

# The Sex Educator

7

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A MAGAZINE FOR INTERVENERS AND EDUCATORS WHO ARE OFFERING SEX-EDUCATION ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE OF SECONDARY-SCHOOL AGE A production of the ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec in collaboration with the Université du Québec à Montréal and Tel-Jeunes

**VIDEO GAMES  
AND SEX ROLES:**

**FROM CYBERSPACE  
TO SEX EDUCATION**

BY  
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In 2005, the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (GTA)* was recognised as one of the most popular video games on the Canadian market (Ritoux, 2005). Since the Grand Theft Auto series was introduced in 2004, the game has been the focus of much media attention. It reignited a debate that has stimulated much reflection in the fields of both research and intervention. The main story of GTA takes place in the fictitious state of San Andreas and features a young gangster named Carl Johnson, who is looking to avenge his mother's murder while renewing ties with gang members and committing auto theft. Through the main character of Johnson, players must carry out a series of actions and missions ranging from driving cars to gangland retribution and street fights. Many people agree that this game is too violent, too sexist and too realistic (Péloquin, 2004). The use of the term "realistic" to describe a computer game may be surprising, but according to some researchers, the sophistication of these games, which can be seen in the quality of the graphics and the scope of movements available to players, increasingly contributes to reducing the gap between the virtual and the real (Dietz, 1998; Griffiths, 1999; Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005).

One question that has emerged from the controversy caused by GTA is, what messages do video games impart to adolescents? There is widespread public perception that mass media has negative effects on consumers, for example, that it feeds aggressive and sexist attitudes (Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998). Do video games have such effects? Do they foster development of stereotypical identities among adolescents? Conversely, can they have positive effects? And especially, how should we intervene with adolescents who enjoy this type of entertainment media?

Currently, there are very few studies on the influence of video games on adolescents' perceptions of gender roles (Provenzo, 1991; Dietz, 1998; Trudeau, 2002; Jansz, 2005) and, indirectly, on the development of their interpersonal skills (Ballard and Lineberger, 1999). Most researchers interested in this subject tend to associate video games with aggressiveness, anxiety or dependence (Anderson and Ford, 1986; Dill and Dill, 1998; Bensley and Eenwyk, 2001; Valleur and Matysiak, 2003; Baldaro et al., 2004; Gentile et al., 2004; Bartholow et al., 2005). The goals of this publication are to elucidate influences of video games on developing gender roles during adolescence and to provide suggestions for sexuality education, since having an interest in what shapes our young people's identities is the basis of any sex education process.

First, a summary of the principal notions of adolescent identity is presented. Various types of video games and their importance to young people are then described, and the characteristics of users are outlined. The positive and negative effects of this form of entertainment media on the sexual identities of young people are also discussed. Some suggestions for interventions related to video games and adolescents are also presented. Finally, there are suggestions for pedagogic activities pertaining to video games and the gender roles presented to young people.

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**THE MEDIA: AFFIRMING ADOLESCENT IDENTITIES**

During adolescence, young people try to find answers to the question *Who am I?*, a question at the very heart of the notion of **identity**. According to Erikson (1959, 1964, 1974), adolescence is a period in human development that involves experimenting with identity. During this phase of development, adolescents are required to discover themselves and manifest themselves as female and male. To accomplish this, adolescents can adopt the gender roles society expects for men and women (Bee, 1997). The term “**gender role**” refers to attitudes and behaviours a culture considers appropriate for men and women (Olds and Papalia, 1996; Bee, 1997). Table 1 outlines the gender roles expected of boys and girls in Western society. These roles can be likened to sexual stereotypes when they are interpreted rigidly and do not leave room for whom an individual truly is. The term “**sexual stereotype**” refers to an exaggerated perception of gender roles (Olds and Papalia, 1996; Bee, 1997) and does not necessarily represent the actual behaviour of each boy or girl.

