



ENGLISH 204
FINAL EXAM
Summer 2003 -2004

Time Allowed: 3 hours

Directions: Text A and B both discuss the issue of video games and children. Critique Text A, synthesizing information from B to support your thesis.

TEXT A:

I can Quit Anytime I Want

by

Robert de los Reyes, Esq. , Frictionless Insight, May 20, 2002

1. As we at F1^{*} prepare to head off to E3⁺, stunning in its excess, I am put in mind of a new front in the current war on computer and video games. It seems not a week goes by in which video games aren't blamed for some great evil in the world, particularly for including youth violence and assorted anti-social tendencies. History tells us these charges are preposterous. Books, theater, movies and music... even Elvis' hips have been blamed for destroying young minds. Thomas and Harriet Bowdler produced a work called Family Shakespeare in 1818 designed to make Shakespeare more suitable for impressionable young ears (their legacy gives us the modern English word "bowdlerization," meaning the process of prudishly censoring something). Even in the 19th Century, the cry of "We've got to protect the children" rang out. Rightfully, it seems silly now, and I hold out hope that in time this anti-video game crusade will seem silly as well. It really doesn't matter whether video games never approach Shakespeare's level of art; that wasn't the Bowdlers' concern. They were concerned about harming children. They were wrong, and the anti-video game crowd is wrong, as well.
2. The reason the opposition to games seems like more than a dull repetition of history is that games are purportedly "interactive" in some way unlike books and movies, a way that makes them palpably more dangerous. Alarmist studies claiming to demonstrate that playing video games leads to increased levels of aggression remind one of all those studies showing that attending rock concerts caused impaired hearing. They did, you know – for the twenty or so minutes after the concert. There has been no study of which I'm aware that has been able to conclude that playing violent video games has a long-term effect of skewing the psyche to violence and criminality. And yet the popular belief lingers that these immersive, interactive games are little more than violence training simulators. Eventually someone will show this not to be the case, although, just as you still

* Frictionless Insight – Computer gaming news, reviews and scholarship: from the serious to the seriously fun.

+ E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo

hear about isolated bannings of *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Huckleberry Finn*, we'll likely always have to contend with some sort of anti-game movement.

3. A new weapon has emerged, however, in the anti-game arsenal of late. Games are now not only "morally harmful" or "aggression-inducing" but are also now argued to be "addictive". Note at the outset that, due largely to the American War on Drugs, the word "addictive" has a talismanic power. Addictiveness is nowadays laced with drug-related connotations, and so anything addictive is presumptively bad or—worse yet—downright evil. The charge of addictiveness has arisen, not surprisingly, in at least one well-covered lawsuit. As reported in this article that appeared at the end of March, a woman has sued the makers of *EverQuest*, charging that her 21-year-old son's "addiction" to the hugely popular massively multiplayer online roleplaying game caused him to commit suicide. As noted in the report, the mother claims that her son "sacrificed everything so he could play for hours, ignoring his family, quitting his job and losing himself in a 3-D virtual world where more than 400,000 people worldwide adventure in a never-ending fantasy."
4. The article goes on to quote the solemn pronouncements of an addiction counselor named Jay Parker:

Parker said people who are isolated, prone to boredom, lonely or sexually anorexic are much more susceptible to becoming addicted to online games. Having low self-esteem or poor body image are also important factors, he said. "The manufacturers of *EverQuest* purposely made it in such a way that it is more intriguing to the addict," Parker said. "It could be created in a less addictive way, but (that) would be the difference between powdered cocaine and crack cocaine."
5. Presumably, the family will be relying on "expert" commentary just such as this in pressing its lawsuit. But closer examination reveals that here, too, "addiction" is more icon than agent. Games are said to have an addictive quality that makes them attractive to the kind of people who are likely to be susceptible to addictive behavior. *EverQuest* doesn't cause the things that make a person prone to addictive behavior; rather, it exists out there, oozing the quality of "addictiveness," waiting to ensnare an addict in search of a habit. The mother further comments that "It's like any other addiction. Either you die, go insane or you quit. My son died."
6. It is easy and right to sympathize with the pain of a mother who has lost her son, but her comments and those of the addiction counselor demonstrate the power of the word "addictive" as a symbol of evil. It is patently not true that all addictions lead to death, insanity or cessation. Millions of people are addicted to coffee (likely the caffeine is the addictive agent). It can even be harmful to some people, but it need not result in death or insanity. In what may be a corollary to Godwin's Law (noting, roughly, that the longer an internet message thread hangs around the

more likely someone will bring up Nazis), the longer any product or service retains its popularity, the more likely it is that someone will append the suffix "crack" to its name. It didn't take long for the EverCrack moniker to emerge. The trouble is that some people (largely) predisposed against games) use it to prove far too much. The popularity of the Blackberry portable device has earned it the title Crackberry. Is the Blackberry also a magnet for those with poor body image? Should it, too, be made less addictive to protect those with low self esteem?

