

Life is Just a Game

The Rise of Video Games in American Culture

Ever since *Pong* first appeared in American homes and shopping mall arcades in the 1970s, video games have occupied a prominent place in American life. Today, video games are something of an institution: The market for gaming software and hardware (not including computers) has been estimated at upwards of \$10 billion—more than movie industry profits at the box office. As video games acquire greater capabilities to simulate “real” life, they are likely to outstrip Hollywood even further as America’s choice source of popular entertainment.

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Kids are not the only ones clamoring after video games these days. The children weaned on Atari and Nintendo in the 1980s continue to be the most avid players: 145 million Americans routinely play video games, and the majority of them—61 percent—are adults, according to the Entertainment Software Association. Seventeen percent of regular video-gamers are over the age of 50. And whereas adolescent boys, the group that originally flocked to video games, still account for 21 percent of the gaming population, adult women have surpassed them, at 26 percent. The average American video game player is 29 years old, and spends on average 6.5 hours each week plopped down in front of a gaming console.

Nor is today's video game player lacking for opportunities to indulge the habit. A host of portable gaming platforms, from laptop computers to cellular phones, is blurring the conventional lines between work-time and play-time, allowing people to take up a game of solitaire or blast away at enemy space invaders between business meetings or university classes. In a July 2003 poll released by the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life, one third of college students admitted to playing games *during* class. The market for cellular phone-based games, now worth \$500 million, is expected to grow to nearly \$4 billion by 2007, according to the Informa Media Group.

At colleges and universities, video games have become a central part of student life. According to the Pew study, two thirds of college students said they play video games regularly or occasionally out of boredom: Video games have become "almost an automatic part of what... college students do for fun and leisure," said Steve Jones, the principal author of the report. Most stu-

dents claimed that gaming didn't adversely affect their studies or their social lives. Many students said going online to join a networked game is a good way to meet people or socialize with friends.

To satisfy the gaming population's increasingly diverse set of appetites, the industry has offered an incredible assortment of new games. Women reportedly favor *SimCity* and other "God games" that involve the construction and manipulation of virtual environments; men gravitate toward games with sports themes or first-person shooting. And since games like *Pac-Man* no longer thrill adults, there is a new category of hugely profitable, and immensely controversial, "mature" games that are sexually-oriented and gothically violent. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, presently the industry leader in the mature genre, gives points for having sex with prostitutes and then beating them to death—one reason why it and similar games have spurred legislative efforts in New York, Florida, and the U.S. Congress to restrict the sale of mature-rated games to minors.

Not long ago, leading voices on both the left and the right could agree that habitual video game use among children had deleterious consequences: a greater propensity for anti-social, if not violent and aggressive behavior; a higher incidence of obesity; utter docility and laziness. But today, video gaming has become a habit of parents and young adults, and we have yet to discover what the consequences of this will be (or already are) for parental attitudes about children's use of the games. Already among adults, there is increasing documentation of so-called "video game addiction," which has caused some college students to drop out of school, marriages to fail, and middle-aged men to lose their jobs.

As one part of America is choosing the path of self-imposed infantilization, a growing number of academic centers and educators are looking for ways to incorporate video games into the curriculum of schools, businesses, and government agencies. EnterTech, one of the first and most successful of such “learning simulation” initiatives, was developed in 1998 at the University of Texas, and is now being used at schools and adult learning centers to help “rapidly impart” personal and entry-level work skills through virtual role-playing. Graduates of the program “experience higher incomes, job promotions, improved confidence and a desire to continue their education,” says the EnterTech website.

James Paul Gee, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the author of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, argues that video games, even excessively violent ones, teach “strategic modes of thinking that fit better with today’s high-tech, global world than the learning they are taught in school.”

Meanwhile, the U.S. Army has been distributing a video game called *America’s Army* on its website and at recruiting centers—with 1.5 million copies circulated so far. The Army is also using video games to train soldiers for combat situations. In conjunction with the Institute for Creative Technologies, a game engineering center at the University of Southern California, the Army has been developing “immersive systems for learning”—video games played on Microsoft’s Xbox system, designed to inculcate the skills of decision-making and leadership necessary for success on the modern battlefield. One of their products, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, trains squad leaders to maneuver their men through hostile environments. *Full*

Spectrum Command, a game set in the vil-
lages of Eastern Europe, is designed to
instruct Army Captains on how to organ-
ize company missions and recognize
threats in peacekeeping situations.

Now the CIA wants a video game of its own. The agency has asked the Institute for Creative Technologies to develop a role-playing game that will help their analysts become “accustomed to looking at the world from the perspective of the terrorists we are chasing,” according to a spokesman. This has struck some as an exceptionally ludicrous idea. “This raises questions about leadership at the agency,” said former congressman Bob Barr. “What we ought to be doing is focusing our money and attention on identifying terrorists and their associates so we can be on the watch for these characters, not playing video games.”

But if video games aren’t necessarily the best training for anti-terrorism, they might be good public relations tools for the terrorists. The Iranian-financed terrorist group Hezbollah has developed and begun marketing a new video game called *Special Force*. The game is designed to duplicate the combat situations faced by Hezbollah operatives in their battles with Israeli troops in 2000 in southern Lebanon, including the geography, mine fields, number of enemy combatants, and even the weather. Players assume the role of a Hezbollah operative, engage in fire-fights with Israeli soldiers, and refine their shooting skills on targets like Prime Minister Sharon and other Israeli officials. According to Hezbollah’s Central Internet Bureau, the game is designed to “correct” the impression left by American-made games that “usurping Zionists” are always victorious heroes, and invites young players of the game to become part of the

“resistance.” So far, over 10,000 copies of *Special Force* have been sold in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, Germany, and Australia.

Terrorists and soldiers, spies and businessman, students and parents—we live in an age of video game enthusiasts, and what is best and worst about our world will sooner or later be packaged into a game. As the games grow more realistic, and the

players grow older, the distinctions between life and game grow grayer and more vague. We increasingly grow desensitized to the difference between simulation and reality—living in make-believe worlds in which actions have no consequences and deadly mistakes can be fixed by pressing reset. The days of *Pong* are long behind us.