According to Pollack (2001), boys and girls construct their own ways of becoming men and women. To this end, adolescents must learn to disassociate themselves from certain rules of conduct society instills in children from a very young age. However, during adolescence, young people are vulnerable to stereotypes since their own identities are still forming (Olds and Papalia, 1996). Adolescents can learn about gender roles through their parents, other significant adults, friends or media such as television and video games. To feel comfortable with their identities, young people turn less to their parents than to peers and the media (Olds and Papalia, 1996; Bee, 1997). Consequently, video games can be very important models for adolescents learning about gender roles.

**TABLE 1 GENDER ROLES EXPECTED OF BOYS AND GIRLS IN WESTERN SOCIETY**

| Gender roles defined as appropriate for boys   | Gender roles defined as appropriate for girls   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Be aggressive</b><br/>(Spence et al., 1975; Brannon, 1985; Levant and Fisher, 1992; Messerschmidt, 2000; Torres, 2002)</p> | <p><b>Be gentle</b><br/>(Cyranowski and Andersen, 1992; Lips, 2003; Spence et al., 1975)</p>              |
| <p><b>Don't act like a girl</b><br/>(Brannon, 1985; Badinter, 1992; Levant and Fisher, 1992; Torres, 2002; Pascoe, 2005)</p>     | <p><b>Be nice</b><br/>(Cyranowski and Andersen, 1992; Lips, 2003; Spence et al., 1975)</p>                |
| <p><b>Contain your emotions</b><br/>(Brannon, 1985; Levant and Fisher, 1992; Torres, 2002)</p>                                   | <p><b>Be attentive to others</b><br/>(Cyranowski and Andersen, 1992; Lips, 2003; Spence et al., 1975)</p> |
| <p><b>Strive for achievement and success</b><br/>(Brannon, 1985; Levant and Fisher, 1992; Torres, 2002)</p>                      | <p><b>Express your emotions</b><br/>(Cyranowski and Andersen, 1992; Lips, 2003; Spence et al., 1975)</p>  |
| <p><b>Develop the ability to count on yourself</b><br/>(Brannon, 1985; Levant and Fisher, 1992; Torres, 2002)</p>                | <p><b>Be romantic</b><br/>(Cyranowski and Andersen, 1992; Spence et al., 1975)</p>                        |
| <p><b>Present sex as a performance</b><br/>(Spence et al., 1975; Snell, 1990; Levant and Fisher, 1992)</p>                       |   |

**VIDEO GAMES: A POPULAR FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT**

The definition of video games usually cuts across two categories of virtual entertainment media: games on playstations, small machines entirely dedicated to video games, and games played on computers (Gabriel, 1994). Video games involve constant interaction between the game and the player based on a set of pre-programmed rules (Jansz, 2005). For example, players of the game Super Mario Bros are limited to five functions: jumping, running, swimming, bending over and throwing objects. These functions are the only ones available to gamers to save the princess in distress. Moreover, given that players do not know ahead of time where the game is heading, they must make constant efforts, such as investing time to improve and score more points. Video games are a form of active entertainment when compared with watching television, which is considered to be rather passive (Griffiths, 1999).

Since the 1970s, video games have been gaining in popularity, especially among adolescents (Kirsh, 2003; Bartholow et al., 2005). Indeed, in 1999, international video game sales were over \$7 billion (Gentile et al., 2004). For example, between 1987 and 1999, Nintendo, one of the leaders in the industry, sold an average of three games a second, for a total of one billion video games on the market (Ballard and Lineberger, 1999). Studies have revealed that the majority of young North Americans—over 75%—have played a video game at least once in their lives (Dill and Dill, 1998; Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005).