7. The February 2002 issue of *Scientific American* features an article called "Television Addiction is No Mere Metaphor". The article begins by noting what is déjà vu all over again for gamers – critics of TV have largely focused on its violence but may now be paying attention to its addictiveness. The authors of the reported study offer a more considered presentation of the concept of addictiveness, defining it with such criteria as "spending a great deal of time using the substance; using it more often than one intends; thinking about reducing use or making repeated unsuccessful efforts to reduce use; giving up important social, family or occupational activities to use it; and reporting withdrawal symptoms when one stops using it." The authors observe that these symptoms appear in non-trivial ways among people who watch a lot of television. The authors are quick to comment, however, "That does not mean that watching television, per se, is problematic. Television can teach and amuse; it can reach aesthetic heights; it can provide much needed distraction and escape. The difficulty arises when people strongly sense that they ought not to watch as much as they do and yet find themselves strangely unable to reduce their viewing."
8. Based on the results of their study, the authors theorize that the cutting, editing, panning, zooming, etc. that are characteristic of television programming actually trigger a physical reaction (dilation of blood vessels to the brain, slowing of the heart, and so on) that is part of the evolutionary build of humans. The effect is to cause rapid relaxation when the television is on. The problem is that the relaxation diminishes the longer the TV is on and evaporates when the TV is turned off. In other words, TV is a lot like a tranquilizer. Even so, the researchers comment that "we need to be careful about overreacting. Little evidence suggests that adults or children should stop watching TV altogether. The problems come from heavy or prolonged viewing."
9. Computer and video games don't show images in quite the same fashion as television programs, so the physiological mechanisms that give TV an addictive quality may not be present in gaming. In fact, to the extent that anecdotally it seems to be just online games that are overbearingly addictive, as opposed to other games, the source of any "addiction" is likely not grounded in a physiological response to the image presentation of games. Still, the example of TV addiction is a useful lesson. It may be that some people really are addicted to gaming within the scientific (as opposed to popular) meaning of the word. But if gaming can be addictive, the real question is what, if anything, we ought to do

about it. The woman whose son committed suicide is probably not the only person currently suing a game maker for creating an addictive product. Her lawyer likens *EverQuest* to nicotine and concludes that the game is negligently designed. But this is the bluntest sort of thinking. Addictiveness occurs in qualitatively different ways and affects different people in wildly varying ways. In the end, the alarmist, facile reasoning of the lawsuit serves neither those who may actually be susceptible to addiction (is it even conceivable that a warning label would help?) nor the non-addicted population of game players who might nevertheless benefit from a thoughtful examination of addiction-like effects of prolonged gaming.

Text B:

Video games: Cause for Concern?

Taken from

The BBC News

Huge hype surrounds the launch of each new games console-the Sony Playstation 2 is just the latest. But should parents be worried by their children's passion for virtual play?

1. Foremost among the criticisms levelled at video games is that they are addictive.
2. The charge goes that they can lead to compulsive behaviour, loss of interest in other activities, association mainly with other addicts, and unusual symptoms when addicts are denied their favourite pastime – such as the shakes. Sound familiar?
3. A decade ago research showed that video game junkies were highly intelligent, motivated and achievement-oriented individuals. They did well at school and work.
4. But could the more sophisticated games of the 21st Century be so all-consuming as to interfere with that kind of achievement?
5. Dr. Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University, an expert on video game addiction, thinks it could just happen.
6. “The video games of the 21st Century may in some ways be more psychologically rewarding than the 1980s games in that they require more complex skills, improved dexterity, and feature socially relevant topics and better graphics.”

Game addicts

7. If these games offer greater “psychological rewards”, players might be more at risk of developing an addiction, he said.

8. Children are drawn to video games at about the age of seven. For most, the games remain a harmless activity, but a small minority could be termed "addicts".
9. A recent study of children in their early teens found that almost a third played video games daily, and that—more worryingly – 7% played for at least 30 hours a week.
10. Dr. Griffiths is concerned by that figure.
11. He said: "What are the long-term effects of any activity that takes up 30 hours of leisure time a week on the educational, health and social development of children and adolescents?"
12. Such dependency could feed other delinquent behaviour such as stealing money to buy new games, truancy, failing to do homework, or simply extreme annoyance when unable to play.
13. So how are concerned parents to decide when school plus video games equals overload?
14. Dr. Griffiths has a ready reckoner:
15. **Does your child:**
 - play almost every day?
 - often play for long periods (over 3-4 hours a time)?
 - play for excitement?
 - get restless and irritable if they can't play?
 - sacrifice social and sporting activities?
 - play instead of doing their homework?
 - try to cut down their playing but can't?
16. If the answer is "yes" to more than four of these questions, then your child may be playing too much.
17. **So what do you do now?**
 - Give children educational rather than violent games.
 - Encourage video game playing in groups rather than as a solitary activity.
 - Set time limits on children's playing time. Tell them they can play for a couple of hours after they have done their homework—not before.
 - Ensure children follow the video game manufacturer's recommendations. For example, they should sit at least two feet from the screen, play in a well-lit room, never have the screen at maximum brightness, and never play when feeling tired.
 - Finally, if all else fails, take away the games console and give it back on a part-time basis when appropriate.