Chapter 15
The Contribution of Videogames to Anti-Social Attitudes and Behaviours amongst Youngsters

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to contribute to the growing debate surrounding the impact of video games on social practices by reporting on a small-scale, ethnographic study into the use of these games and the practices of youngsters in a small town in Portugal, with a particular focus on the relationship between video-gaming and violent and aggressive social behaviours.

Using questionnaires and interviews, the video-gaming habits of 136 youngsters, ranging from the ages of 9 to 15 years, were assessed, taking into consideration their age and gender. It was found that many youngsters are playing games which are not appropriate for their age group, and that long hours are spent at computer screens on these games without parental control or supervision. In fact, most parents do not even know what games their children are playing never mind whether they are rated as suitable for their age group. In addition, differences between boys and girls were significant, allowing us to confirm that boys prefer more action-oriented games while girls choose simulation games. Although the small-scale nature of this study does not allow us to generalise its conclusions, its findings are relevant and can point the way for future studies of this type. The centrality of video games in the lives of children and teenagers today is such that these and the practices they engender need to be taken into account when considering the rise of anti-social, aggressive, and at times violent attitudes and behaviours amongst youngsters.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of information and communication technologies challenges us to try to understand their impact on our lives. We are living a period of constant development and transformation of media technologies and, as they evolve, so do their properties, uses and effects. We can no longer refer to the influence of the media on our lives without taking into account the increasingly interactive relationship we have with these technologies and the power this has given us, as audience, to become editors and producers as well as users. This sense of power is exhilarating but it may also be frightening, especially when it comes to children and adolescents and the use they make of the new media entertainment – video games.

The focus of this chapter is on the impact of video games and their consumption on the behaviours and practices of youngsters today. Parents and teachers are increasingly concerned about the rise of violence and aggressiveness amongst children and young people, worrying that they appear to be imitating violent media models in many aspects: they wrestle instead of playing, they shout and insult each other all the time, they find violence humorous, they do not appear to respect authority or older people. In fact, children appear to be desensitized and often seem to be living in a virtual world, where adults have no important role to play and where life is a game, a mere simulation. Whatever they do, everything will turn out just fine. While video games cannot be held exclusively responsible for the high rates of aggressiveness, violence and criminality that are witnessed today among youngsters, and they clearly have many positive aspects to contribute, it is possible to question whether they are a factor in the decline of social values and skills and whether the amount of time spent in front of computer games is not contributing to the decline of school performance, as many researchers worldwide have indicated, for example, Sharif and Sargent (2006).

Surprisingly, while there has been considerable concern among academics and the public about how young people are affected by the media, particularly by televised violence, and parents strive to control their children's consumption of television, little attention has been devoted by researchers to the effects of a constant exposure and immersion in the virtual world of video games. Video games have become one of young people's most favourite leisure activities, yet parental rules regarding their use appear to be practically non-existent. Not many parents seem even to know the games that their children play or to give any attention to age and suitability ratings. However, even if parents wanted to control the games their children play, they would probably be surprised by the kind of games that are considered suitable for children and teenagers – the amount of violence contained in some cartoonish children's games is sometimes astonishingly similar to that found in games rated for teenagers (Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007). In addition, research has demonstrated that the rating system is not as valid as it should be (Walsh and Gentile, 2001), and control of violent content in video games or young people's access to those games has been deficient. Apparently it is not difficult for a teenager to play or obtain 18-rated games in shops or even to download them from the Internet.

Video games are a relatively new entertainment form, and, as such, they have not been widely studied from an ethnographic perspective. Several characteristics are attributed to this type of entertainment which differentiate it from other types. For example, when playing a video-game, the player becomes a character either through an avatar that they have been given or have created; they may even have the chance to make their own image appear on screen. Video games also have the potential to almost perfectly represent 'reality' and gamers have the possibility to interact with that same 'reality' and contribute to its evolution and change. Such involvement in the game may lead to a total immersion (McDougall

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