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The role of computer games and their influence on society

Computer games are one of the most popular types of entertainment nowadays. The industry is ever growing and currently 65% of Americans play games, 63% of which play together with others, as a recent study shows [1]. Considering those numbers, the question arises which role do video games play in society and do they have an influence on society. In order to discuss this question, a short overview of both good and bad impacts on the personality of the player will be given. Following that, it will be discussed how those impacts can be projected onto society, highlighting both good and bad influences.

Playing games is a big part of growing up and still very prevalent in adolescence. Humans have also played games for many centuries; playing is engrained into society. Therefore, it makes sense that games can influence and represent the personality of the player. It has been observed, that players behave the same in online multiplayer games as they do in the real world [2][1]. This, in return, means that players may experience a change in personality in response to playing games. These changes can be both good and bad: playing First-Person-Shooters (FPS) can be linked to more aggression and delinquent behavior, while online role-playing games can increase anxiety and cause players to experience withdrawal due to addiction [2][2]. Although concerns about the negative effects are valid, there are also many benefits to playing video games. Quwaider et al. state in their work "The Impact of Video Games on the Players Behaviors: A Survey", that playing video games, in general, impacts learning positively and playing in a group increases the cooperation and feeling of cohesion between the members[3]. It is also noted, that contrary to research that supports the claim that video games have an impact on personality, most research focused on denying the effect that video games have on the players is supported by weak evidence [2][4].

Since most research points towards video games influencing the personality of the player, the question arises do video games also have influence on society? This can partly be answered by taking a closer look at one of the largest shapers of our society: the education of children. When looking at academic performance of students, Wright found a correlation between playing games and having significantly lower GPAs [3][5]. This finding is also consistent with the results of other studies listed in the same paper[6]. Although it seems that generally video games have a negative effect on education, Wright also points out that there are positive effects, such as an increase in visual-spatial skills and developing verbal skills [3][7]. In fact, video games stimulate motivation and are considered useful for acquiring practical and problem-solving skills. De Aguilera and Noguero point out, that, while research has yet to prove computer games are intellectually harmful, many studies in fact defend their impact on intellectual abilities [4][8]. Simulation games especially can have a positive impact, as games focused on medicine and business allow players to get familiar with real situations [4][9]. In general, there are several authors listed in "Video games and education: (Education in the face of a "parallel school")", that call for inclusion of video games in school curricula purely from a standpoint of art. Since video

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[1] See "3. The Impact of Video Games on player Personality"
[2] See "3.1. Video Games with Negative Impact"
[3] See "3.2. Video Games with Positive Impact"
[4] See "5. Conclusion"
[5] "Results", p. 40
[6] "Discussion", p. 40
[7] "The Effects of Video Game Play On Academic Performance", p. 38
[8] See "2.4 Conclusions"
[9] See "2.3 Main Lines of Research"

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games are such an important form of media, it is, according to those authors, necessary to give students the capability and knowledge to critically judge those new forms of media and art [4][10].

Another example of how video games can influence society can be observed by looking at relationships and interactions between players in online multiplayer games. Kowert et al. report, that for shy individuals, online games and the related social interactions can be an important way to make new social contacts and integrate these social skills into their offline lives. They also point out, that online gaming is often used to help maintain existing offline friendships, as they provide a lot of social flexibility [5][11]. This leads to the conclusion that online games as a social space is advantageous for emotionally sensitive people, as they allow them to overcome traditional social problems and difficulties [5][12]. This evidence supports the claim, that video games can strengthen preexisting friendships as well as enable the formation new ones.

Lastly, video games enable players to experience and gain a perspective on morally and ethically ambiguous topics. Certain games give players the ability to experience sensitive topics, such as war, from different viewpoints and draw their own conclusions. The game "Spec Ops: The Line" is one of those games. In this game, the player must make many ethically questionable decisions and fight enemies that seem more human than the playable character himself. This is also represented and supported by the dialog in the game [6][13]. Keogh remarks, that players approach the game as they would every other military shooter at first, but throughout the game quickly realize how morally wrong and horrible their deeds truly are [6][14]. Games like "Spec Ops: The Line" can make a strong statement, as they force players to think about complex and unpleasant topics they usually might not deal with. This is also supported by Zagal, as he states that games can make players feel personally responsible for their actions and decisions, which in return can challenge and enhance their ethical system [7][15].

In conclusion, there is are many ways that video games do impact society. They can enable and strengthen friendships, be a way to teach students critical skills and improve their abilities and they play a role in developing and orienting the morals and ethics of the player. At the same time, there is evidence that supports negative effects such as an increase in aggressiveness and addictive behavior. Although the medium is, compared to more established media such as movies, still young, it is rapidly becoming the biggest and most important one. Therefore, the question is not whether video games have influences on society, but rather whether the good or the bad effects will overshadow the other.

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[10] See "2.2 Common Ground for Research on Video Games"
[11] "Discussion", p. 4
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[13] "Shifting Sands and Questionable Ethics", p. 11-13
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