**WHO PLAYS THESE GAMES AND WHAT TYPES OF GAMES ARE THERE?**

Video games are one of the most popular forms of entertainment among adolescents, particularly among boys (Michaels, 1993; Dietz, 1998; Dill and Dill, 1998; Kirsh, 2003; Gentile et al., 2004; Lucas and Sherry, 2004). Indeed, while boys spend about 12 hours a week playing video games, girls spend about 5 hours a week. This difference has been explained by the fact that boys and girls do not find the same gratification in this type of game (Lucas and Sherry, 2004). For girls, the challenge (wanting to beat the game and reach the next level) is the primary source of motivation. Boys gain status and self-esteem mainly through competitive aspects (wanting to be the best player) and social interaction (being in the company of friends). The motivations of the two sexes are different,



as are their preferences for types of games. Boys seemingly prefer violent video games (e.g. combat, martial arts and adventure games), while girls like more traditional games (e.g. card games and quizzes). Studies indicate that girls also have an interest in this form of entertainment media and would spend as much time as boys playing if the industry focused more on aspects that are attractive to girls (Lucas and Sherry, 2004).



Video game content varies greatly. Several typologies have been proposed to account for this diversity (Gabriel, 1994; Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998; Le Diberder and Le Diberder, 1998; Griffiths, 1999; Lenhard, 1999; Lucas and Sherry, 2004). Le Diberder and Le Diberder's typology, presented in Table 2, shows three categories of video games: puzzle games, action games and simulation games. The most popular games depict stereotypical characteristics such as violence associated with masculinity, and physical beauty with femininity (Dietz, 1998; Lucas and Sherry, 2004). In this regard, we can refer to GTA which, as attractive as it may be for adolescents, portrays an image of men that is reduced to violence and a quest for power.

From these initial findings it emerges that the video game market is extremely lucrative. Consequently, we understand that industry focuses essentially on stereotypes such as violence and physical beauty to sell its products (Dietz, 1998; Lucas and Sherry, 2004; Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005). Since the industry's main clients are adolescents, primarily boys, who are in the process of learning gender roles, should we not worry that video game designers promote such caricatures of sexual identity? Conversely, we can also ask whether video games have positive effects on players.

### POSITIVE EFFECTS OF VIDEO GAMES ON ADOLESCENTS

Contrary to popular opinion, players can reap benefits from video games. Essentially, video games are a fun form of entertainment for young people (Media Awareness Network, 2005). Although this aspect seems obvious, it is often neglected and even disregarded in discussions. Video games can help improve the quality of life for young patients in terminal stages of a disease (Dill and Dill, 1998), foster eye-hand coordination (Dill and Dill, 1998; Lucas and Sherry, 2004), contribute to the development of positive attitudes toward technology (Lucas and Sherry, 2004), and help develop academic skills in reading and math (Media Awareness Network, 2005). In addition, video games can promote team work and cooperation and enhance social interaction, as well as foster the development of new friendships (Lucas and Sherry, 2004), notably through on-line video gaming, where it is possible to develop relationships with people from all parts of the world.

Studies have shed light on other positive effects of video gaming, which could constitute an asset for development. In fact, by playing violent games, for example, adolescents can experiment with a broad range of emotions and identities that can influence construction of their identities (Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005; Jansz, 2005). This idea is based on the *catharsis theory*, which states that playing aggressive video games has a relaxing effect by channelling and releasing latent aggression (Griffiths, 1999). Thus, games such as GTA that focus on violence allow boys to express stereotypical behaviours without fearing reproach by their peers or parents. It is as if this type of game gives them the right, for a brief moment, to simulate behaviours they know are unacceptable, such as theft and murder, without being subjected to any negative consequences. By putting these behaviours into practice in the virtual world, adolescents may feel less inclined to engage in such acts in the real world (Jansz, 2005). According to the catharsis theory, playing video games does not cause adolescents to develop stereotypical identities. On the contrary, it can help young people clarify gender roles by experimenting with the more extreme behaviours.

