

Video Games: Constructive or Destructive?

Six master gunmen descend into a room full of futuristic puzzles they've never solved. Breath quick and curses flying, they fail the puzzle and activate the room's failsafe which calls for enemy reinforcements. Running low on time one makes a brash decision and uses his best gun to shoot down some enemy reinforcements only succeeding in getting himself shot. Many wounded and one down, no one gives up and not a thought passes anyone's mind to quit. Foes overwhelming the remaining gunmen it's up to their coordination and quick wit to come together as a team to beat this challenge many have lost to: a raid. Ethan Clark (age 18) explains that's how he met his online friends, as they asked him to do a raid (a difficult endgame activity requiring 6 people to complete) with them through a random message they sent him. "...and [the raid] took a very long time, even though it was really easy. I can beat it with my eyes closed now but I couldn't back then. We did it, and the three of us, Joe, Drew and I got close [...] and from that moment that built a friendship. There were so many new things I could do after that... The possibilities were endless."

In recent discussions of video games, a controversial issue has been whether they have negative or positive effects on users. On the one hand, some argue that video games are addictive and propagate toxic behavior. On the other hand, however, others argue that video games help people cope, build community, and inspire people. In *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*, sharp media critic and avid gamer Christopher A. Paul maintains that video games promote

toxic behavior by stating that video games pit people against each other, and when paired with strong negative emotions against the other team, can lead to a toxic environment where both teams forget there's a real person with real experiences behind every character playing the game with them. This behavior entails swearing, verbal belittlement of the other team, and a strong sense of competition that outweighs all else.³ Others still argue that it's just a game and people's behavior in video games doesn't reflect who they are in the real world, and that the cooperation required and friendships built through video games outweigh the often toxic community. In the end, video games cause more good than harm.

When playing video games in a group it isn't uncommon to hear vulgar language thrown around. Headset on and a video call ongoing Clark laughs and quickly quips back when one is thrown at him. When asked if video game communities are toxic, Clark started his reply with a simple "Oh of course it's true..." On the other hand, he immediately followed up with, "...If it wasn't toxic, it wouldn't be fun." He goes on to elaborate on the fact that the entire world is full of toxic people, but that video game players have an upfront way of showing it. He says that "the goal is to be the you that you can't show other people," and in doing so it teaches kids how to be vocal about what they have issues with instead of doing nothing about it. [insert secondary source about bullying in video games] Curtains drawn closed the screen is the only thing that paints the room in a red light as a "Mission Failed" message displays on the monitor. Getting frustrated Clark leans back into his comfortable gaming chair, taking a moment

for himself in his dark surroundings. He then reminds, “The toxicity can become a problem from time to time but the good thing about video games and being online is that you can actually just turn it off.” Video games, although toxic at times, teach kids to stand up for themselves and cope with situations that might be presented to them in the real world at a later age. You would think that the amount of time people are spending on video games would be bad for you, but recently, experts and standard video game players have come together to suggest that the widespread love of video games might stem from the need of an escape from reality. In video games nobody cares about how the real you looks, what problems you have, or anything else going on in your life. In an article interviewing people with disabilities about their experiences with video games, Mark Barlet, founder of Able Gamers Charity, said that like with many able-bodied individuals, video games can help those with disabilities forget what they can't do.² This escape from reality isn't limited to physical disabilities either, as people like Clark battling depression and other mental health issues express the same sentiment. “So those of you who aren't gamers right, a lot of reasons why people start gaming is due to depression because if you can't escape your real world, you can escape it digitally [...] that's why [video games] mean so much to me, they literally saved my life.” Video games cause more good than harm because they can save lives through offering an escape in trying times.

Video games weren't always so popular as they are now, yet concerns about them were. Miroslaw Majorek (age 51) talked with me about how when he was in

highschool his parents thought video games were useless. “My parents strongly opposed me playing video games or doing anything with tech in that matter. ‘They’re a big waste of time’ my parents said.” Leaning back in his chair he pulled his jacket pointing at the big red Youtube logo, smiling as he said, “‘They’ll never get you anywhere. Get a real job, none of that computer business. It’s doomed to fail’ was another common one they repeated.” He chuckled. “Video games inspired me to code, to do something I was passionate about,” he continued. “Not to mention how they helped me find my best friend for the duration of highschool.” Instead of focusing on how video games can be toxic or debating whether they’re a waste of time, we should focus on the social opportunities they open up for everyone. When asked if video games were as social then as they are now, Majorek replied, “Oh yes they were very social back then. Computers were scarce, so whether by circumstance or social aspect people gathered around who had a computer and would have what people would now call LAN parties? It was very fun. We played Manic Miner on my friend’s computer and went to a computer cafe everyday after school to play video games. Ultimately what inspired me to be a software engineer was the fact that I wanted to make a video game of my own, and my friend supporting me made all the difference.”

Today, video games have more opportunities for meeting people and aren’t bound by scarce computers or physical distances. In Emily Gera’s view as a recognized game consultant and journalist, “Yet while fears around the rise of esports abound, in bedrooms and internet cafes around the world games such as League of Legends, Dota 2 and Fortnite have become a cultural phenomenon, bringing young people from

different regions and religions together and bridging divides.”¹ Playing video games puts you in a position where you are surrounded by people bound by a common interest: Video games! Other differences that might make a difference in real life don’t matter, and therefore pull people together and form long lasting friendships. Take Clark for example: He met his online friends through his favorite game and would not have been able to find them any other way, one living in Massachusetts and the other in Los Angeles. “We basically met by chance,” he says, “We’ve been friends for maybe... 7 or 6 years now? And we continue to do stupid stuff today.” Video games cultivate long lasting friendships that otherwise wouldn’t have been possible, inspire new career choices, and teach children to speak up for themselves. What benefit isn’t there to video games?

As for the future of video games, no one really knows what will happen next. Both Clark and Majorek predict they will stay social, but as to how they will change is completely up to the younger generation. What better way to assess the future of video games than asking the younger generation itself? Take it from Wyatt Clark who’s 5 years old, has played video games for about 2 years, and likes games like Sonic the Hedgehog, Spiro, and more. When asked about why he likes video games he enthusiastically answered, “You get to control the... you get to control the person you are!” When asked if video games were sometimes cooler than real life he vigorously shook his head up and down with 2 thumbs up. When asked what he would create if he could make his own video game he said, “to be a blob of fire.” When coaxed to

elaborate he sheepishly smiled and stuck out his hands, "I can destroy anything else [...] with any element out of my hands." The younger generation is already getting inspired by video games to create and think, and who knows: Maybe Wyatt will be tapping away at his keyboard, intensely focused on the next big hit video game with his new friends one day, dreaming of becoming a videogame developer. The possibilities really are endless.

Cited Sources:

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