour, is too personal and could awaken violent tendencies that might explode at any time anywhere, given sufficient provocation. I know how I felt while I was playing the special agent, how seduced by the role I became. Even though it was all part of research that started out as an objective assessment, there was a certain fascination in playing the role of someone I could never be. Fortunately, I have no desire to emulate that person outside of the game arena which I readily accept as a fantasy that stops as soon as the computer is switched off. What troubles me is that some, hopefully only a small minority, either can't tell the difference, or choose not to.

I tried out a few more games of different types and eventually came to the conclusion that most were relatively harmless. The puzzle concept, as I've already said, is quite entertaining and helps improve mental awareness along with hand-eye co-ordination. There are strategy games in which the player commands armies, deploys troops and fights battles, usually in conjunction with

a plan to improve overall strengths and often finances. These generally tend to be prolonged campaigns and would have little appeal for anyone of an impatient nature. Playing them, I experienced a sense of detachment from reality, not seeing flesh-and-blood soldiers treated as cannon fodder, but simply as representational pieces I'd move around to achieve the desired outcome. Simulations of historical conflicts such as "Medieval Total War" and "Harpoon" are absorbing, but don't strike me as leading to anti-social behaviour. In fact, having to consider both the here-and-now with respect to the big picture can be good training for real-life situations. Even the popular, extremely addictive "Diablo", although essentially violent because it is all about killing, is pure fantasy and any overflow of a player's emotions or attitudes into the real world would be miniscule; unless, of course, they regularly encounter ghouls and monsters lurking in the shopping mall.

I highly recommend "Diablo" to anyone who loves to lose themselves in make-believe, and one other that it would be criminal not to mention – "Plants vs Zombies". It is nothing like reality (not my kind, at least), is totally crazy and a ripper therapy for stress-relief. Even losing is a laugh and sometimes better than winning. The in-built humour tickles my fancy, as it does many others, judging by the online comments. It's only politically incorrect if you're a zombie, so most game-players will take no offence.

In conclusion, I would say that the majority of the older games are fairly innocuous, the new shoot-to-kill breed less so. Some are plainly undesirable and contain subliminal elements such as coloured flashes, jump-cut scenes and stirring music, all of which are there simply to get the player stressed and on edge. That they seduce and corrupt is, to my mind, not in doubt, and I worry that less-discerning, impressionable players will have become brainwashed to the point where a problem in reality subconsciously triggers a mental flip to their role-playing attitude when they might easily act out the kind of solution that worked for them in the virtual world.

Unfortunately, these games are available to all and sundry. My best advice to players is: take your frustrations out on your fantasy enemies, but continue to be nice to people in the real world you actually have to live in. For parents: play the games yourselves before deciding which are appropriate for your children; and simply ban the ones that you consider to be unsuitable. This may cause a huge upset, but stick to your guns - metaphorically speaking, of course.

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