Video Games and Adolescent Development

Christine Naderer, Greg Steinbaugh, Brittany Mention, Ann Schroeder
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Video games are a multimillion dollar industry: according to the NPD Group, a leading
global market research company, video game hardware, software, and accessories made
$743.1 million dollars in May 2011. Adolescents make up a large proportion of video game
buyers. According to a recent survey, over 70% of children between the ages of 8 and 18
own a video game console. Video game manufacturers realize this and target this
important age group.

As video games developed in the 1980s and 1990s, the content of the games were brought
into question. After the release of Mortal Kombat, Doom, Night Trap and Lethal Enforcers,
there was much controversy over video game content for violence, gore, and sexual
situations. In 1994, the Entertainment Software Safety Board (ESRB) was established to
provide a rating system for video games similar to the movies set forth by the Motion
Picture Association of America (MPAA): E = everyone, EC = early childhood, E10 = 10 and
above, T = teen (13-17), M = mature (17+), and AO = adults only (18+). In addition, many
retailers (e.g. Target, Wal-Mart, Toys R Us, etc.) have a policy of not selling games with the
“M” rating to people under 17 without parental approval. This helps parents make wise
decisions on what video games are appropriate for their children and adolescents.

From a developmental standpoint, playing video games encourages cognitive development
in teens by having them create specific schemes and incorporating both assimilation and
accommodation into game play. Video games also encourage social-emotional
development in teens by having them play together to overcome obstacles and increase
their level of potential development through game play. Appropriate video games are
available for each level of development and we have found that the the rating system of the
ERSB is accurate and should be adhered to by parents.

We will examine four specific games (The Sims, Dance Dance Revolution, Call of Duty, and
Grand Theft Auto) and look at both positive and negative connotations associated with each
game. We will specifically look at how each game could incorporate cognitive and social-
emotional development in adolescents.

The Sims

The Sims is one of the most successful video games series of all time: as of April 16, 2008,
the franchise has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide, and as of June 22, 2010, is
the best-selling PC franchise in PC history. In the game, players create virtual people called
"Sims" and place them in houses and help to direct their moods and satisfy their desires.

The Sims is an excellent example of sociodramatic play in which players create virtual
people (the “Sims”), have them go to work, make money, and build upon their houses;
Furthermore, the variety of jobs offered in the game which can allow players to experiment. Adolescents are in the psychosocial stage of identity vs. role confusion where they must decide who they are and where their lives are headed; by playing *The Sims*, teens can create an avatar with a specific job and determine if they want to change their character or not which could help them decide in real life.

Like many games, *The Sims* has had some controversy associated with it. When *The Sims 2* was released in 2004, there was some controversy over mods where the characters could be naked and have their genitals showing; although this was never proved, it raises questions about how far some video games will go to be as realistic as possible. It is important for adolescents to understand the difference between what happens in the virtual world vs. the real world so they can avoid engaging in risky business such as unplanned pregnancies.

**Dance Dance Revolution**

*Dance Dance Revolution*, another video game we explored, is different from many other games in both format and experience. The game involves mimicking dance steps projected on the screen by pressing different sensors on a floor mat. Depending on the difficulty, this game can challenge adolescents’ coordination, footwork, and physical stamina. This game is appropriate for the age group because it does not include the negative aspects found in many other games, it promotes positive physical development, and it can also help teens socialize with friends in a unique way.

Over the past few decades, more and more children and adolescents have been experiencing problems with obesity. According to the textbook, 18 percent of U.S. youth ages 6-17 years old are overweight. A lifestyle of inactivity contributes to obesity problems, and games that offer a physical workout along with entertainment can be a positive option for youth battling obesity. Additionally, during adolescence, teens are experiencing many sudden, dramatic changes in the way their bodies look and feel. During and after puberty, adolescents often experience insecurity about their bodies. Being involved in fun physical activity can help adolescents not only have healthier bodies, but develop a better self-image as well.

