

## Video Games: Opportunity for Colleges or Potential Addiction

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### Introduction

Video games are providing new opportunities for college campuses to bring students together as a community (Young, 2007). Often video games are considered for their negative aspects. Highlighted for their violence and potentially addictive nature, there has been little focus on the positive aspects of video games. Recently, however, college campuses and researchers are finding the positive aspects of video games to be beneficial to college students in multiple ways (Reeves & Malone, 2007).

### History

In order to understand the current state of video games and their impact, it is important to look at their history. Video games are much older than most people realize. The first one was created in 1952 and was a basic tic-tac-toe game. Initially video games were confined to research facilities and universities as they were the only ones with enough money to explore the creation of them. In 1962, *Spacewar* was created at MIT by Steven Russell. This game would become very popular at universities around the country and would become the first influential computer game ever released. During the next ten years, a great deal of research and development would take place with video games. However, it would be the 1970s when the first video game explosion would occur. The first video game consoles would be released during this decade to great success. Magnavox would be first with the Odyssey in 1972 although most notable would be the Atari 2600 in 1977. Despite being the most recognized game of the 1970s, *Pong* would be superseded by *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids* as the most popular games of the decade. At the same time, arcades were becoming popular due to their low cost and entertainment value. Before the end of the decade, the first massive multiplayer online game (MMOG) had been released for the Internet. Multi User Dungeon (MUD) allowed players to interact with each other in worlds they created. Although the game had no graphics and was solely text based, it became very popular with gamers who enjoyed classic games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (Discovery Channel, n.d.; PBS, n.d.).

The start of the 1980s would bring continued growth and a flood of new games into the console market. Arcade games became more popular than ever before causing a coin shortage in Japan at one point. Classics like *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* would continue making arcade games very popular. However the flood of new games was also creating a problem. Everyone wanted a piece of the growing video game market and games with little development or poorly created were causing people to become frustrated with the quality of video games. At the same time, the most successful personal computer of all time, the *Commodore 64*, was released. All of this culminated in the crash of the video game market worldwide in 1983. It would take three years but a new company with success in Japan would bring video games roaring back through the United States in 1986. Nintendo would release the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) with a plumber named Mario leading the way. Sega would also release its first system without the same success as the NES. Nintendo would dominate the market until the end of the 1980s when Sega would release a new character that would become the symbol of its company. Sonic the Hedgehog added a fast paced and fun appeal that gamers leaned towards immediately. The Sega Genesis would enjoy success across the country as

Sega would come to dominate the video game markets at the start of the 1990s (Discovery Channel, n.d.; PBS, n.d.).

The 1990s would see the largest explosion of consoles since the 1970s and the introduction of a new competitor. Sony would release the Play Station system in 1994 while Nintendo and Sega were releasing some of the most popular video games in history. *Street Fighter II* helped Nintendo regain some ground in the market just in time for Sega to release the very controversial and very popular *Mortal Kombat*. The graphic nature of *Mortal Kombat* would lead to the first senate hearings regarding video game violence. At the same time *Doom* would add to the violence in video games discussion as one of the most popular games of the 1990s. By the year 2000, Sega had lost its piece of the market and Microsoft was joining Nintendo and Sony with the Xbox. The new millennium has seen Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony take over the console market. Today the Microsoft Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii, and Sony Playstation 3 control the console market (Discovery Channel, n.d.; PBS, n.d.).

During the later part of the 1990s and into the new millennium, computer games changed the video game market forever. In 1997, *Ultima Online* would be the first massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). This genre of video games allows players to take on a character within the game while playing with and against other players. *Everquest* would bring MMORPGs to popularity in the United States in 1999. Increasingly more games of this variety were released with the most popular being *World of Warcraft* in 2004. These types of games have led to a renewed concern over video game addiction as players are introduced into a game that has no end and a virtual world where they can meet and connect with other players. Today, games on the computer and home consoles can be networked allowing a new interactive experience for all gamers and not just those on the computer. This has led to massive success for the video game industry and their profits increase yearly and sales records are set with the release of new games on almost a monthly basis.

