10.4: The Impact of Video Games on Culture

Learning Objectives

1. Describe gaming culture and how it has influenced mainstream culture.
2. Analyze the ways video games have affected other forms of media.
3. Describe how video games can be used for educational purposes.
4. Identify the arguments for and against the depiction of video games as an art

An NPD poll conducted in 2007 found that 72 percent of the U.S. population had played a video game that year. Chris Faylor, “NPD: 72% of U.S. Population Played Games in 2007; PC Named “Driving Force in Online Gaming,” Shack News, April 2, 2008, http://www.shacknews.com/onearticle.x/52025. The increasing number of people playing video games means that video games are having an undeniable effect on culture. This effect is clearly visible in the increasing mainstream acceptance of aspects of gaming culture. Video games have also changed the way that many other forms of media, from music to film, are produced and consumed. Education has also been changed by video games through the use of new technologies that help teachers and students communicate in new ways through educational games such as *Brain Age*. As video games have an increasing influence on our culture, many have voiced their opinions on whether this form of media should be considered an art.

Game Culture

To fully understand the effects of video games on mainstream culture, it is important to understand the development of gaming culture, or the culture surrounding video games. Video games, like books or movies, have avid users who have made this form of media central to their lives. In the early 1970s, programmers got together in groups to play *Spacewar!*, spending a great deal of time competing in a game that was rudimentary compared to modern games. Stewart Brand, “Space War,” *Rolling Stone*, December 7, 1972. As video arcades and home video game consoles gained in popularity,
youth culture quickly adapted to this type of media, engaging in competitions to gain high scores and spending hours at the arcade or with the home console.

In the 1980s, an increasing number of kids were spending time on consoles playing games and, more importantly, increasingly identifying with the characters and products associated with the games. Saturday morning cartoons were made out of the *Pac-Man* and *Super Mario Bros.* games, and an array of nongame merchandise was sold with video game logos and characters. The public recognition of some of these characters has made them into cultural icons. A poll taken in 2007 found that more Canadians surveyed could identify a photo of Mario, from *Super Mario Bros.*, than a photo of the current Canadian prime minister. Cohn & Wolfe Toronto, "Italian Plumber More Memorable Than Harper, Dion," news release, November 13, 2007, http://www.newswire.ca/en/releases/mmnr/Super_Mario_Galaxy/index.html.


The Subculture of Geeks

The acceptance of video games in mainstream culture has consequently changed the way that the culture views certain people. "Geek" was the name given to people who were adept at technology but lacking in the skills that tended to make one popular, like fashion sense or athletic ability. Many of these people, because they often did not fare well in society, favored imaginary worlds such as those found in the fantasy and science fiction genres. Video games were appealing because they were both a fantasy world and a means to excel at something. Jim Rossignol, in his 2008 book *This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities*, explained part of the lure of playing *Quake III* online:

Cold mornings, adolescent disinterest, and a nagging hip injury had meant that I was banished from the sports field for many years. I wasn’t going to be able to indulge in the camaraderie that sports teams felt or in the extended buzz of victory through dedication and cooperation. That entire swath of experience had been cut off from me by cruel circumstance and a good dose of self-defeating apathy. Now, however, there was a possibility for some kind of redemption: a sport for the quick-fingered and the computer-bound; a space of possibility in which I could mold friends and strangers into a proficient gaming team. Jim Rossignol, *This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 17.

Video games gave a group of excluded people a way to gain proficiency in the social realm. As video games became more of a mainstream phenomenon and video game skills began to be desired by a large number of people, the popular idea of geeks changed. It is now common to see the term “geek” used to mean a person who understands computers and technology. This former slur is also prominent in the media, with headlines in 2010 such as “Geeks in Vogue: Top Ten Cinematic Nerds.” Craig Sharp, “Geeks in Vogue: Top Ten Cinematic Nerds,” *Film Shaft*, April 26, 2010, http://www.filmshaft.com/geeks-in-vogue-top-ten-cinematic-nerds/.
Many media stories focusing on geeks examine the ways in which this subculture has been accepted by the mainstream. Geeks may have become “cooler,” but mainstream culture has also become “geekier.” The acceptance of geek culture has led to acceptance of geek aesthetics. The mainstreaming of video games has led to acceptance of fantasy or virtual worlds. This is evident in the popularity of film/book series such as The Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter. Comic book characters, emblems of geek culture, have become the vehicles for blockbuster movies such as Spider-Man and The Dark Knight. The idea of a fantasy or virtual world has come to appeal to greater numbers of people. Virtual worlds such as those represented in the Grand Theft Auto and Halo series and online games such as World of Warcraft have expanded the idea of virtual worlds so that they are not mere means of escape but new ways to interact. Lars Konzack, “Geek Culture: The 3rd Counter-Culture,” (paper, FNG2006, Preston, England, June 26–28, 2006), http://www.scribd.com/doc/270364/Geek-Culture-The-3rd-CounterCulture.

