

# How Computer Games Affect CS (and Other) Students' School Performance

Compulsive game playing, especially of the role-playing variety, risks failing grades and withdrawal of financial support from tuition-paying parents.



Discussions with hundreds of students at the University of Texas at Austin have convinced me that computer and video games, particularly when they involve role playing, do in fact ruin the social and scholastic lives of many students. I don't claim this is the world's top social malady, but many students—particularly those in computer science at my university—are addicted to these games, and it can be inferred that students at other institutions face the same problem. The evidence for my claim is anecdotal, so it suffers from all the shortcomings of any unscientific investigation. Despite this caveat, I am convinced of the negative effect games have on college students' academic performance and social relationships.

My methodology was simple: I asked students—all computer science majors in an undergraduate program—whether they knew someone whose scholastic or social life had been harmed by computer games. About 90% answered affirmatively, describing students whose fascination chained them to their apartments or dorm rooms for days, weeks, even semesters. Many admitted to having or having had this problem themselves. The effect is exacerbated by so-called role-playing games like *Age of Kings*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, and *Everquest*, with addictive power so great some call it *Ever-crack*. Players create characters and alter egos in cyberspace,

living out their personal fantasies, usually by adopting the traits they believe they lack in the real world. My informal surveys suggest there is something particularly addictive, if not sinister, about role-playing games.

Students have told me of parents withdrawing financial support from their children who play games at the expense of their studies; of intimate relationships undermined by an obsession with virtual worlds; and of roommates who no longer respond to human interaction while playing, transfixed as they are by the interface bridging virtual experience and human mind.<sup>1</sup>

Escapism is the primary appeal. Moreover, as the graphics get better and the game play more sophisticated, playing becomes even more engrossing.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to understand why anyone would want to escape our difficult and complicated world and fall into a vivid, compelling game environment. One can live there with little or no interaction with the ordinary world. With money, online bill paying, and groceries delivered to the door, one can peer almost full time into a computer screen.

Why would anyone choose to live as a character in a game instead of in the real world? Virtual real-

<sup>1</sup>A graduate student reported that when his roommate did not get out of his chair for days, he offered to buy the chair for \$50. The transaction was concluded, but the roommate just dragged over a pile of (dirty) clothes, sat on it, and continued to play. Other students told me of friends who manage tech-support computer help lines from home while simultaneously playing computer games.

<sup>2</sup>My informal surveys suggest that obsessive computer game playing is particularly problematic for male students.

# Viewpoint

ity, increasingly indistinguishable from real reality, is almost here, and many like it. Today's students are among the first generation to experience these games, and their life choices—or rather, the choice of a cyberlife—may herald the future choices of the general population.

How can I convince them not to compulsively play such games? One strategy is to point out the

objection, gamers might say they aren't worthy of others' interest or want time alone. But even if we acknowledge the validity of such claims, what of the disappointment they cause their parents? Here, gamers might question whether college students should make decisions based on whether or not they disappoint their parents.

Parental approval/disapproval may be a considera-

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negative consequences games can have. Suppose they don't care. Suppose they say their lives are terrible, especially compared to their counterparts in cyberspace. Suppose further they claim role-playing games allow them to be courageous heroes they cannot be in real life or that communication with online friends teaches them something about relationships they would otherwise never know.

It is easy enough to imagine college students who don't care about their coursework and other scholarly pursuits. But a committed gamer might say that familiarity with the fast-paced computer world is actually job preparation for the 21st century. In short, if they prefer playing games to studying, finding an effective rejoinder is difficult. I could assert my preference for reading over gaming, but this would only reveal my subjective preference. Who am I to say anything about their preferences, especially when they don't seem to hurt anyone, other than possibly the players themselves? Gamers could claim that role-playing games make their lives better than the ones they live in the real world; thus, they might add, the consequences of playing are in fact positive.

