VIDEOGAMING

Although I am not a gamer (Spider Solitaire is about the only game I play), I feel compelled to point out a few issues that Neville Holmes failed to include in “The Deal[r]th of Human Understanding” (The Profession, Oct. 2008, pp 108, 106-107).

Skipping the obvious blaming of technology that Mr. Holmes reverses on in the final paragraph, I believe lumping all videogames together to be a mistake. Videogames, like all technology, continue to go through an ever-increasing evolution. Many current games foster social interaction, team building, and coordination in ways far beyond most people’s ability to accomplish in the real world. Game players can interact with other players from all over the world, and thus learn about other countries and cultures they normally would have no contact with.

Next, I would like Mr. Holmes to clarify his statement concerning young people being the predominant players. What age group is he terming “young”? As I understand it, the average videogame player is over age 18, and most of the serious gamers I have encountered are over age 30 (www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html). However, I also know that there is an ongoing problem with parents ignoring rating and warning labels on videogame packages because they automatically assume videogames are for kids. Grand Theft Auto was never meant to be played by children.

I think my biggest problem with the article is that it seems to address a particular type of videogame—the first-person shooter. However, the most popular videogames today are multiplayer games where communication and teamwork are essential to success in the game.

If Mr. Holmes wants to address the ills of the first-person shooter game and people’s erroneous assumption that all videogames are for kids, I will be happy to join him. However, condemning all videogames is a big mistake.

Edward Shattuck e.shattuck@computer.org

Neville Holmes responds:

The issues related to videogaming and its ilk were covered by the essay cited in the opening paragraph of my October essay: “Digital Technology, Age, and Gaming,” (The Profession, Nov. 2005, pp. 108, 106-107). As the citation’s title suggests, it focused on videogaming and other forms of gaming, agreeing with most of the points Edward Shattuck makes, and incidentally arguing that although there might be a correlation between age and videogaming, correlation is not causation, and that culture is more significant in this area than age.

However, my October essay was not intended to be primarily about childhood and videogaming. It was intended to be about the possible effects of digital technology of various kinds on the personality and sociality of people generally. I chose its title to emphasize this.

If too great stress is put on the effects on young people, this is best excused by considering that, if indeed there are harmful effects springing from the use of digital technology, these will be more serious for children in being longer lasting. See, for example, the recent news items news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/uk_news/education/7692843.stm and theage.com.au/news/technology/missing-canadian-xbox-gamer-found-dead/2008/11/06/1225561002899.html. However, relevant news items of a more general nature continue to appear, as, for example, guardian.co.uk/education/2008/dec/12/games/online/video-games-print.

In “The Deal[r]th of Human Understanding,” Neville Holmes says that videogames are dangerous. I agree with most of his ideas. As I am an expert in youth protection from the dangers of the Internet (www.ilFiltro.it), I often have the opportunity to address parents and teachers on this topic. After many years, I decided to change the typical scheme of my lectures: Instead of emphasizing the risks of the Internet and videogames, I’m now trying to show the positive lessons we can learn from children who are “digital natives.” This is the path Marc Prensky followed in “Don’t bother me, Mom—I’m learning” (www.marcprensky.com).

The lack of concentration and contemplation that Holmes fears has often been a concern when something new has come along. For example, according to Plato, Socrates said that “writing is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind.”

Parents and teachers haven’t mastered the new technologies: They know less than their children and students. They can’t teach children how to “cross” the Internet the same way they teach them how to cross a road.

Perhaps this is the first time that the new generation is more expert than its predecessors. The kids are learning by themselves; without the experience of others to learn from, they take risks. Playing Grand Theft Auto with their children would give parents the chance to teach them something about what playing the game means. The same applies for Wikipedia, dangerous because it is intrinsically unreliable while being an excellent source of information. If teachers don’t write on Wikipedia with their students, the students won’t learn to use it critically.

It is also important to say that the best suggestion for all children is a balanced diet: videogames, chat, SMS, but also books, sport, excursions.

Michele Crudele
www.crudele.it

Neville Holmes responds:

Although this essay did mention in passing aspects of videogaming relevant to children, this was not meant to be its focus. Rather, I meant the
Letters

focus to be on the possible effects of digital technology on human relationships and personality.

I congratulate you on what you are trying to do. However, my own feeling is that the computing profession should empower teachers and parents to use digital technology to amplify the learning of their students and children in their earliest years (The Profession, Mar. 2008, pp. 104, 102-103). This will then enable their charges to extract the greatest benefit from the technology on their own terms rather than being driven by fashion and marketing.

Your quotation from Socrates was made under circumstances unlike the present. Reading and writing expanded the influence of the spoken language. Digital technology seems to be degrading the influence of the written language, not expanding it. Whatever the cause, researchers are confirming the problems I fear (www.theage.com.au/national/nation-heads-for-maths-hurdle-as-students-fail-the-numeracy-test-20080901-4779.html).

Parents and teachers might know less than their children and students about digital technology, but there must be more to life than digital technology. And teachers and parents of all generations typically know much more in toto than their children and students while they are children and students.

Technology had effects on culture and personality long before the advent of videogames. Some of these changes have been far reaching.

The development of amplified sound systems, moving pictures, and radio made it possible for one person to talk directly to thousands, if not millions, of others. This increased the ability of a single charismatic individual to influence events by orders of magnitude. Previously, an individual could only talk directly to a few hundred people. Those individuals would then have to take that message to the rest of society. This diluted the effect of the individual’s charisma. With the new technologies, Roosevelt could talk to all of America. Hitler could also talk to all of Germany. The results in one case were beneficial; in the other, catastrophic.

Technology is now making the one-to-many model of communication obsolete. Through the Internet, virtual communities are being set up. This dilutes the ability of a single person, no matter how charismatic, to influence an entire nation. The resulting Internet communities, however, generally comprise people who think alike. A person can now spend his entire intellectual life online without ever having his core beliefs challenged. The result is a fragmentation of society and the radicalization of online communities as they follow their beliefs to their logical conclusions.

When it comes to videogames, we must distinguish between two effects. The first is the learning effect that Neville Holmes described. Individuals who frequently play videogames will become more active and less contemplative in their behavior. There is a second effect, however. Those who are already more active and are therefore better at videogames acquire greater social status. This increased status gives them more visibility within society and also more success in other areas. So, do videogames teach individuals to be more active, or are more active individuals more successful in a videogame culture?

Victor Skowronski
victor31@ieee.org

We welcome your letters. Send them to computer@computer.org.