

## Introduction

“Just one more level! Please?”

More than likely, you have already come in contact with the strong social forces of video games. They have become more than a simple phenomenon. Video games are now a constant, prevalent, and expensive part of life. Your family’s household budget, for example, is an area that can be strongly affected by video games.

Of course, it is not just *your* household:

- *World of Warcraft*, released Thanksgiving of 2004, has sold millions of copies. As of March 2007, it boasted over 8.5 million subscribers worldwide.<sup>2</sup> At \$50 per game and \$15 per month, this is a serious indicator of the presence of games in our culture.
- By the end of January 2007, the Nintendo DS had sold 10 million units, after selling 5 million the previous year.<sup>2</sup>
- According to a survey carried out by the Interactive Digital Software Association, 60% of Americans play games, either on consoles, handheld devices, or PCs; 61% of players are adults; and 43% are women.<sup>3</sup> It may be surprising for some that the average age of players is somewhere between 26 and 33 years old.<sup>4</sup>

One sees then, that games have become a pervasive influence not only in your children's lives, but also in the lives of their friends and their friends' families. What are parents' roles in ushering in this Brave New World to their children today? How do video games, which are increasingly popular in our culture, affect children?

Studies are beginning to emerge describing the addictive potentials of games, but what is even meant by addiction? What of aggression and violence? Are video games creating little monsters or are kids learning something useful? Some authors focus on the idea that teachers should start to integrate more aspects of video games into schools, precisely because of their teaching and training potentials.<sup>5</sup>

When you see your children staring at the screen, involving themselves in realms unknown, you should know where to turn for questions.

Troubles between parent and child seem to occur when their respective ideas of the world do not connect. A child heavily into gaming sees a very different world than the parent who is not familiar with that realm. To a concerned parent, it may seem that a child is being absorbed by a world taking up increasing amounts of time no longer spent on other tasks like chores or homework. Meanwhile, what the child sees is a place of fun and even learning, although what is being learned may be a point of contention.

More likely than not, your kids will not try to see the world from your point of view. The language of adults is not interesting, compared to the language of their friends. One of a parent's duties (as if he or she doesn't have enough) is to learn a child's language and to share the wisdom of the adult experience in those words.

For example, a child has a certain routine at school. There are classes, teachers, friends, and best friends, as well as relationships with each of these. Together, these form a world with an associated language. A child trying to explain his day to his mother will have a much easier time if the parent already knows the language of the child's day-to-day world well. Being able to have a discussion with his

mother can promote a closeness as well as an openness to parental guidance and suggestions, rather than silence or opposition.

Games create a world with a language of its own. Hopefully, this book can help you to begin having this very important communication with your child.

### *Learning the Landscape*

Consider which movie you would allow your child to see: *The Little Mermaid* or *Taxi Driver*? Which would you allow your child to read: the latest Harry Potter novel or Henry Miller's *Sexus*?

If you know these films and books, the questions may seem nearly senseless. *The Little Mermaid* is a pleasant Disney film while *Taxi Driver* has tremendous violence and can barely be stomachied by many adults. Harry Potter is the story of a child growing in school, albeit involving some fantasy and heroic elements, while *Sexus* describes a wanderer's lifestyle rife with sexual escapades lasting for pages.

Books and movies have been around for generations. In these instances, it is not difficult or foreign to establish standards of judgment. Parents already know how to get information quickly, as provided by friends, relatives, advertising, reviews, and other sources. A decision about a book or movie can be made quickly—so much that the comparison to games seems ludicrous.

However, the differences between individual games can be similarly large. Well known are *Grand Theft Auto* and *Doom*. Many other games, however, have slipped past the radar of the general media, although they may carry some redeeming qualities, if not some very positive ones—*Prince of Persia*, *Psychonauts*, *Grim Fandango*, *Starcraft*, *Age of Empires*, *Katamari Damacy*, *ICO*, *Darwinia*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Brain Age*, *Elite Beat Agents*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Re-Mission*, and *Rez*, to name a few. There are many games, and each has its own story line and goal, much like a book or movie.

Many of these games have not entered the general public knowledge base. The fervor behind the ones that the news media presents,

such as *Grand Theft Auto*, can inadvertently skew the overall picture of video games.

How a video game affects a person is related not only to its content but also to the person playing the game. One writer uses a good example of a person who is violently allergic to peanuts.<sup>6</sup> Banning peanuts for everyone else or saying that peanuts are entirely bad would remove an important source of protein, not to mention an enjoyable food, for many. A parent still needs to be careful and guide a child in the process of learning to eat healthfully and safely, in the case of severe food allergy. Similarly, a parent can guide a child toward being a healthy gamer if games are to be allowed in the home.

Toward this end, a parent needs to understand what draws kids to video games, what constitutes problematic play, and how gaming fits into the general community.

Before beginning the main text, I would like to address the question of which games are the “best,” as I am often asked this question. In my opinion, the best games are probably the real-life, play-with-a-stick-in-the-mud variety, i.e., going outside, involving oneself in nature, and learning to play in the most natural playground available.

Having said that, I also believe that video games with excellent qualities do exist; however, which games are good for you or your child is an individual matter just as the choice of a book or movie is a matter of personal taste. Learning about the qualities of the video games your child is interested in playing, as well as learning about the qualities of your child’s personality, is of fundamental importance when making appropriate connections between the two.

