

Comment on “Videophilia”

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We who grew up in earlier decades, who played outdoors with friends after school, lay on the grass and identified shapes in clouds, slept under the stars in the back yard, walked to school, read books for pleasure, made things for play without the use of kits, waded in nearby creeks in summer and ice-skated on local lakes in winter, may sometimes wonder whether our misgivings about children’s pastimes today are perhaps just old fogeyish or simple nostalgia for our own lost youth. However, Zaradic and Pergams, like others, provide empirical evidence that the sedentary, indoor, electronic-centered occupations of most children today have physical, social, and environmental consequences that are not in the best interests of young people or the societies they will one day inherit.

Although not quantitative, my ethological studies of the origin and functions of the arts in human evolution provide a perhaps unfamiliar but interesting perspective on the effects of videophilia in children. Ethologists tell us that the behavior and psychology of an animal are as much a product of its environment and way of life as its anatomy and physiology. For example, caribou and reindeer live on open plains, are exposed to predators, and have evolved to graze in large herds. Forest-dwelling roe deer, however, move around alone and browse inconspicuously in well-spaced, defended territories (Eisenberg, 1981, pp. 200–201). As a result of millions of generations of biological adaptations for a particular ecological niche and way of life, caribou psychology is as ill-equipped for solitude as is the roe deer’s for togetherness.

If we think of ourselves as animals whose psychology evolved to operate in a particular way of life, what might this fact contribute to a discussion of the consequences of videophilia on the young human mind? Whether we think of human evolution as beginning with the first upright hominids of five million years ago, the earliest representatives of our genus *Homo* some two million years ago, or behaviorally modern humans who lived after 100 thousand years ago, it is clear that twenty-first century human life *style* differs enormously in most respects from that of our ancestors and is unprecedented. Yet human *psychology* is arguably little changed.

Even though hominids left Africa and settled in widely diverse habitats that required diverse material cultures, they did not relinquish the emotional needs and psychological satisfactions of their hunter-gatherer (or “small-scale”) way of life. Human psychology evolved over hundreds of thousands of generations to find such a life satisfying. Being carried around as infants on our mothers’ bodies; growing up in a small

group of like-minded others of all ages; learning to make the artifacts necessary for subsistence (from tools to shelter to clothing) and to do what was needful (hunt, trap, fish, prepare food, make and keep fire) with our own hands and bodies, using the materials of the natural world; socializing with our fellows and demonstrating with them in participative ceremonies a shared system of beliefs—these are the behaviors that an ethologist from Mars would have recorded as characteristic of our species until the invention of agriculture made possible much larger, stratified, settled societies.

Surely these are behaviors that our cognition and emotions have evolved to find appealing, satisfying, and meaningful. I have no doubt that such lives would have seemed full and rewarding. Had our ancestors not felt that way, had they all been depressed and alienated, we would not be here today. And I think it is fair to say that humans today still have a Pleistocene psychology. Looking at a timeline of life on earth, on which five million years of human evolution is only a few seconds before midnight of a 24-hour day (Potts, 1996, p. 6), modern (post-agricultural or post-Enlightenment) life is itself only a nanosecond of those few seconds. There simply has not been enough time for the fundamental emotional needs and predilections acquired during our lives as hunter-gatherers to have changed very significantly.

To be sure, adaptability is in itself one of humankind's prominent adaptations. Wherever children grow up and in whatever time period, their dexterous hands want to handle and manipulate—whether mud, fibers, and rocks or dials, knobs, and electronic buttons. Curious young minds, ready to participate and learn, are sure to be attracted by fast-moving colorful action, excitement, adventure, violence, and competition—whether in stories told or read aloud by elders or on a computer or TV screen. Can't we say that the toys of twenty-first century life are just a new variation on the old "let's have fun and learn" theme?

Pioneer art therapist Edith Kramer reports that in her long career of working with hospitalized children, the use of art materials with a real person easily out-competed television for their interest (Williams, Kramer, Henley, & Gerity, 1997). But she found that with the availability of video games, children no longer preferred art making. She describes an important psychological as well as physical difference between the two. Although video games may satisfy a need for mastery, they do so without the benefits of the lessons of *real* hands-on play, action, and adventure in an actual social and natural environment. Pressing keys or clicking a mouse is not like building or making real things. Real materials, says Kramer, may resist as well as obey. Handling them generates a kind of body-mind interaction that is not found in computer art.

Zaradic and Pergams mention that videophilia easily fosters a reduction in physical activity. Equally detrimental is the loss of human *interactivity*, which is a vital psychological and emotional need from birth. Human infants, born "natural," immediately show their preparedness to become cultural beings. Newborns are ready to interact socially, preferring human faces and voices to any other sight or sound. Babies are imitative, ready to copy what others do—from early facial expressions and the sounds of language to the gestures and actions of the people around them. Through play and watching what other children and adults do, they acquire the manipulative, physical, cognitive, and social skills that their lives will eventually require. They wish to please others and be accepted by them.

In his landmark work, building on studies by Daniel Stern, Colwyn Trevarthen, and others, Allan Schore presents evidence from many disciplines that caretaker-infant interaction, based on face-to-face visual-vocal communication with mutual gaze, critically influences the development of the infant brain (Schore, 1994). Such interaction is essential to the child's future capacity to self-regulate emotions, to appraise others' emotional states, and to manage stress. Later social interaction with family and peers builds on infant interactivity and intersubjectivity and helps them to develop. Electronic communication, although interactive, remains cognitive and disembodied—the opposite of two people face-to-face. Studies of mother-infant interactions have shown that as early as 8 weeks of age, infants expect their mothers to respond to their own visual, vocal, and kinetic behaviors contingently—that is, in fractions of a second (Beebe, 1982; Murray & Trevarthen, 1985; Nadel et al., 1999). An electronic image may respond to a finger click but not to a small change in facial musculature, vocal sound, or head movement. Coordinating body movements and vocalizations with others has been a time-honored way of building emotional rapport and one-heartedness—from mother-infant play to the ritual ceremonies of the Pleistocene to folk dances and gospel choirs of today. Understanding that humans evolved with the readiness—nay, the emotional need—to interact face-to-face with other people, to handle natural materials, to make and use things for their lives, and to sing and dance in groups is further indication that it is not only the natural environment but the natural human social world that is in danger of virtualization from videophilia.

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Author Note / Endnote

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