If gamers deny the harm games might do to them—about which they may be correct—we could argue that they harm others. For example, real-life human relationships are more difficult to maintain with people who play games, since they spend so much time chained to their computers. To this

tion, but it is hardly the only or even most important one. If it were indeed the most important, how many of us would still have disappointed our parents? And how many of us would choose to live in accord with our parents' desires? Most of us would grant that personal autonomy holds sway over others' preferences, even those of our parents.

What about students who depend on their parents for financial support for their habit? In this case, parents are likely justified in pulling back from a project they deem worthless. Students who are financially independent can circumvent this obstacle. In fact, it is now possible to make a living from role-playing computer games, my students tell me, by creating and developing characters with special powers or virtues, then selling them for profit. One can expect entrepreneurs to find yet other ways to make money via role-playing and other computer games. Short of financial dependence on people who frown on compulsive game playing, there seems no conclusive argument concerning either harming oneself or others against a gamer's personal fixation. So, without good reason, we have failed to convince either the gamer or ourselves to give up a potentially addictive habit.

### The Gamer's Lament

Gamers could ask whether all role-playing games are really as bad as I claim. First, I doubt the benefits can possibly outweigh the costs in terms of per-

sonal time and energy. It is possible that games do facilitate social interaction, since many require players play together as a team and get to know each other. For the shy or the friendless, this is surely a comfort. Still, games' addictive effects—I feel justified in calling them that—suggest they may be more pleasant and engaging than real life; otherwise their appeal wouldn't be as great as it is.

In defending their habit, gamers might yet cite several more arguments:

- Most gaming experience doesn't lead to the collapse of one's social life;
- Gaming offers at least some positive lessons, especially as it relates to human-computer interaction; and
- Some gaming might actually aid a computer science education illustrating, say, the lessons of proper design for human-computer interaction.

Strong counterarguments can be made against all of them. The first concerns how much time might be spent gaming before the gamer's social relationships begin to break down. Determining with accuracy is difficult, but given my anecdotal evidence, the social and academic lives of people playing several hours a day are affected. As for positive lessons, some could involve cooperation and strategy, as well as how to design yet more games. But the fact is that games, especially those involving role playing, target primal areas of the brain satisfying primitive needs in the (primarily male) psyche.

As for the claim that at least some amount of gaming rounds out a contemporary computer science education, I simply reject it. Students can take all the interface/game design courses they want.

### **Games and the Addictive Personality**

If it could be shown scientifically that gamers become addicted to role-playing games, the case against them would be stronger. Why? Because addictions involve compulsive behavior that harms the lives of the people doing it. The key to understanding why we view addictions as harmful is the

conjunction of compulsivity and negativity. If only one, but not the other, is present we'd likely not refer to a particular behavior as an addiction. It may measurably hurt me to smoke a cigarette, but I'm hardly an addict if I quit immediately afterward. Likewise, I may be compulsive about many things without being addicted to them in a negative sense. I may be compulsive about eating healthy meals and exercising 30 minutes a day, but few would label me an addict. Compulsivity by itself doesn't make someone an addict—at least not in the negative sense. And the reason we aren't likely to view such people as addicts is primarily because there isn't anything negative about eating or exercising in moderation. However, if I did nothing but breath, eat, and exercise, it might be said I was compulsive in the negative sense, precisely because my behavior doesn't reflect moderation or temperance.

I have now introduced another idea—moderation—in my effort to understand this harmful addiction. Thus, I define addiction as a compulsive behavior, engaged in without moderation, that directly harms one's life.

Compulsive gamers are therefore addicts. While it would be difficult for them to deny their behavior is compulsive, they might still claim it affects their lives only in positive ways. Cigarettes, which may seem good to smokers, really are harmful to human health, independent of anyone's desire for a smoke. Similarly, role-playing games may appear challenging and fun to those playing them—because they may be so uncomfortable with or fearful of the world as it is.

We can only hope gamers begin to recognize that the real world holds much more reward for those with the courage to face it, promising more positive experience, knowledge, joy, and love than any world of computer-generated reality. ■

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