### *What Are Games?*

Games, in general—not just video games—are a restriction of reality. One takes the “rules” of real life and restricts them to only a few. The player has the opportunity to focus on the game world. As such, he can meditate on this world until its rules are mastered. These aspects

are then naturally generalized and transferred by the mind to the real world.

In effect, gaming is learning, while it also carries the major essence of play.

For example, when your child was an infant or toddler, there were likely moments when you could just stare in wonder and amazement while he focused with intensity on a block or toy. The powerful attention with which children play shows us the strength this act holds in the fundamental task of learning.

As people get older, they can carry this mind state of play in learning and intense concentration to their adolescent and adult worlds. These states can occur at work, in games, and in sports, among other places. We focus our attention not just for learning but also for the joy it brings.

For example, people who play chess regularly may raise their IQ scores.<sup>7</sup> More often than not, though, chess players do not play with the intent of raising their IQ scores. Instead, they play for the stimulation of enriching their views of the world and developing strategy—while they happen to be improving their minds. The abstractions and thought processes practiced in chess become available to other activities in their play and work lives.

The video game *The Settlers: Rise of an Empire* provides situations where a player “builds” a fishery near a lake. One can then build a warehouse where the fish may be stored. The fish are then used by the townspeople, who all have their own jobs. The player does not actually do any of these things in real life, but the consequences of these actions can be entertained. The functioning of a society with people in their individual roles can be readily considered. The game, in this sense, provides a source of learning.

The elegant board game of Go, somewhere between three and four thousand years old, is extremely simple in its rules, yet incredibly difficult to master. In fact, mastery can literally take a lifetime. It reduces the world into the simple placing of stones on a 19-by-19 grid, yet somehow teaches of life, growth, competition, territory, greed, desire,

patience, focus, and other topics indisputably important to simply being alive.

Teamwork, cooperation, competition, training, loyalty, and strength are all learned from competitive team sports such as basketball or football.

Although video game players are often cited as having improved hand-eye coordination,<sup>8</sup> they most often do not play video games with the intent of improving hand-eye coordination, much as chess players do not play chess to increase their IQ scores. Rather, their understanding of the world around them grows in ways different than what can be measured by a few points on an arbitrary scale.

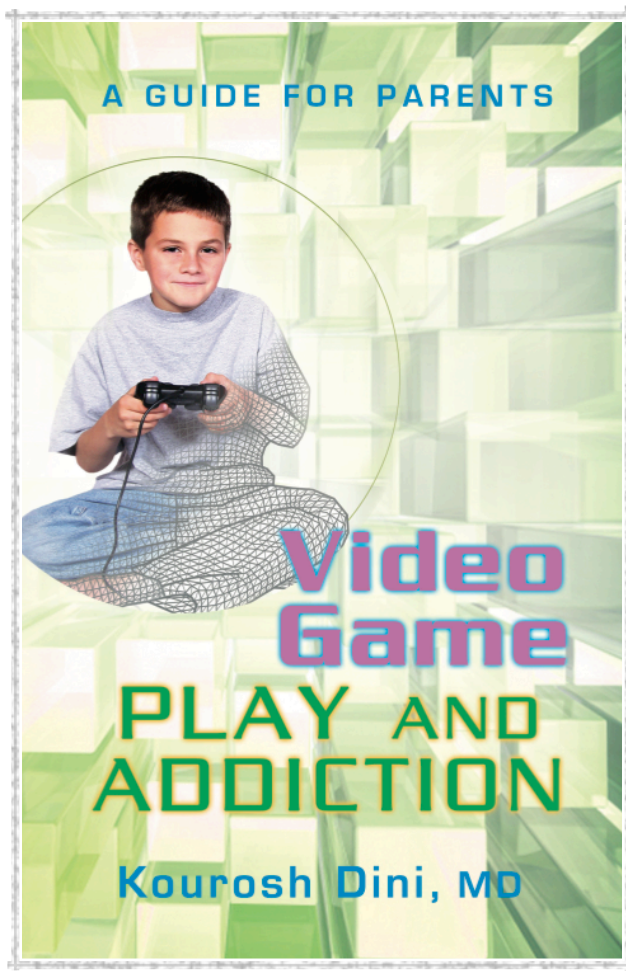
A video game such as *Starcraft*, for example, which employs resource gathering, formation of armies, tactics, and timing, teaches similar lessons to Go. It can teach that environment is crucial, that money spent wisely is much more important than simply having more, or that time is very much of the essence. It teaches that, although you may have the feel for something, you still need to learn the basics and that one can always review the basics to learn more.

These principles learned in games can be applied to the workplace. In addition, if one can learn to foster a creative environment similar to those of games where workers feel able to explore, then learning can continue as a positive experience even at work.

Games teach through allowing the gamer the practice of play. Each game is a different sandbox in which the gamer can explore. The boundaries of a game support the growth of the player. However, the direction of growth can either be beneficial or of concern.

When beginning to address addiction, we need to focus on what is gained and then find ways to provide these gains elsewhere, if such a change is deemed necessary. Growth of sorts does occur within video games through the strong learning mechanism of play. The types of growth require exploration, as they are neither all good nor all bad.

<http://videogameplayandaddiction.com/>



## A Comprehensive Guide for the Concerned Parent

- What is the allure of video games?
- Is there anything good in video games?
- When should I be worried?
- What if my child's friends are playing?
- What do games mean for the future?



Pages: 166  
ISBN: 0-595-45470-4  
Published: Apr-2008