

To play or not to play...

By the time a young gamer reaches his fifteenth birthday, he has already killed thousands of his so-called enemies. Even though he kills all of them virtually, he still feels the adrenaline flowing through his blood every time he makes a kill. His young brain derives pleasure from wiping people off the face of the earth, on a digital screen. When he fires his AK-47 or Colt CM901, his pupils dilate; his heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure increase every time he slays. And even though he slays people day after day, he is never punished for the brutality he commits. In fact, he is rewarded with points. He also moves to the next level of the game!

Video gaming is a multi-billion dollar industry. According to Newzoo, a global leader in games, e-sports and mobile intelligence, the worldwide revenue of the gaming industry is expected to reach 107 billion in 2017.

But children's access to violent video games is a debatable subject now. While some say that violent video games do not make people violent, others say that they most certainly do, at least to an extent.

Some argue that children and adults who already have a predisposition toward aggression are drawn to violent video games. Therefore, the games themselves have nothing to do with making people violent.

The supporters of violent games think that playing them leads to catharsis in aggressive people, lessening the tension inside. They also argue that playing these games actually helps aggressive people release their tension toward something or someone that is not real.

Even if we take this catharsis argument as true, the question remains as to whether this is a healthy outlet for aggression.

Psychiatrists beg to differ with those who think violent games do not directly affect their players. According to American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), "Many of the most popular video games emphasise negatives themes and promote the killing of people or animals, the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol, criminal behaviour and disrespect for authority and the law, exploitation and violence toward women, sexual and gender stereotypes, and foul language and obscene gestures."

AACAP also argues that children who are exposed to violent media may become "numb to violence, imitate the violence, and show more aggressive behaviour."

Also, long hours spent playing video games can affect the health of a gamer. Physical consequences include migraines, sleep disturbances, backaches, eating irregularities, poor personal hygiene, and carpal tunnel syndrome, which happen when the area of the wrist that houses the main nerve and tendons, becomes swollen or irritated.

VIOLENCE AND VIDEO GAMES

Reports on Ali Sonboly, the 18-year-old perpetrator of the recent terror attack in Munich, Germany revealed that the teenager was 'obsessed' with first-person shooter video games. Although obsession with violent video games cannot alone be held responsible for aggressive behaviour among youth, it is often considered to be a signifi-

Young people obsessed with violent video games carried out mass murders in the past, too. The horrific 1999 Columbine High School massacre, which took place in Colorado, USA, was committed by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two high-school seniors obsessed with first-person shooter video games like Doom and Wolfenstein 3D.

cant factor, which contributes to aggression in young males.

Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right terrorist, who killed 77 people in 2011, played Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, an extremely popular but violent first-person shooter game. Breivik also testified in court that he used the video game to train for his shooting massacre.

A mentally unstable 20-year-old young man named Adam Lanza committed the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in Connecticut, USA, killing 26 people, 20 of whom were children. Lanza

was obsessed with violent video games.

Among the games he played there was one with a disturbing title - School Shooting. News reports on Lanza stated that he also played other violent games such as Grand Theft Auto, Call of Duty, and Left 4 Dead. Lanza spent the final months of his life alone in his bedroom, playing video games.

Although these facts do not inconclusively prove that video games aggravate violent behaviour, such astounding evidence is sufficient to establish at least a link. We simply cannot dismiss the argument that prolonged exposure to violence and active participation in violent game playing desensitise people to brutality and bloodshed. Having said that, it is also important to bear in mind that a person's psyche, family situation, and environment may also determine whether s/he will act violently.

DHAKA'S GAMING SCENE

In a conversation with Mohammad Mosabbirul Haque, an avid gamer and a known name in Dhaka's gaming scene, I learnt that interactive console gaming is gradually becoming big in Bangladesh. The youngest players are as young as 12, and they spend long hours each day playing video games.

"A lot of kids under 14 years of age play first-person shooter games in Bangladesh," said Haque. "As a matter of fact, although rated M (that is, suitable only for ages 17 and up), Call of Duty's main target audience these days is children below 15."

Asked how safe the online gaming environment is for children and teens, Haque replied, "Young kids easily fall victim to cyber bullying when they play online. They also give in to peer pressure. It is not a safe environment for children."

"When preteens play mature video games against adult men, it is not a fair competition," he added. "Games rated M are not made for children, and they should not play them - it is too competitive and can get brutal at times."

Haque believes that console games are only for mature people who know what they are getting into.

Azim, 14, bought his PS4 at the age of 12. When he first joined the online gaming community two years ago, the older gamers made fun of him for his lack of gaming skills. Today, he is one of the best players of Call of Duty, a game that is rated M, in Bangladesh.

Azim has no social life, at least not the kind that a healthy boy of his age should have. He hangs out with men ten years older than him, and they are all avid gamers like Azim.

Azim, who is picked on for his weight in real life, has found the virtual world of video gaming to be the perfect place to spend time. The internet is where he can remain faceless, and it is the only place where people look up to him. But Azim was a loner, and continues to be so. He is still heavy, has difficulty sleeping at night, and he games until as late as 6am every day!

The advent of handheld devices has made video games available to everyone, even small children. Abir, six, scratches and hits his parents when they refuse to let him play mobile games. His favourite is Clash of Clans, a strategy action game that requires its users to be at least 13.

In Clash of Clans, young children like Abir mercilessly raid villages of other players, and protect their own. They also steal the 'gold and elixir' owned by their enemies.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As a parent, if you allow your child to play video games, ensure that the games are not violent in nature. A simple search will give you a list of video games that are considered violent. You can also visit the website of U.S. Entertainment Software Rating Board - www.esrb.org - to read the rating category and content descriptors of a video game. Before you buy your child a video game, take a few minutes to research the game.

Modern gaming consoles like PS3 and PS4 feature parental control settings. Learn about this feature of the console so that you can set limits on what games and for how long your child can play.

Keep gaming machines like computers and consoles in a communal area of the house so that you can easily monitor their use. And remember that your child should not enjoy more than two hours of screen time in a day.

Do not hand your cellphone to your young child to keep him busy. Parents of children like Abir now regret their decision to buy a cell phone for their son.

Before you download a game for your child on a mobile device, read the age and content ratings. If you are a parent, who wants your child to play strategy games, encourage them to take up board games like chess, which help players concentrate and improve their logic, and teaches them how to problem solve in uncertain situations.

It is never too late to take positive steps to protect your child. So, if you have a child at home who plays video games, take some time to check what he plays, for how long, and with whom he interacts with on the internet. After all, it is better to be safe as soon as possible.

By Wara Karim

Some of the names used in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.