Modern technology's dark side

By Paul Gathercoal

In the movie "Star Wars," young Luke Skywalker constantly was tempted to give in to the "dark side" of some mysterious, omnipotent force whose power could corrupt minds and souls if abused.

Skywalker, following the advice of a wise old teacher bearing a striking resemblance to Alec Guinness, managed to avoid the trap. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for young people falling prey to a real-life version of the dark side: video games.

Nearly 10 years ago, while working as a media studies consultant in Australia, I wrote several articles for professional journals pointing out the anomaly that governments regulate all mass media to some degree, with the exception of video games. To this day in North America, there are no government classification systems, no censorship boards, and no regulations regarding distribution and delivery of video games. During this same time frame, video games have not only become standard equipment in arcades, shopping malls, bars and other entertainment venues, but have developed computer graphics so real that the vicarious thrill of a violent act on screen is awfully close to the real thing.

In a recent visit to a video arcade, I watched a father lift his preschool age son off the ground so he could shoot a crossbow and "kill" people displayed on screen. Yet, that same father wouldn't even think of allowing that child to see a movie with an "R" or "PG" rating due to the violence on the silver screen.

Research consistently indicates that exposure to violent film and video experiences enhances the likelihood that children will be aggressive toward other people in social settings. So, while watching John Rambo kill lots of people in new and ingenious ways probably isn't good for a child's development, allowing the child control over a violent video game is worse. In these games the child not only sees and hears the action, but also feels the gun metal against his cheek, experiences the action of pulling a trigger, and learns the thrill of witnessing a "villain" collapse in a heap, writhing in agony and spewing blood from every orifice of his body. Then he turns to his parents or friends and says, "Cool. Let's do it again."

Video games have taken on a realism that is unprecedented. Today's games feature heroes who are as realistic as any prime-time TV action hero. The heroes have a physical beauty that players identify with and command for the moment of play. Playing the game is permission to believe that the player is the character and is important as long as he or she continues to win. In effect, those playing computer games quickly come to believe that they— and they alone—control the actions of the hero and determine who will live and who will die.

With different programming driven by the same high technology, video games could have strong potential for fostering socially-acceptable forms of creativity, critical thinking and values development. However, when the choices offered by the micro chip are simply multiple methods of simulated mass murder, the scenario of player as author/illustrator becomes more disturbing. When young people have frequent access to a social activity which allows them to rehearse all the behaviors and thought processes needed to kill someone, some will eventually become callous, or believe that this sort of behavior is normal, expected or OK in our society. There is a critical mass of players who simply don't realize how violent they have become in thought, word and deed.

While the end values of freedom, equality and justice are probably fostered and reinforced by playing video games, the means of achieving such ends are not congruent with those used by most responsible citizens living in a democratic society. For example, justice can be achieved either through intelligent debate and thoughtful decisionmaking, or through violent interaction. Video games rarely encourage players to do anything through peaceful means. Hence, when playing video games the metaphor changes from justice through peaceful resolve to justice by the sword.

Video games instill anarchy in children. This is not what we need. Worldwide, we need to encourage a humane environment and caring attitudes. We need to foster the values of cooperative group work, mutual respect, peaceful problem-solving and delayed gratification. Most video games actively encourage children to adopt attitudes antithetical to these. They encourage aggressive-competitive behaviors which value power, individual strength, violent problem solving and instant gratification.

Even more striking is the overriding message in thousands of video games: You are quick or you are dead. With repeated exposure, children come to believe that the skills needed for survival are quick reflexes which result in instant violent reactions. Is it any wonder that there seems to be a steady rise in that kind of violent, antisocial behavior among children and teenagers?

The hope for the future lies in education. Beginning at an early age, children must learn to be more socially and culturally responsible for selection, access and use of the media and its messages. Our next generation must be made to understand that all media forms are actively involved in society's construction of information and entertainment, and that the messages they contain affect us not only as individuals, but as a culture and as a global society.

At a point when the "information superhighway" is evolving at a torrid pace, we cannot allow ourselves to ignore the messages new and enhanced technologies may bring. Video games have already affected how a generation of young Americans receive and transmit information and entertainment. If we don't act now to better educate our children, we may one day find that Darth Vader is alive, well and actively pursuing the dark side in our own homes.

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