



## Overview of computer and video games

Computer and video games were first developed in the 1970s. As technology and programming improved, games became more accessible to individuals in their own homes and the industry experienced massive growth. Australians spent \$452 million on computer and video games in 2001, an increase of 23.6% on the 2000 figures. Microsoft Australia projected that the revenue gained by the video game industry in 2002 would grow to \$678 million.

Many children enjoy playing computer and video games and while there are benefits to be experienced, there are risks also.

This topic covers:

- what are computer and video games?
- benefits of playing computer games
- risks in playing computer games
- what parents can do
- readings & research
- related topics.

It does not include 'educational' games which are a separate topic.

### What are computer and video games?

Computer and video games are programs that are designed for recreational use. They can be used on a variety of platforms, that is on many different types of machines, systems or devices. Games can be bought or downloaded from the internet. You can play games on:

- a computer, either Mac or PC
- home consoles used with TV sets. Commonly used systems are Sony Playstation (*PSOne* and *PS2*), Nintendo Game Cube and Microsoft XBox.
- coin-operated arcade game machines
- handheld game systems. The most commonly used systems are the range of Nintendo Game Boys with other systems being released soon by Sony (PSP) and Nokia (N-Gage).
- Palm Pilots (Personal Desktop Assistants — PDAs)
- mobile phones.

Various types of games are:

- **first person shooter** (3D Action, shooter, FPS). The player holds the gun and shoots other characters. Always violent. Examples are *Quake*, *Unreal*, *Soldier of Fortune*, *Medal of Honour*, *Return to Castle*

*Wolfenstein*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, *Vietcong*, *Battlefield 1942*.

- \* **combat**. The player's character competes physically, often through martial arts, with other characters. Always violent. Examples are *Mortal Kombat*, *Tekken*.
- \* **real-time strategy** (RTS). The player can strategically direct battles. Always violent, but not usually graphic. Examples are: *Age of Empires*, *Command & Conquer*, *Close Combat*.
- \* **role playing**. The player goes on a quest of some sort overcoming obstacles on the way. Usually violent. Examples are: *Diablo*, *Everquest*, *Morrowind*, *Ultima*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Dungeons & Dragons*.
- \* **adventure**. The player follows clues or uses problem-solving to overcome obstacles and puzzles which must be solved to continue the story. Can be set in fantasy worlds or ancient times. Rarely violent. Examples are: *Myst*, *Syberia*, *Dark Fall*, *Monkey Island*.
- \* **simulators** — sports, racing or aircraft flight. The player participates in simulated sporting situations, car races or flies an aircraft. Some are violent. Examples are: *Links*, *Sports Car G2*, *V8 Super Cars*, *Flight Simulator*.
- \* **platform**. Relatively simple games, often made for young children. The player chases or avoids characters by jumping onto platforms. Examples are *Super Mario Brothers*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Donkey Kong*.

### Benefits of playing computer games

There are many benefits available to children and adults who use computer and video games in a healthy way. In addition to providing entertainment, some games can:

- introduce children to computer technology
- give practice in following directions, problem solving and logic, use of fine motor and spatial skills, visual skills
- provide occasions for parents and children to play together.



## Risks in playing computer and video games

There are many risks associated with computer and video games, which include:

- becoming addicted
- being exposed to violence, particularly practising violent acts in the first person
- developing or reinforcing negative racial or sexual stereotypes.

### Becoming addicted

Often children can become 'hooked' into the fast moving world of computer games. Excessive exposure to games can lead to a number of problems, such as poor eating habits, not mixing with others, poor communication, trouble with school work, social isolation and not paying attention in class.

A child who is cutting back on:

- the time they spend outside
- being with friends
- playing sports
- other social or club activities

in order to spend more time playing computer and video games may be at risk of developing an addiction.

### Exposure to violence

There is a growing body of research which indicates that playing computer games where violence is the major theme, is harmful to children. (See related topics *Violence in computer and video games* and *Violent Video Games and Other Media Violence: Craig Anderson answers FAQs*)

- Studies find a relationship between violent television watching and behaviour. Practising violent acts by playing computer games may contribute more to aggressive behaviour than passive television watching.
- Game environments are often based on plots of violence, aggression and gender bias.
- Playing violent video games may be related to aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Gentile, Lynch & Walsh, under review).
- In many violent games, players must become more violent to win. In first person shooter games, the player may be more affected because he or she controls the game and experiences the action through the eyes of his or her character.

- Some claim playing violent video games provides an outlet for aggression. This view is not supported by the research.

### Development or reinforcement of negative stereotypes

- Women are often portrayed as weaker characters that are helpless or sexually provocative.
- Villains are often portrayed as coming from ethnic backgrounds other than Anglo Saxon.

## What parents can do

It is helpful to be clear in your own mind about the potential impact of computer and video games. Dr Craig Anderson, one of the leading researchers on video game violence, has produced a simple three point summary, stating:

1. learning happens
2. content matters
3. venting (the theory that players get rid of angry feelings when they play computer games) doesn't work.

It is important to be aware of what games your children are playing. Get involved in purchases they are making and use the classification to guide their choices. Learn as much as possible about the games, perhaps even playing them with your children. Make clear rules about what games are and are not acceptable in your home and the amount of time children are allowed to play them.

See related topic *Strategies for parents around computer and video games*.



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