Introduction to the Special Issue on Video Games

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Video games are fast becoming one of the most popular media of choice among children and young adults. As with any new media enjoyed by youth, but relatively unused by elders, myriad responses may be witnessed, ranging from curiosity and wonder to fear and concern. Historically, new media have endured periods of reactionary alarm from politicians, activists, and scientists alike until youth themselves age into the elders of society and acceptance becomes commonplace. In that time, opportunities for the positive use of a new medium may be delayed.

Video games are one of the newest media forms to find themselves under scientific scrutiny. To date, much of the attention has been negative, focusing on potential harm related to addiction, aggression, and lowered school performance. However, as video games have become more popular, statistics on children in the United States and Europe suggest that they are experiencing fewer behavior problems, less violence, and better scores on standardized academic testing (see Ferguson, 2010). Thus, our concerns about the alleged harmful effects of video games may, in large part, be allayed. Scientists increasingly are examining the potential to use this immensely popular media for positive purposes, in education, in health, for students with disabilities, and to foster visuospatial cognition. This special issue concerns itself mainly with these issues: refocusing the discussion of video games away from fears that may have been exaggerated in the past, to examining whether video games may be put to some good use or are just games in the end.

Two articles in this special issue concern themselves with the issue of aggression from differing perspectives as it remains hotly debated in the psychological literature. Ferguson (2010) presents a critical view of the aggression literature, arguing that harmful effects have been exaggerated and that current concerns about video games fit into a historical pattern of media-based moral panics. This view is contrasted with Markey and Markey (2010), who argue that video game violence may indeed increase aggression in some individuals, particularly those who are already predisposed to violence, whereas it has little effect on those without such a predisposition. These two articles may help frame debates about video game violence and the limitations of this research in the future.

Several articles then turn to the issue of video games as tools for cognitive enhancement. Spence and Feng (2010) consider the impact of video game playing on visuospatial cognition, an area of increasing attention in the scientific literature and the public. Annetta (2010) discusses the application of video games to edu-

cating youth through the development of "serious" games. Kato (2010) considers the specific application of video games to health-related problems, an area that has seen some remarkable successes. And Durkin (2010) examines research regarding the use of video games in improving the outcomes of developmental disorders in youth. Although each of these areas would benefit from continuing research, each also holds some initial promise.

Ceranoglu (2010) reviews the nascent research field of video games applied to therapy with youth. This remains an underresearched area, with a dearth of randomized controlled outcome studies and a rich area for future researchers to consider.

Bers (2010) considers the degree to which video games promote civic engagement, and Przybylski, Rigby, and Ryan (2010) consider the personal and social motivations for video game play. These articles suggest that video games may not be as asocial as many elders believe, and that violence may not be the prime attraction for well-received video games.

Barnett and Coulson (2010) review massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, a genre that may be perplexing to elders unfamiliar with such games. This review is timely, particularly given both concerns that such games may be addictive and theories that these games may conversely promote civic engagement, socialization, and verbal skills. Given that the player census of a single MMO, *World of Warcraft*, has been said (at 12 million players) to exceed the populace of Greece, this is not an insubstantial population of individuals to understand.

Lastly, Olson (2010) attempts to answer a question many elders ask, "What is the attraction of video games to youth anyway?"

As several of the above articles note, almost all youth now play video games at least occasionally (with boys generally playing more often than girls). The genie is out of the bottle and, as Przybylski et al. (2010) note, lamenting this fact is unlikely to roll back this tide anymore than lamenting the alleged (but still debated; see Savage & Yancey, 2008) deleterious effects of TV's impact on viewership. Indeed, by playing the role of "nanny" or "teetotaler" (although assuredly with good intent), particularly in the absence of societal data indicating evidence of harm, psychological science may run the risk of sacrificing careful science for advocacy and alienating the general populace of youth who might become the psychologists of the future. It is hoped that psychological science will learn from the excesses of the TV violence research epoch (see Freedman, 2002, and Grimes, Anderson, & Bergen, 2008, for discussions) and engage in a careful and balanced discussion of potential harms and benefits of video game play. Otherwise, we merely return to a familiar pattern of "fighting the last war."

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