TABLE 2 VIDEO GAME TYPES BASED ON THEIR DESCRIPTIONS<sup>1</sup>

| Types            | Descriptions  | Examples   |
|------------------|---|--|
| Puzzle games     | Games based on strategy planning skills, traditional forms of entertainment, role-playing and adventure games.    | Civilization, Age of Empire, Final Fantasy, Legend of Zelda, Diablo, Monopoly, Chess, Resident Evil, Tomb Raider, Grand Theft Auto |
| Action games     | Games based on driving and speeding, martial arts and fights, reflexes and the ability to shoot other characters. | Grand Turismo, Super Mario Kart, Quake, Duke Nukem, Mortal Kombat, Tekkan, PacMan, Pinball   |
| Simulation games | Games based on an illusion of reality and team or sport events.   | SimCity, NBA Jam, NHL  |

1. According to Le Diberder and Le Diberder, 1998

### NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF VIDEO GAMES ON ADOLESCENTS

Conversely, Dietz (1998), Provenzo (1991, cited in Griffiths, 1999) and Trudeau (2002) consider that video games encourage sexism and violence, insofar as almost one third of games do not have female characters and a quarter present women as victims (the damsel in distress), and many convey the message that women should fit the image of idealised female beauty. The “perfect” prototype of female idealisation is presented in the game *Tomb Raider*, in which the young adventuress is given caricature-like body proportions (Trudeau, 2002). Furthermore, sound effects, points and bonuses reward players who successfully complete actions, which often involve violence and aggressive responses (Dill and Dill, 1998). In this context, video games tend to reinforce gender stereotypes for boys and girls (Dietz, 1998; Dill and Dill, 1998; Trudeau, 2002). This concept is based on social learning theory, which states that playing video games, especially sexist ones, encourages players to emulate behaviours that denigrate women (Griffiths, 1999). By identifying with virtual characters, players are tempted to imitate those behaviours in real life. According to this theory, aggressive misogynist macho video games such as GTA could reinforce sexual stereotypes among young gamers.

Different studies have been conducted to understand the influence of video games on young players. Some studies show that in the short term, playing violent video games increases aggressive behaviours among children aged 4 to 8 years (Bensley and Eenwyk, 2001) and adolescents (Bartholow et al., 2005), and leads to increased hostility (Anderson and Ford, 1986; Gentile et al., 2004). Other studies indicate that violent video games can have negative effects on social interactions (Ballard and Lineberger, 1999), such as reducing altruism, encouraging competitive behaviours (Sheese and Graziano, 2005) and lowering empathy (Bartholow et al., 2005). It also appears that video games can create an addiction in players (Valleur and Matysiak, 2003), which can negatively affect school performance (Gentile et al., 2004). Some young people skip classes or the lunch hour to play video games (Dill and Dill, 1998). Finally, video games have been linked to increased anxiety among players (Balduino et al., 2004).

What emerges from these studies is that video games, especially violent ones, can boost the stereotypical male image. Indeed, video games feature the same characteristics as those that constitute the male identity promoted by society: aggression, competition and inhibition toward expressing emotions. These findings reinforce the social learning theory, which posits that by serving as models, visual media lead consumers to emulate in the real world what they see on screen. The combination of modeling, practice and reinforcement makes video games powerful learning tools (Dill and Dill, 1998). Through video games, boys can learn that to become men, they need to be violent and domineering, especially with women (Dietz, 1998). On the other hand, girls may understand that women must be ‘sexy’, dependent, submissive and weak. Consequently, although video games provide some benefits, in some cases they can nonetheless also foster the adoption of sexual stereotypes.

### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF VIDEO GAMES: WHAT SHOULD WE THINK?