**Call of Duty**

On the Common Sense Media website, which is “dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a world of media and technology,” many parent reviewers rate *Call of Duty: Black ops* appropriate for ages 11-13 and up. In addition, many (if not most) of the reviewers are under the designated age of 17. This indicates that many consumers of this game are adolescents in spite of its “Mature” rating for players ages 17 and up.

In researching *Call of Duty*, I chose to start by interviewing my nephews, ages fourteen and sixteen. Each of them spends a minimum of five hours a week playing Call of Duty. The two
of them guessed that approximately eighty to one hundred percent of their male friends play some version of the series. When asked why these boys play, their responses were: “because I’m the type of person that likes war games,” “it uses teamwork,” “me and Gabe can play together,” “it’s more realistic [than others],” and “there are different modes inside of it.” Modes include:

- Team Death Match, in which the team attempts to accumulate “a certain number of kills,”
- Domination, in which players attempt to “control a series of flags,” and
- Search and Destroy, in which each player is given one life and must destroy a designated strategic objective.

The goal of any mode is to accumulate “achievements” and move on to the next level, or “map.” As my nephew stated, graphics and weapon manipulation are very realistic, which is a huge draw for this game among this age group.

**Grand Theft Auto**

*Grand Theft Auto* is a very popular video game amongst all ages, races, classes, and even gender. *Grand Theft Auto* is a video game where an individual criminal is involved in different crimes, including organized, in order to move up and make a name for himself in big cities. The male criminal, is involved in crimes such as stealing automobiles and weapons, murder, other theft, and hooking up with prostitutes. The more crimes committed, the better because that is how the criminal in the game makes a man for himself. I have several of the *Grand Theft Auto* games in my home so I decided to look at the game for more information. The game is for mature audiences which is deemed 17+. The game ratings include blood, intense violence, nudity, strong language, strong sexual content, and the use of drugs and alcohol. I agree that this game should have this rating because of what it entails and what is appropriate for a certain age group.

*Grand Theft Auto* has been in the middle of controversy since its release date in 1997. However, Rockstar Games continues to pump out a better version each year, with more graphics, more sex, more violence and their audience wanting more. The issue is not if the game is appropriate or not but what ages should be playing this game. *Grand Theft Auto* (also known as GTA) is the center of many lawsuits including one with Cody Posey played the game excessively before murdering his own father. The issue becomes, who can handle playing these video games and are they the reason for things such as murder or a six year old trying to drive. Another story surrounding GTA is about a six year old Virginia boy that missed his bus and decided to get in the family sedan and try to drive to school. The six year old told police that he learned to drive watching *Grand Theft Auto*.

According to the Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, “studies have shown that the more realistically violence is portrayed, the greater the likelihood that it will be tolerated and learned.” The article also points out that although some films portray violence in tandem with its natural consequences - “suffering, loss, and sadness to victims and perpetrators,” video game violence is most often used for “immediate visceral thrills without portraying any human cost.” This - portrayal of violence without its natural
consequences - desensitizes the child and can also “inflate the prevalence of violence in the world, cultivating in viewers the 'mean-world' syndrome, a perception of the world as a dangerous place.” This skewed perception can make children become less empathetic and less caring.

**Conclusion**

Cognitively, students at this age are highly susceptible to the effects of such games on their brains. According to Piaget, they are able to “to draw logical deductions about situations that have no basis in physical reality” (McDevitt and Ormrod 198). This means that students can imagine and reason about the abstract situations portrayed in the game. They are also able to “envision idealistic alternatives to current social and political practices” (198), and this idealism can also be affected by the games - students may idealize violence as a suitable (and perhaps even preferable) solution to problems.

Erikson would place these young people in the identity vs. role confusion stage - a period of life in which children and adolescents “actively engage in soul searching related to who they are, what they believe in, and where they are going” (407). This is a key consideration when deciding whether or not a game such as Call of Duty is appropriate for this age group. As adolescents struggle to identify themselves, it is crucial for adults to guide them in deciding what kind of citizens they hope to become and help them choose activities that match these goals.