### Defining Gamers

Most students can be considered gamers whether they realize it or not. The term gamer carries a negative connotation despite the fact that anyone who plays a video game can be considered a gamer. What differentiates gamers is the time they invest and the types of games they play. A casual gamer is one who will play video games when they have a free moment. They're not dedicated to any specific game, but rather, enjoy the entertainment value and hanging out with friends when playing with other people. A hardcore gamer on the other hand can dedicate themselves to one game until all objectives have been completed and the game has been won. Although there is no time requirement for a person to be defined as a hardcore gamer, many hours are often dedicated to gaming on a weekly basis. The final group of gamers is professional gamers. Few people realize there are professional gaming leagues where players can compete against each other for titles and large amounts of money. Titled eSports, the professional gaming leagues and tournaments utilize specific games for their competitions.

### Current Discussion

As video games have transitioned into an interactive experience rather than the solitary one for which they are known, students are being impacted in new and often positive ways. By networking video games across the Internet, colleges have the opportunity to create programming which appeals to large populations of students. Young (2007) discusses Northern Virginia Community College where a gaming lab was created for students to utilize. The Game Pit as it is called is very popular with students and has created an interest in technology classes on campus. It has also spurred the creation of a gaming club with over 100 active members that are getting involved in the local

community as well. These are positive experiences that are bringing students together in new and creative ways resulting in a stronger community and support of student interests.

Recently there also has been research that suggests students are utilizing leadership skills that are found within established leadership models. Reeves & Malone (2007) evaluated the leadership skills utilized in MMORPGs when leading groups of players in coordinated efforts to complete goals within the game. They found that although the online world and real world settings differ on many levels, the leadership skills found in leadership models were being exhibited by players. As the world moves towards a global society where business interacts through the computer and on multiple continents, leadership skills demonstrated online may become more important and utilized in the professional workplace (Reeves, Malone, and O'Driscoll, 2008).

Despite positive aspects of video games, concentration on their negative impacts continues to be the focus. Addiction has become a popular topic as video game addiction was almost included in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 2007 ("American Psychiatric, 2007). Studies dating back to 1983 (Soper & Miller, 1983) have discussed video game addiction and the negative impacts on young people. However the more research that is conducted the more questions are raised. Disparities in the number of people who are addicted to video games are evident when looking at multiple studies. Grusser (2007) found that almost 12% of participants met the minimum requirements to be considered addicted. However, Leung (2004) found that over 37% of participants met the minimum requirements to be considered addicted. The result is a lack of reliable evidence on the actual percentage of players who could be addicted to video games.

An important note to make regarding discussions with students is sensitivity. Despite the word gamer referring to anyone who plays video games, it is often portrayed as a nerd or geek in their basement playing video games by themselves. As professionals, it is our responsibility to support students, but often discussions of video games turns negative. Whether this is intentional or accidental, it is important to recognize how students perceive it. Gamers are a significant population on college campuses and if there is a percentage of that population at risk, the last thing anyone wants to do is alienate them. Gamers do not openly talk about their activity outside of a group of friends. Based on past experiences it cannot lead anywhere positive. When having discussions with students, be inquisitive and show interest. There is a great deal to learn about video games and today's world, and the best resource available is the students playing those games.

No matter your personal opinion on video games, it is difficult to ignore the impact video games are having on the generation of students in college today. *World of Warcraft* currently has the largest player base with over 10 million active players throughout the world (Blizzard, 2008). The ability to interact with so many other people worldwide has opened a whole new world to young people. Spending time in *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs leads to discussions with people around the world. They give people the opportunity to meet people they never would and to connect with friends they would not be able to see otherwise. Spend a few minutes in the game and you will likely see people chatting with each other about the upcoming election or talking about their day. The conversation is not limited to what is going on in the game and often times becomes more personal with friendships being started and real life concerns being discussed.

As video games continue to become more prominent on college campuses it will also be important to consider the impact on new construction and Internet capabilities. Colleges can no longer worry about bandwidth with regards to computers only. Networked video games now utilize that bandwidth as well and that will impact campuses increasingly in the future.

Video games have come a long way in just a half century. More students are playing them than ever before. Negative aspects must be considered when looking at their impact on students especially in

regards to their academic success. However, it is time the positive aspects be brought into the discussion. Communities are being strengthened, students are connecting with each other, and people are meeting each other from half way around the world. As we look for new ways of engaging students, video games are already providing opportunities we discuss giving our students every day.

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