

May 2003

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Jeffrey E. Brand

Bond University, jeffrey_brand@bond.edu.au

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Recommended Citation

Jeffrey E. Brand. (2003) "Don't criticise the effects of video games on kids, exploit them!" , .

http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs/21

Don't criticise the effects of video games on kids, exploit them!

By Dr Jeff Brand

Associate Professor of Communication and Media

Co-director of the Centre for New Media Research

<http://www.bond.edu.au/hss/centres/cnmre/>

Bond University.

Video games are the new "bad boys" of communication technology. We blame them for violence in society, vulgar tastes and a host of other ills. Meanwhile, we decry the decline of formal education, literacy, and numeracy. Could it be that video games are related to educational decay?

Research on boys' literacy by Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford reinforces the view that formal education suffers from perceived irrelevance by the very people it seeks to inspire. Put another way, it appears that formal education fails to consider the learners.

We can understand young learners by projecting who they will be in the future. Take, for example, the projection made last year by Douglas Lowenstein, president of the American computer games industry group, Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA), when he addressed its annual trade forum: "...within the next decade, IDSA will routinely meet with Members of Congress and top government officials who actually play video games and, within 20 years, the person sitting in the White House will be a once and future video gamer."

For those who are surprised by Lowenstein's projection that leaders in 2022 will be video-game players, consider (or reconsider) education in the context of dynamic culture and society. Students in 2003 inhabit a physical, social, economic, political and technological world different in important ways from that experienced by their parents and teachers. Their media world in particular is fundamentally different: it is interactive and technologically, if not thematically, diverse. This diversity of media products and services creates a ubiquitous socialising agent.

Now, the media as a dominant source of culture may be unsavoury. South Park, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and anything played on the PlayStation2 or Xbox is of questionable worth. Popular media express trivial, ephemeral and material tastes. By comparison, the value of formal education is that it provides meaningful knowledge and attitudes in service of citizenship. History, mathematics, literature and civics are defensible as tools of the productive work force.

Perhaps, however, we err when we dichotomise popular and formal culture, when we see them as mutually exclusive, when we speak of them in phrases like "entertainment versus education".

In 1938 German philosopher Johan Huizinga completed his book, *Homo Ludens*: A study of the play element in culture. Huizinga's thesis was simple: play is the precursor to culture. Huizinga claimed that play underpins language, civilisation, law, war, knowledge, literature philosophy and art. He wrote: "The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start. Take language

for instance ... behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words."

Huizinga also argued that the opposite of play is seriousness. He might have dichotomised work and play, formal culture and popular culture, education and entertainment, but he was more careful in his expression than we are in our popular discourse on these matters:

Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath.

So, we read about things that entertain us, that allow us to experience play, but that are also functional. If we are fortunate, we work in professions that are fun and enjoyable as well as productive. We consume popular cultural products for the same reasons: because they are entertaining and functionally useful beyond their entertainment value.

It is therefore perplexing that parents, teachers and politicians bemoan popular culture ... and that they express surprise upon learning that technologies of popular culture contribute to something beyond their own manifestation of entertainment and play. For example, when video games foster learning within the context of formal education. The notion of "moral panics" helps explain their negativity to technologies of popular culture.

Moral panics are processes by which individuals or groups, often aided by the fuel of mainstream media attention, identify a threat to society. Video games are the latest in a series of media technologies to suffer from the singularity of derision that a moral panic brings. Other media technologies that have been the subject of moral panics include the popular newspaper in the mid-19th century, the so-called "dime novel" at the end of the 19th century, movies at the beginning of the 20th century, television in the mid-20th century and the Internet in the 1990s. Moral panics follow a pattern. What has happened recently with video games demonstrates the model:

1. The shooting of eight students by 14-year-old Michael Carneal in 1997 at a school in Paducah, Kentucky, USA was a catalyst that served to identify video games as a problem (the perpetrator played video games that used a point-and-shoot interface).
2. The media monitored and covered stories related to the catalyst. The crisis of school shootings presumably activated by video games, extended to schools in Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998), Springfield, Oregon (1998), Littleton, Colorado (1999). An industry of experts formed around these events, each of which also featured prominently in the media. Lt. Col. David Grossman, a co-author of *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, is a prominent example. The prevailing view was that these events are the tip of the iceberg.
3. Public outcry about the apparent threat of violent video games fuelled political reaction. Legislation, legal proceedings, and interest organisations arose to establish

social control over the source of deviance, and researchers were given agendas. In 2000 and again in 2002, the US congress considered legislation to limit violent content and more tightly regulate the video games industry in America. Watchdog groups like the National Institute on Media and the Family have campaigned against the industry generally. In Australia, vocal lobbies pressed the Office of Film and Literature Classification and opposed an adult 'R' classification of video games.