We note that video games can have positive effects on players (Dill and Dill, 1998; Lucas and Sherry, 2004; Jansz, 2005; Media Awareness Network, 2005). These benefits are interesting and should be incorporated into interventions for adolescents (see the section “Interventions pertaining to video games for adolescents”). However, it is important to make young people aware that video games can also have negative effects, notably the promotion of gender stereotypes (Provenzo, 1991, cited in Griffiths, 1999; Dietz, 1998; Ballard and Lineberger, 1999). Therefore, learning about gender stereotypes this way can prompt us to question the models of interpersonal relationships video games convey. As noted earlier, this form of entertainment can lower empathy and reduce altruism as well as increase feelings of aggression and competitive behaviours. Yet, some of the essential skills required for good communication include empathy, respect for others, paraphrasing, non-aggression and communication using “I”, the first person singular (Adler and Towne, 1998). While promoting the establishment of contacts with individuals around the world, video games do not teach young people good communication techniques and even run the risk of fostering poor interpersonal skills. Therefore, it is important to develop adolescents’ critical thinking skills in relation to the messages conveyed through video games.

### VIDEO GAMES: MORE REALISTIC THAN TELEVISION?

Studies conducted over the last few decades have demonstrated the influence of television on the conceptions children have of social reality (Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998). Adolescent boys and girls compare themselves to representations in the media and attempt to conform to these images (Wiseman et al., 2005). Thus, several researchers have associated frequent exposure to various media—especially television—with greater acceptance of gender stereotypes (Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998; Ward, 2003). Inversely, television could also have the effect of breaking stereotypes, as has been demonstrated in an American study on the TV series *Freestyle*, a programme whose objective was to change attitudes of children aged 9 to 12 years towards gender roles (Johnston and Ettema, 1982, cited in Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998). According to this study, the series succeeded in convincing girls that it was good for boys to help with household tasks and child minding. What emerges from these studies is that television influences adolescent sex-role socialisation, and that this influence is either negative or positive, depending on the contents of the message.

Compared with television, video games exercise greater influence on adolescents because they offer more control and a more active form of entertainment (Dietz, 1998; Griffiths, 1999). In many cases, gamers can choose the character with which they play (Dill and Dill, 1998). Consequently identification with the character’s behaviour may be stronger because the character is chosen by the player himself or herself. Moreover, video gamers are offered great freedom of movement (Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005). In the case of GTA, players can choose the type of vehicle they will steal and even select the radio station they want to hear in the car. Some researchers associate such freedom of movement with a degree of realism that game designers increasingly seek to heighten (Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005). Notions of realism do not only involve ‘real life’ video games: some games qualify as extremely realistic even though they take place in a world of fantasy. Realism is found in the quality of the graphics, in the characters and in the possibilities available to explore a game’s environment. This latter aspect is particularly evident in GTA, where players have at their disposal several cities they can explore as they please. Given the levels of realism, this form of entertainment media has greater influence on adolescents than does television (Gelfond and Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005). Studies have shown that television can encourage viewers to adopt stereotypical behaviours; therefore, it is plausible that video games have the same effect.



## INTERVENTIONS PERTAINING TO VIDEO GAMES FOR ADOLESCENTS

Most of what has been written about video games underlines the importance of parents' roles (Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998; Le Diberder and Le Diberder, 1998; Lenhard, 1999; Gentile et al., 2004). Parents should impose certain limits on their children's use of this type of entertainment media (Greenfield and Retschizki, 1998; Lenhard, 1999). In this regard, we note that when there are parental limits on exposure to violent video games, adolescents are less aggressive and have better school grades (Gentile et al., 2004). Furthermore, parents who watch television and discuss it with their children can provide good interpretations of the message, which helps young people improve their knowledge of the information conveyed by the media (Collins et al., 2003). Consequently, these studies emphasize not only the role of parents or other adults important to adolescents but also discussion and clarification of messages transmitted in video games as forms of sexual education.

Teachers or educators do not always have the same emotional or relational effects that a parent would so how can they intervene with regard to video games? In schools, it is primarily through the broad area of learning entitled "Health and Well-Being", where the educational aim is "[t]o ensure that students adopt a self-monitoring procedure concerning the development of good living habits related to health, well-being, sexuality and safety." (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2003, p. 41). This venue constitutes an interesting framework in which to raise the topic of video games. Another pertinent entry point for discussion of video games could be the broad area of learning called "Media Literacy", whose aim is "[t]o develop students' critical and ethical judgment with respect to media and to give them opportunities to produce media documents that respect individual and collective rights" (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2003, p. 41).

