Point/Counterpoint: Video games

Player 1: Begin!

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Staff Writer

For the past few years, it has been fashionable to blame some of society's problems on video games. First, it was teenage violence, now it's un-creativity. There are some, like Pat Walsh, an English teacher at T.C. Williams High School for over 30 years, who see video games draining our generation of its creative talent. The topic disturbed him enough to write a piece for *The Washington Post* on it. The question is, do they?

I'll admit I'm a pretty hardcore gamer. I've spent countless hours burning my eyes on a CRT screen, gaming until my hands no longer function. But I'd hardly say my gaming has sucked my creativity dry.

I write, make films, mix CDs, and read voraciously as much as I game. Previously, video games have sometimes interfered with my studies, but there are always days where you'd rather nail your hand to a desk than go to school. I've skipped a few classes to beat people down in *Halo*, and have spent many sleepless nights gaming with my friends.

Playing video games isn't about the violence, or the myth that gamers enjoy being alone. And it's not like only geeks play them, 90% of boys and 40% of girls these days plays video games, according to PBS. We play games because they bring us closer, they teach us about things in ourselves we didn't know, they drop us into a world so vivid and so alive we fall in love.

I have a friend in Canada studying Classics, who plays more video games than anyone I know. Yet he also is in the middle of writing a fourteen book series based on ideas he got while playing video games. So far he's done with one, and is working on the second. I also find ideas for stories while playing games.

Also, many critics argue that because video games provide no "real life skills," there is no point to them. The same argument could be applied to books. Some books do enhance "real life skills", but most are fiction, or merely intellectually enriching. Yet the written word has become a sacred institution, founded on the stories and worlds created in books.

We're not losing our creativity to video games. We're just as creative, but sometimes we'd rather play games than read. Books use words to tell a narrative, while games use images. Some of the best games draw from literature, history and anthropology, to create vivid, new stories for the next generation. And although a part of the entertainment business, the video game industry is also striving to make video games into works of art, much in the way that film evolved from a business into an art.

We need to see video games, not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a new form of media and art, and even as a profession. Recently, there have been a few professional video gaming leagues established, the Association of Gaming Professionals (AGP, www.theagp.com) being one such league. With more and more attention going to video games, the future looks bright. Not to mention creative.⌘

KEVIN BRYAN/PHOTO ILLUSTRATION
Player 1 and Player 2 duke it out

Player 2: Begin!

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My name is Taleisha, and I play video games.

Not incessantly, but certainly obsessively. I may go for weeks without touching a console controller - but then I'll pick one up out of boredom and not set it down for days at a time.

Keep these facts in mind when I tell you that video games are hazardous to real life in many ways. While people may argue that video games increase creativity, improve hand-eye co-ordination or sensory motor skills, I say the video games suck players in and never let go. They contribute to the rampant obesity in our country and numb players' minds.

Of course, there are times when mind-numbing isn't a bad thing. But there are certainly effects to getting too much of any bad thing.

Part of the electronic hazard comes from just how technologically advanced video games have become. When I was six, sitting down in front of the original Nintendo system couldn't keep me occupied for very long. Admittedly, this was mostly because I sucked at the game and three lives weren't enough to get me very far, but also because the graphics were very 80s and the plotlines were kind of lame.

But current video games? They're sexy, all high-resolution and high density polygons and involved, intricate plotlines. They suck you in visually and don't let you go until you suddenly realize that you haven't moved for 12 hours, staring at a T.V. screen.

This phenomenon is more common than you might think.

Take, for instance, *Halo 2*, which was released on Nov. 9, 2004. The game made more than $125 million in its first day on the shelves, and newspaper editorials rang with teacher complaints of students skipping school to try to beat the game.

The "kill all aliens" game has a following consisting of more than just nerds and geeks. While playing the game isn't necessarily an anti-social event - have you seen the recent blurbs in the *Buzz* advertising *Halo* tournaments? - it, and other video games, will lead to neglecting other things.

In fact, in weeks following the release of *Halo 2*, more than one woman was complaining that she couldn't get her boyfriend's attention-he'd been seduced by the siren call of the X-Box.

Around the release date, I also noticed that several men were missing from some of my classes. They emerged days later, unshaven and unwashed, muttering things like, "Spartan - Scarab - Tartarus."

I think what amuses me most is that the *Halo* games originated from a set of books about alien/human relationships in the future - very typical sci-fi stuff. I can't help but wonder how many of the game's aficionados would be as absorbed in the books.

Now, this isn't a rant against *Halo* in particular, but video games in general. *Halo* just happens to be a convenient target.

Video games are designed to engage the players. It makes fiscal sense to design them that way-after all, the better the gaming experience, the more people will by that game, and the more likely they are to buy future games by the same company.

The problem is, as I've said, that players get sucked in to the games, neglecting other things that need to be done. I know I've plopped down in front of a console multiple times instead of doing homework. In fact, I managed to log about 30 hours re-playing *Final Fantasy X* during finals last semester (not to mention multiple hours spent *watching* a housemate play the game).

Did I pass my finals? Yes.

Could I have done better on them with 30 extra hours of study time?

Undoubtedly.

I'm not saying that there's no place for video games and other down-time activities. I'm just saying that it's too easy for time spent playing video games to take over a person's life in a manner that other leisure activities rarely have the bells and whistles and graphics to do.

But maybe it's just my imagination. Maybe no one's really getting carried away with their gaming and every gamer has firm control over the potential to lose all sense of time spent in the virtual world.

But do I really believe that?

Not at all.⌘