Chapter 39

Video Games and Society

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ABSTRACT

Video games do not exist in a vacuum; they influence and are influenced by many other factors. The factors that involve individuals or smaller groups have already been discussed, but there are many other issues that exist in society at large that impact video games or that video games impact. Two of the largest issues are how video games and violence affect each other, and how video games can be addicting, similar to gambling addiction. These and other issues regarding how video games try to interact within society as a whole are discussed in this chapter.

VIDEO GAMES AND SOCIETY

As much as players and gaming is a subculture to the larger culture of the world, it has grown large enough that some of the problems that exist within the gaming world have begun to have an impact, or at least visibility, on the larger culture. Building on the concepts in previous chapters, it is important to note that these issues, many times, are taken out of context of the subculture of gaming, and are viewed from a non-subculture point of view. That can be important, but it is also important to view the issues from inside the subculture as well, to get a larger view of what is happening.

This chapter will speak about three separate topics that have to do with video games and their impact upon society, and one topic that is related, but exists within video games. The first will be violence, and whether or not video games influence violent behavior. In addition to the discussion on violence is a related discussion of the behavior of players within video games, how to analyze it, and how to improve it. Secondly, addiction and its relation to video games will be discussed. Last of all, video games will be discussed in relation to free speech and censorship.

VIOLENCE AND VIDEO GAMES

The discussion of whether different forms of media cause violence in people has happened as long as there have been different forms of media. The argument with violent TV and movies is that viewing
violent materials will make individuals inherently more violent. With video games, that argument ramps up an additional notch because the violent or mature images are not just being viewed passively, there is an active component involved. The active participation of committing the violence (even in a virtual setting) is considered to have more influence and cause more problems than just passively viewing the violence. The question is whether or not there is any validity to the belief that violent media (video games in this case) cause violent behaviors, or if there is no correlation at all.

The difficulty about the conversation of violence and video games is that there is a leaning in media, and larger society, to view the subculture of gaming from the outside in, and not get the opinions or views of people from the gaming subculture to comment on the issue. Kuchera (2013) said it best:

*These conversations have a nasty sense of paternalism to them. They want the kids to leave the room while the adults figure out what to do with these terrible games we’re all playing. The problem is that the dialog, at least so far, ignores the most important people in the equation: Those who actually sit down and play the games.*

When discussing the issue of violence and video games publicly, it is important to get all sides of the story, and understand the different perspectives of what is happening. Much of the hype or hysteria around violence and video games comes from the media, and it is a one sided conversation, with very little done to show the point of view of the people who play the games. The difficulty is that there are larger incidents that eclipse much of the argument.

Shootings that have happened in the past decade or two have had some connection to video games in that the shooters have had some relation to video games, usually just playing them when alone. This connection of the Columbine, Virginia Tech shooting, and a number of others have seen connection to video games, and a cry for the games to be banned or censored in some way. This is the very public face of violent video games, but there are many other viewpoints that need to be considered, like those within the subculture. What about the people that play these same violent games, and have no violent tendencies?

*You never hear about the lawyer who wears a suit to work and then comes home to unwind with a few rounds of Battlefield 3, although I know him. I’ve talked to doctors who are Devil May Cry fans. My wife enjoys when I come with her to parties thrown by the accounting firm she works for; her co-workers love to talk about video games and my slightly unusual job. These are men and women who handle millions, if not billions, of dollars in their day-to-day job, and they play video games.* (Kuchera, 2013)

This is an example of a group of well adjusted individuals who play violent video games and are not committing violent crimes. While anecdotal, in both cases, they do provide good examples of both sides of the argument.

Rather than looking at opinions and anecdotal evidence, some hard research is needed. Weaver (2011) is one of the leaders in analyzing violence and media. He analyzed 65 independent studies with 43 separate articles to get an idea of how media (not just video games) is really connected with consumers. Weaver was looking into two different aspects of viewing violent media, “One is selective exposure, which refers to people choosing to watch violent programming over other, nonviolent content… The other concept is enjoyment, or how much a person likes a given media message.” (p. 233) The goal of the meta analysis from Weaver was to see the reason for violent media. Before there are more details,