We know that video games are extremely appealing to adolescents, especially to boys. However, as Lucas and Sherry (2004) note, we can suppose that within a few years, the video game market will reach adolescents of both sexes more equally. Moreover, as stated earlier, gender stereotypes reproduced in these games affect girls and boys. Indeed, their enthusiasm for video games serves as a gateway to discuss sex roles among young people and initiate reflection on conformity to sexual stereotypes. As Collins et al. (2003) have shown, discussion is key to the success of sex education. Indeed, one of the objectives of sexuality education is to inform, encourage reflection and help construct identity (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2003). Therefore, it seems pertinent that educators use discussion to compel adolescents to question and qualify depictions presented in video games.

In this regard, Griffiths (1999) proposes that interventions be primarily based on the positive aspects of video games. Such an introduction would grab the attention of adolescents and motivate them to participate in the activity. It would also provide an opportunity to highlight the beneficial aspects of video games, which are often overlooked but of which adolescents are certainly aware. This kind of approach could help create an environment of trust since it would show young people that the educational aim is not to prevent them from playing video games, but rather to get them to think about the games' influences. For example, educators could use the video game *Catch the Sperm*, which can be downloaded from the Web (stopsida.ch), as a tool for adolescent sexuality education. This game combines the positive effects of video gaming, such as eye-hand coordination, entertainment and the development of positive attitudes towards

technology, as well as promoting the use of condoms during sexual relations. *Catch the Sperm* is a simple game that can be played by children in higher levels of primary school as well as by adolescents in secondary school. In addition, jcapote.com has interactive activities that can appeal to young people, although there are no video games on this Web site.

This is only the first step. The negative effects should also be discussed with adolescents to encourage awareness that video games promote certain sexual stereotypes. This opens the door to discussing issues ranging from learning about gender roles to acquisition of poor social interaction skills, and the influence of the media in this process. In this regard, teachers and educators should keep in mind Pollack's (2001) view that every child constructs his or her own way of being a man or a woman. Media, including video games, present only one facet of reality, and it is up to educators, teachers and other professionals to guide young people to help them discover who they really are. In short, educational interventions provide a bit of a pause during which adolescents can become aware of the influence video games have on learning about gender roles.

## CONCLUSION

Video games constitute a thorny issue that elicits passionate deliberations in the media as well as among research and intervention professionals. Some authors consider that this type of entertainment releases tensions while others believe that video games impart negative models to young people. In this context, sexuality education facilitates reflection on the positive and negative effects of video games and how they influence learning about gender-based roles during adolescence. The goal of sex education is to bring young people to question the types of models proposed in video games, where virtual reality increasingly challenges reality, and ultimately, to encourage them to think about the types of heroes they are being sold.

# Pedagogic activities

## related to video games and gender roles among adolescents

The pedagogic activities proposed here are designed for boys and girls in secondary 4 and 5. The activities fall within the scope of the general objective, which is to raise awareness among young people concerning the influence of video games on learning about gender-based roles during adolescence. This goal is also one of the aims of the Québec Education Program, namely, construction of identity and world-view, and empowerment. Table 3 presents the titles of the pedagogic activities proposed and their objectives. The activities were designed to fit in periods of an hour and a half. However, depending on the intervention milieu, each activity can be used individually and its duration can be extended so that adolescents can have more profound discussions.



