Re-Conceptualizing the "Problem" of Video Games

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Over the last decade or more there has been much attention focused on finding a connection between video game play and negative behavioral outcomes. These have included everything from overweight and aggressive children, to poor math and reading skills. Although there is little doubt that playing of video games at the expense of other proactive activities can contribute to maladaptive behavior, a causal relationship between these games and any maladaptive behavior is much less clear. While it is true that too much of anything can be unhealthy, I believe that by simply focusing on the potential negative effects of any behavior, one can only achieve a one-dimensional understanding of a multi-dimensional issue. This is often the case with video games, as we fail to recognize the important role these games can have for some teens and young adults. However, if we begin to actively attend to those positive aspects of video game play that do exist, there is great opportunity to facilitate development in a group of students that often feel stuck.

This being said, I am not advocating unlimited access to games, but rather a shift in the way we understand the role these games have in the lives of some students. It is from this shift in perspective that parents and educators may re-conceptualize their understanding and approach to the management of video game play. When viewed as an opportunity to meet developmental needs, rather than a waste of time, the skills and experience developed through play can truly be used as a stepping stone for future development and success. Absent this, video games will not only become a waste of time, but more importantly a wasted opportunity.

At some point during your teen years, if you're lucky, you discover that you are good at something. For some students this first discovery may occur through the playing of video games. But regardless of the context, when this occurs, confidence swells, you feel more independent, and most importantly you become an expert. You are admired by others. You can teach, show-off, compete, and in turn receive accolades for your efforts. This success can then build upon itself as it becomes easier to try things unfamiliar, new, and challenging. It is the momentum generated from this exploration that helps us discover those talents in ourselves that can shape our future. Whether it is sports, academics, social interaction, and yes, even video games, these opportunities provide an essential foundation upon which future adventures and successes may be built. These experiences feel great! They also represent a significant step in establishing ones own identity, while also maintaining momentum in the developmental process of risk-taking and skill development. A process that is in large part built on previous success.

I believe that this is especially true for individuals who have had limited opportunity for success in their lives because of social-skill, processing, executive functioning, or academic deficits. For them, their interaction with others through video games can provide that opportunity for achievement and success from which other successes may be built. In fact I have seen this occur.

Within my role as psychologist at the Humanex Academy I work with students presenting every combination of learning disability, processing deficits, organization difficulties, NVLD and ASD. For each and every one of them the achievement of success has been difficult. This is especially true in the academic and social arenas. As a result they have often felt isolated, bad about themselves, and have universally struggled to imagine future success and achievement. For these students video games have

often provided one arena in their lives where it is possible to shine. To compete with peers. To succeed. To make friends. To become experts.

Most often this has occurred on-line, but this connection can also occur directly with peers – and is something I work to facilitate at Humanex Academy. Through this arena of interpersonal video game play (initially more parallel play) I have witnessed the significant development of social skills, and a developing desire to be with others where it did not previously exist. Video games provide a familiar and structured activity through which to interact. Something especially important to male social interaction. It also provides a reason to step out of one's comfort zone to be with others. It's fun! And because they want to do it, it also becomes the most valuable social-skills group they have ever attended – even without the direct involvement from myself or other Humanex Academy staff. New skills then develop, and the desire to learn additional skills occurs as they are needed within this social dynamic. For example, How do I tell someone I don't like their behavior?; How do I manage their negative response to my own behavior; How do I resolve conflict?; How do I plan an activity other than video games?. These skills can only become part of a social "skill-set" through practice, and are best learned in situations that really matter. Video games, fortunately, are that important.

As learning occurs, a greater sense of control develops, self image improves and so does the willingness to take on other daily challenges. More things seem possible as there are successes to build upon. Students also begin to dream, and to imagine futures for themselves' that may utilize the strengths that they have or would like to develop. They become future focused in a way that does not result in fear and avoidance.

For this reason, it should come as no surprise that many of these students dream of becoming video game designers. This is what they know, and is often their area of expertise. While it is true that this is a very difficult career field to enter, its possibility offers that chance to dream. Like the child who dreams of becoming a professional ball player, students hoping to work within the gaming industry are dreaming big. This is important, and an essential part of the natural progression of identity development. They are trying on roles to see if they fit. Pursuing a dream that requires some skill development, and exposing themselves to alternative future opportunities. By dreaming of a future, they are learning to recognize their skills, to explore their use in multiple arenas, and are developing the courage to try something completely new – maybe even discovering additional skills, interests and talents. Video games can be a first step in facilitating this process.