Kids and Computers: Digital Danger

Alison Sperry

Are computer games fundamentally different from board games? Does talking on the phone develop the same skills as chatting online? What is the difference between painting with watercolors and "coloring" with a desktop paintbox program? These questions are explored by Alison Sperry, who comes up with some disturbing answers. See if you agree with her concern that online entertainment leads a child in very different developmental directions from nonelectronic play.

There's a familiar saying, "play is children's work." Through play, people who study child development tell us, children develop the skills and outlooks that determine the adults they will become. Playing house or school, for example, helps them "try on" the roles of Mom or Dad or teacher. Athletic activities help kids develop coordination, learn to work as part of a group, and gain confidence and a sense of fair play. Even solitary activities like reading connect children with the wider world, encouraging a sense of empathy with the greater human family.

But in very recent years, other forms of entertainment have had an enormous impact on growing children. For many kids, computer activities and video games now take up much-even most-of the time formerly devoted to more traditional forms of play. Entering adulthood now are the first Nintendo babies, a generation raised more on Virtual Boy and Mortal Kombat than baseball and Uncle Wiggly. How have they been affected by this change in the concept of "play"? Social scientists, parents, and talk show pundits will be debating the question for years to come. But we can start drawing our own conclusions. As amusing and ingenious as electronic entertainment can be, children-and the society they live in-are the losers when they rely on these forms of fun. Unlike traditional games and toys, "wired" entertainment encourages kids to be unimaginative, socially immature, and crudely desensitized to the world around them.

Watch a child take a ball of Play-Doh in her hand and begin to roll it experimentally. First it's a simple ball, then a snake. The snake might become a figure eight or a bracelet. She coils the bracelet on top of itself to create a pot that she uses for a make-believe tea party. Next she smashes the pot back into a ball, which may next morph into a snowman, a horse's head, a bunny, a sea serpent, or a skyscraper. with nothing but her hands and an inexpensive chunk of flour and salt, she forms a universe in which she makes the rules and creates the inhabitants. when she tires of it, she can wad it back into a shapeless mass that awaits her next creative impulse. The act of playing with the Play-Doh sparks other interests-maybe she'll work with modelling clay that she can bake into a permanent form, or paints, or papier-mâché. Although she doesn't give what she's doing a great deal of thought, she's learning something valuable: I am a creator. I can give my ideas tangible form.

A video game, on the other hand, is cynically programmed to give the illusion of creativity. The player is given various choices at every turn-Which door will I go through? which weapon will I use? what clue shall I read? - but they are choices in the same sense that a pigeon's pecking at a lever to get a grain of corn is a choice. The player is as much a tool of the game as the joystick. Her momentary fun is unsatisfying because it leads not to any genuine sense of achievement but only to the hypnotic experience of watching someone else's creation unfold. Hand a ball of Play-Doh to a child reared on the sterile adventure of video games, and you're apt to get a blank look and the hesitant question, "What do I do with it?" The video game player learns her own lesson: I don't create. I let someone else's creativity happen in front of me.

It's a beautiful Saturday in autumn, and a group of kids are playing a pickup game of soccer. A dispute arises about whether a kick went over the foul line. Some of the kids are sure it did; others insist that it did not. Voices are raised; tempers flare. Maybe a hothead or two will stalk off the field. But the sky is crystal blue, and there are chores waiting at home. Making a quick calculation about the relative benefits of continuing the game, the players work out a solution. Maybe they replay the kick. Maybe they flip a coin. Maybe they agree to say that the ball was fair; or foul. Their willingness to compromise, to accept the idea that such give-and-take is part of life-, allows the game to proceed. The players move on, having learned a small lesson about getting along with others.

Contrast that scene with the world of the Internet chat rooms, where many adolescents spend uncountable hours. on that same lovely Saturday, young Internet queen hunches over her keyboard, alone in her room. Her buddy list includes dozens, even scores, of "friends" she's never met. Her fingers fly across the keyboard as she races from one dialogue box to another keeping up multiple conversations. These are peculiar conversations, however, including none of the vulnerability that is part of real-world friendship. In the buddy-chat world, status is based on the ability to keep up a rapid pace of one-liners, insulting zingers, caustic put-downs. The chat queen's most intimate friendships take the form of brief alliances with buddies who join with her to "flame" another chatter who has displeased them. If that ally eventually becomes annoying, too, zap! She can instantaneously erase him from her buddy list, or even block him so he is unable to contact her again. It's no great loss. There are literally millions of new acquaintances waiting to be picked up in a chat room to fill that void. The lesson: I shouldn't have to work at

relationships. They come and go instantly and at my convenience. If someone displeases me, I can make that person disappear.

When kids sit down to play Monopoly, they form a loosely knit group that is still part of the world around it. When company arrives at the house, it's no problem to halt the game briefly. The players can greet visitors, laugh together talk about the game, even quickly rearrange it to include new players. Even after the game continues, chatting with other players and nonplayers is easily accomplished. Despite their involvement in the game, the players are not ruled by it. Human contact, courtesy, and communication are not seen as threats to their enjoyment. They are learning that they can enjoy their own activities and still be sensitive to the larger world around them.

Contrast this board game scene with one that has become depressingly familiar in many living rooms. Visitors arrive at a home to find a child hunched in front of the TV set, video controls in his lap. Even when spoken to directly, he does not pull his eyes from the screen. "I'm playing!" is his furious response if the visitors persist in trying to engage his attention. Far too often, even his parents, intimidated by the high-priced, high-tech gadget that has sucked their child's humanity away, tiptoe around rather than disturb him. The game itself is all too likely to be one that presents the most hideous suffering as entertainment, with the player in the role of psychotic killer-maybe in Duke Nukem, with its "twenty-three levels of nonstop carnage!" or Bloody Roar
which offers the player "more ways to maim, crush, and devour your enemies than ever."

The lesson?

Isn't it too awful to think about?