**TABLE 3 OBJECTIVES AND TITLES OF PEDAGOGIC ACTIVITIES**

**GENERAL OBJECTIVE** BECOME AWARE OF THE INFLUENCE VIDEO GAMES HAVE ON LEARNING ABOUT GENDER BASED ROLES DURING ADOLESCENCE

| Activity titles                  | Specific objectives  | Cross competencies               |
|----------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| 1 Some statistics on video games | Based on a survey, share personal experiences of video games.  | Communicate properly             |
| 2 Where exactly is the virtual?  | Identify the roles of men and women in video games and discuss the pertinence of these representations.                                | Exercise critical thinking       |
| 3 Managers' meeting              | List the positive and negative effects of video games on adolescents, toward creating a video game that is without gender stereotypes. | Use creative thinking skills     |
| 4 A reality that resembles us?   | Discuss the consequences of video games on gender roles for boys and girls.  | Actualise adolescents' potential |

## ACTIVITY 1

# Outline video game use in your environment

### DURATION

15 minutes

### OBJECTIVE

- Based on a survey, share personal experiences of video games.

1

About a week before the session, give students a short questionnaire on video games (see suggestion below).

2

Once results have been compiled, present the statistics to the students.

3

Using the following questions, ask the adolescents to talk about the results:

- What do you think of these numbers?
- Do you think that young people your age spend too much time playing video games? Why? What do your parents think?
- Is there a difference between boys and girls concerning video game use? What does the survey tell us about this issue? How do you explain this difference (or similarity)?
- What is it that makes a video become the favourite or most popular game?

4

The session leader can add to the information with the help of the sections entitled "Video games: a popular form of entertainment" and "Who plays these games and what types of games are there?" on page 4.

### Suggestions for activities

The survey could be written as part of an English class.

The survey could be used as a pedagogic tool in a math class; for example, students could use it to practice statistical calculations such as determining averages.

### Suggestions for survey questions

The participants' sex

(this information helps determine who plays video games more, boys or girls) \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever played a video game at least once in your life (e.g. Nintendo, Playstation, X-Box, computer games):

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you are playing video games these days, about how many hours do you spend playing:

- A day \_\_\_\_\_
- A week \_\_\_\_\_

Do you think boys and girls like the same video games:

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

In your opinion, what is the favourite video game:

- of girls \_\_\_\_\_
- of boys \_\_\_\_\_

Personal preferences when it comes to video games:

- What is your favourite video game? \_\_\_\_\_
- Describe it briefly \_\_\_\_\_
- In your opinion, is it:
  - a puzzle-type game (strategy or adventure)
  - an action-type game (racing or fighting)
  - a simulation-type game (based on an illusion of reality or a sports event)
- Why do you like this game? \_\_\_\_\_

## ACTIVITY 2

# Where exactly is the virtual?

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1

Before starting the activity, the session leader briefly introduces notions of gender roles and stereotypes to students. The session leader can go to page 3 for inspiration, to the section entitled “The media: affirming adolescent identities”.

**DURATION**  
30 minutes

**OBJECTIVE**

- Identify the roles of men and women in the video games and discuss the pertinence of these representations.

2

Divide the class into small teams of four or five students. Give each team descriptions of video games that can be found on the Internet (e.g. [www.jeuxvideo.fr](http://www.jeuxvideo.fr) or [www.jeuxvideo.com](http://www.jeuxvideo.com)) or in video-game magazines (e.g. Québec Micro). The session leader can simply print out pages from the Web sites or photocopy articles from magazines that describe the stories of different games.

3

Ask students to use the descriptions to identify the roles of women and men presented in the video games. Students should answer these two questions:

- How are women presented in the video games (e.g. *submissive, scantily dressed, adventurous, absent from the game, warrior-like, fragile, victim, sexy, seductive*)?
- How are men presented in the video games (e.g. *violent, dominant, muscular, strong, warrior-like, race car driver, gangster, powerful*)?

