Editors' Note

Brian Middaugh foregrounds his personal experience as a gamer and at times uses passionate language to explain his opposition to MAVAV's claims about video games' harmful effects. Do you think these rhetorical choices strengthen his credibility (ethos), or do they harm it by making him seem biased or even defensive? The essay cites sources, but with the exception of the MAVAV website, all the articles are neutral about or in favor of video games. How could the essay incorporate more opposing views without letting them overwhelm Middaugh's argument? As evidence for video games' educational benefits, Middaugh discusses a study of students who played a game that taught them particle physics. Apart from a game's content, does the activity of gaming itself teach something? Based on your own experiences with video games, do you find the essay's argument convincing?

Video Games Are Not Evil!

Brian Middaugh

For my seventh birthday I got exactly what I wanted: a Game Boy Color. Since my first time ever popping in the little cartridge, video games have been a major hobby for me, and I am not alone. Young children, teenagers, and believe it or not over half of American adults are picking up keyboards, handhelds, and controllers and joining the new revolution in entertainment technology. (*Harvard Health* par. 1) Yet still some argue vehemently against video game use, namely the Mothers Against Video Game Addiction and Violence, also known as MAVAV.

MAVAV organizes against the video game industry, publishing articles, creating posters and signs protesting video games use, and opening forums for its members to express their hatred of the fastest rising industry in entertainment. According to their website, "MAVAV was launched in December of 2002 with high hopes of raising awareness of the hidden dangers associated with video games:

- Video games are addictive,
- 1 in every 9 gamers are already addicted.
- Video games have led to an epidemic of youth violence all across the world.
- Video games are socially isolating and desensitizing.
- Video games are an inherently inferior medium to film and literature."

MAVAV's claims are not only radical, but irrational and based primarily on utterly biased speculation. I have spent thousands of hours playing video games in the last decade, and I get straight A's in school, I have plenty of friends, I don't randomly break out in acts of aggression, and I am most certainly not dependent on or addicted to them. I'm not challenging MAVAV's right to exist, but I believe there are a few things MAVAV could really learn about video games that may cause them to rethink their radical claims.

First of all, linking this so called "epidemic of youth violence" to video games is simply absurd. No study yet to date has conclusively linked video game use to acts of violence. According to the *Harvard Health Letter*, several randomized experiments have been conducted on the subject, and have only been able to prove that slight increases in aggressive behavior occur directly after playing a violent game, and such increases are only temporary. Aggression peaks for males around the adolescent years, and since video games are popular among adoles-

cent boys, it can be easy to immediately label them as the cause, however "violent behavior is influenced by so many factors—innate personality, abusive parents, substance abuse, cultural beliefs—that it's difficult to tease out media violence, of any sort, as a cause" (*Harvard Health* par. 4). Long-term violent tendencies are more conclusively linked with these factors, not video games. Furthermore, some experts even observe that video games may provide a useful cathartic effect in the years of a child's life when their aggression levels are peaking. So doesn't it seem more responsible and reasonable to just admit that the "epidemic of youth violence" is mostly attributable to rises in divorce rates and drug use than from parents allowing their children to play video games? Of course, I am not pleading that all young children should be allowed to play any game; I'm simply saying that there is not exactly a call to eradicate video games from society. No matter what kind of media is in question, responsible parents should always monitor what their kids are being exposed to, and luckily the video game industry has provided for you the ESRB (Electronic Software Rating Board), which rates almost all video games based on their content to facilitate just that. Would the video game industry do this if they did not care about your kids?

As far as the second preconceived notion that MAVAV holds—that video games are socially isolating and desensitizing—is concerned, MAVAV could not be more inaccurate. Sure, I will admit that early video games were typically pretty isolating, usually having the capacity for one or maybe two players. However the video game industry has been working tirelessly to make video games into a social activity, and the strides taken in this direction have been massive. The Game Boy, invented in 1989, "was the first handheld video game unit that allowed systems to connect for multiplayer games. This primitive form of wired networking was made possible by the Game Link Cable which connected two Game Boy systems, and the Game Boy Four Player Adapter, which allowed up to four systems to link and exchange information that was used in head-to-head competitions" (Cohen par. 5) From here the social networking capability of video games has soared. Virtually all present day video game units are capable of bringing fellow gamers together through split screen, where up to four people play a game sharing a unit, Local Area Networking or System Link, where several units in close proximity to each other connect and play, and the Goliath of social video gaming, online play, which is done over the internet. For example, Microsoft's online video game service for its Xbox, known as Xbox Live, has 14 million members, and *USA Today* calls it "a social media and entertainment hub" (Snider par. 2). Members can find their friends online by exchanging "Gamertags" and invite new gamers they meet online to join their list of friends. Friends can join parties and chat over headsets while they play a game together, send voice and text messages back and forth, find out what games their friends own and play, and the service even allows members to customize their very own avatar, and write a short biography and motto to make their profiles unique and give others a glimpse at their personality. And social interaction doesn't end when you put down the controller; video games have become so popular that they are often topics for discussion among gamers. Just like two fans of a popular TV show or book might discuss last night's watching or reading, two or more fans of a particular game may discuss last night's playing, exchange strategy, and introduce new games to each other. Entire magazines, websites, TV shows, and online chat forums have been dedicated to the purpose of video game analysis and discussion. Video games don't socially isolate or desensitize their players; they bring people together; they create common interest; they provide party activities, and they have their own special culture. Xbox Live updates their service several times a year; maybe those of you associated with MAVAV should update your complaints list.

So, why then, are video games seen among MAVAV members as an inferior medium to literature and film? Probably because when they think of someone playing video games, they imagine someone sitting in a small, dark room with flashing lights and mindlessly mashing buttons. We've all heard the phrase "video games rot your brain" at some point in our lives; however, anyone who actually knows how the human mind works should disagree. Video games actually stimulate the brain in a number of ways, and in fact are such powerful learning tools that James Paul Gee, a curriculum and instruction professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and his colleague Kent Squire developed the Education Arcade project, an initiative to further explore the educational capabilities of video games. In his recent book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee remarked, "video games incorporate learning principles that reflect what researchers know about human learning" (qtd. from Chaptman par. 7). He and Squire, working with their colleagues at MIT developed a game called "Supercharged" to help students learn about particle physics. The player takes control of an electrically charged particle and navigates through magnetically charged mazes. As the student plays they actually learn about the behavior of particles and electromagnetic interactions. When tested at a Massachusetts middle school, the students who had played "Supercharged" scored on average a remarkable 20% higher on the final exam than those taught on traditional book-and-lecture curriculum. It is my understanding that people whose brains are rotting don't typically raise their grade in physics by two letter marks. The potential of video games as learning tools and media should not be underestimated because of contrived connotations with dark rooms, flashing lights, and mindless button-mashing. They often contain themes, characters, and multiple threaded plots like any good novel. They have hours of cut scenes in between game play that can rival the beauty, complexity, and mastery of film. They challenge players to solve puzzles and thrive in a new universe. Inferior? I think not.

It's time for MAVAV to reconsider their position on video games. It's time to forget your preconceived notions regarding violence, seclusion, and inferiority. It's time to accept video games as a new and exciting media, rather than denounce them as a plague on society. They have many positive uses including entertainment, recreation, and even education, and more applications are still being discovered. So next time you feel like venting your video game hate speech on the MAVAV forum, or sticking "awareness banners" in your car window, consider what I've said. Just give video games a chance, and I doubt you'll be disappointed.

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