While moral panics refer to a real problem, confusion about the scope of the problem - and the moral context in which it is cast - blurs our vision about it. For example, the effect of violent media on aggressive behaviour is well studied but not convincingly argued, suggesting the problem is not as great as some would suggest.

Two credible studies demonstrate the point: one in the journal *Human Communication Research* by Purdue University's John Sherry and the other in the journal *Psychological Science* by Iowa State University's Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman. Both studies used meta-analysis (a technique of statistically summarising collections of empirical studies). Both included most of the same original studies in their analyses. However, the two meta-analyses made remarkably different conclusions. The Sherry study found a smaller effect of violent video games on aggression than has been found over the years as a result of violent television content and that more game-playing reduces overall tendencies toward aggressive behaviour but that the type of game violence (human and fantasy, but not sport) did predict aggressive behaviour. The Anderson and Bushman article concluded that violent video games increased aggressive behaviour in players, that it increases physiological arousal and feelings and thoughts related to aggression.

Other studies have looked for different outcomes like the effect of games on attention span or on academic performance. Again, the findings have been inconsistent. Indeed, evidence is mounting (for example from the Home Office in Great Britain) to the surprise of many that video game play is related to higher levels of intelligence, literacy, job success and sporting activity.

Inconsistencies in research findings may result from the different video game content used as stimuli in studies. Moreover, when we learn that video games can serve positive roles in education and socialisation our surprise may be a function not only of our moral panic about games but also a function of inadequate understanding about the complexity and diversity of video game worlds. According to market analysts Inform, more than 3000 video game titles were on sale in Australia in early 2002. As media economist Dimitri Williams claimed in the *International Journal on Media Management* last year, "With the exception of a growing body of social science research chronicling the effects of game violence, academia has largely ignored this booming and vital new mass medium. And yet even this [research] work is mostly uninformed with regards to content...without understanding of the different types of content or an agreed-upon typology for genre or playing style".

Until this year, only five empirical studies had explored the content and nature of video games. Each of these looked specifically for violent content, one also examined gender and race portrayals. The Diverse Worlds Project at Bond University's Centre for New Media Research and Education has just been completed by the author and his colleagues. The aim of the project was to document the range of objects, characters,

stylistic features and narratives in four elements of video game products including the packaging, manual, opening cinematic and game-play. The sample was 130 of the most popular games in Australia determined by unit sales for the first half of 2002 across the five dominant platforms in the market then and now including the personal computer, Xbox, PlayStation2, Game Boy Advance, and GameCube.

The findings reveal that video games present diverse worlds of play, and the vast majority of these worlds contrast with the moral panic associated with video games. These game worlds are populated mostly by realistic human characters who do much more than shoot or attack others in settings modelled mostly after our world (trees, buildings and all) and which present artifacts and stories from our formal cultural traditions.

The lesson of the Diverse Worlds Project is simple: video games tap into our existing cultural base, video games can be a part of learning and contemporary socialisation and video games can be a tool to inspire interest in formal culture, as long as they are tapped accordingly. Marc Prensky is the author of a striking book entitled Digital Game-based Learning. He reminds us that few young learners today live in a home without a computer and none have known a world without television. He calls them the game generation, others use the terms "N-gen" or Nintendo generation.

Boys and young men are fast becoming a smaller segment of the video games market with girls and women entering the playground of games. Australian researchers Kevin Durkin and Kate Aisbett found a few years ago that nearly all children (girls and boys) had played at least one video game in the year preceding the study and that over half of all adults had done so. Among youth, 98 per cent of boys and 89 per cent of girls played video games. In Australia, the video games market grew by 14 per cent in volume and 28 per cent in value during 2002 according to Inform. Last November Inform reported, "This growth rate now means that the total interactive market, including console software, hardware and gaming peripherals, is worth in excess of \$2 million a day in Australia."

For young learners today, video games are part of the "cultural furniture" (this term used by UK author and journalist Steven Poole). The development of boys and girls, their socialisation, and their formal learning (including literacy) are at risk if they reject contemporary media. What humanises technology most completely is appropriation of it. As any parent or teacher who has tried it knows, using popular media in the service of formal learning most readily overcomes the risk attributed to them. It also eliminates the source of moral panics: ignorance about the learners' world.

(Detailed findings of the Diverse Worlds Project will be presented in part at the Office of Film and Literature's International Ratings Conference in Sydney in September 2003; others will find their way into peer-reviewed journals).

posted Monday, 26 May 2003
<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=366>