4

When all teams have finished identifying the gender roles, ask them to give their answers. The session leader can stimulate discussion using the following questions:

- How do video game characters relate to each other? Do men and women relate the same way?
- Are men and women presented in the same manner in video games? What are the differences? What do you think of that?
- Do you think that video games project realistic images of men and women?
- Can young people identify with video game characters? Why? In your opinion, what is it that makes it possible to identify with these characters?
- Why do video game designers present these images of men and women?
- What do you think of these images of men and women?

### Suggestions for activities

It could be interesting to conduct this activity in a computer room where young people can explore Web sites where video games are available while identifying the gender roles that are portrayed. This activity could take place during a computer class or French class: young people could take the opportunity to practice their language skills.

### Suggestions for video games

**Games with stereotypes:** *Grand Theft Auto, Mortal Kombat, Final Fantasy, Legend of Zelda, Diablo, CounterStrike, Resident Evil, Tomb Raider, Grand Turismo, Quake, Duke Nukem.*

**Educational games with fewer stereotypes:** *SimCity, Catch the Sperm, Super Mario Kart.*

**DURATION**  
25 minutes

**OBJECTIVE**

- Present the positive and negative effects video games have on adolescents in order to create a video game that is free from gender stereotypes.

# Manager's meeting

1

Make up four mixed teams.

2

The session leader proposes the following scenario: “You are a group of managers from different video game companies. You have been invited to participate in creating a computer game without gender stereotypes but that is, of course, fun.

3

First, ask each team to identify the positive and negative effects of video games. Explain to them that this information will help them design their game.

4

Then, ask each team to create a video game without gender stereotypes.

5

Finally, all together, decide which game is the best.

6

The session leader can look at the following sections for inspiration and to add to students' comments: “Positive effects of video games on adolescents” (p. 5) and “Negative effects of video games on adolescents” (p. 6). However, explaining the theoretical approaches to the positive and negative effects to students is not useful.

## ACTIVITY 3

### Suggestions for activities

In French or English class, students could use this activity as a basis from which to write a letter to video game companies stating their opinions. In the letter they can denounce the stereotypical representations of sex roles conveyed in the games. They could even send the letters to the companies targeted. In economics class, students could use this activity to set up a fictitious company that designs video games without gender stereotypes. Finally, in computer class, students could be asked to design the best video game possible that is free from gender stereotypes. This assignment could be given as a year-long project.

## ACTIVITY 4

# A reality that resembles us?

**DURATION**  
15 minutes

**OBJECTIVE**

- Discuss the consequences of video games on boys' and girls' sex roles.

1

Read out the following scenario to the students: "Alexander is 16 years old. He spends all his free time playing video games on the Net. He and his friends have given themselves fictitious names so they can recognise each other. Some have chosen pejorative pseudonyms like "whore" and "bitch". At the same time, Alexander is a very reserved boy who has trouble relating to girls. He doesn't know what to say to them."

2

Ask students, who have formed **small unmixed teams**, to answer the two following questions:

- Spontaneously, what do you think of this scenario?*
- What do you think about Alexander's problem relating to girls? Does spending a lot of time playing video games help gamers connect with other people or, conversely, does it impede relationships with others? Why?*

3

Then, the session leader initiates a plenary discussion based on the following questions:

- *How can you tell if someone has become too addicted to these games? (Examples of possible answers: limits the amount of time spent going out with friends, does not want to be in touch with people around him or her ...)*
- *What do you think of the fictitious names that Alexander and his friends use? In your opinion, why do they use such names?*
- *In your opinion, can we escape the influence of media such as video games? How?*

## Conclusion

**DURATION**  
15 minutes

1

Ask adolescents what they have learnt from this meeting.

2

Summarise the objectives of the pedagogic activities (see Table 3 on page 8).

3

To conclude, **remind students** that even though video games are a fun form of entertainment, it is appropriate to look at the images of men and women presented in these games with a critical mind. Likewise, it is important to remain vigilant of the time and reasons one spends playing video games. Is the time spent playing these games substituted for "real" time spent with family and friends? The goal is to find a balance between using video games, entertainment and dependency.

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