The Effects of Video Games on Other Types of Media

Video games during the 1970s and 1980s were often derivatives of other forms of media. E.T., Star Wars, and a number of other games took their cues from movies, television shows, and books. This began to change in the 1980s with the development of cartoons based on video games, and in the 1990s and 2000s with live-action feature films based on video games.

Television

Television programs based on video games were an early phenomenon. Pac-Man, Pole Position, and Q*bert were among the animated programs that aired in the early 1980s. In the later 1980s, shows such as The Super Mario Bros. Super Show! and The Legend of Zelda promoted Nintendo games. In the 1990s, Pokémon, originally a game developed for the Nintendo Game Boy, was turned into a television series, a card game, several movies, and even a musical. Internet Move Database, “Pokémon,” http://www.imdb.com/. Recently, several programs have been developed that revolve entirely around video games—the web series The Guild, for instance, tells the story of a group of friends who interact through an unspecified MMORPG.

Nielsen, the company that tabulates television ratings, has begun rating video games in a similar fashion. In 2010, this information showed that video games, as a whole, could be considered a kind of fifth network, along with the television networks NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox. Mike Shields, “Nielsen: Video Games Approach 5th Network Status,” Adweek, March 25, 2009, http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/news/agency/e3i4f087b1aeac6f008d0ecadfeffe4a191. Advertisers use Nielsen ratings to decide which programs to support. The use of this system is changing public perceptions to include video game playing as a habit similar to television watching.

Video games have also influenced the way that television is produced. The Rocket Racing League, scheduled to be launched in 2011, will feature a “virtual racetrack.” Racing jets will travel along a virtual track that can only be seen by pilots and spectators with enabled equipment. Applications for mobile devices are being developed that will allow spectators to race virtual jets alongside the ones flying in real time. Adam Hadhazy, “‘NASCAR of the Skies’ to Feature Video Game-Like Interactivity,” TechNewsDaily, April 26, 2010, http://www.technewsdaily.com/nascar-of-the-skies-to-feature-video-game-like-interactivity–0475/. This type of innovation is only possible with a public that has come to demand and rely on the kind of interactivity that video games provide.
**Film**

The rise in film adaptations of video games accompanies the increased age of video game users. In 1995, Mortal Kombat, a live-action movie based on the video game, grossed over $70 million at the box office, placing it 22nd in the rankings for that year. Box Office Mojo, "Mortal Kombat," [http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=mortalkombat.htm](http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=mortalkombat.htm). Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, released in 2001, starred well-known actress Angelina Jolie and ranked No. 1 at the box office when it was released, and 15th overall for the year. Box Office Mojo, “Lara Croft: Tomb Raider,” [http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=tombraider.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=tombraider.htm). Films based on video games are an increasingly common sight at the box office, such as producer Jerry Bruckheimer’s Prince of Persia, or the recent sequel to Tron, based on the idea of a virtual gaming arena.

Another aspect of video games’ influence on films is how video game releases are marketed and perceived. The release date for anticipated game Grand Theft Auto IV was announced and marketed to compete with the release of the film Iron Man. Grand Theft Auto IV supposedly beat Iron Man by $300,000,000 million in sales. This kind of comparison is, in some ways, misleading. Video games cost much more than a ticket to a movie, so higher sales does not mean that more people bought the game than the movie. Also, the distribution apparatus for the two media is totally different. Movies can only be released in theaters, whereas video games can be sold at any retail outlet. Associated Press, “‘Grand Theft Auto IV’ Beats ‘Iron Man’ by $300 Million,” Fox News, May 9, 2008, [http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,354711,00.html](http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,354711,00.html). What this kind of news story proves, however, is that the general public considers video games as something akin to a film. It is also important to realize that the scale of production and profit for video games is similar to that of films. Video games include music scores, actors, and directors in addition to the game designers, and the budgets for major games reflect this. Grand Theft Auto IV cost an estimated $100 million to produce. Gillian Bowditch, “Grand Theft Auto Producer is Godfather of Gaming,” Times (London), April 27, 2008, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article3821838.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article3821838.ece).

**Music**

Video games have been accompanied by music ever since the days of the arcade. Video game music was originally limited to computer beeps turned into theme songs. The design of the Nintendo 64, Sega Saturn, and Sony PlayStation made it possible to use sampled audio on new games, meaning songs played on physical instruments could be recorded and used on video games. Beginning with the music of the Final Fantasy series, scored by famed composer Nobuo Uematsu, video game music took on film score quality, complete with full orchestral and vocal tracks. This innovation proved beneficial to the music industry. Well-known musicians such as Trent Reznor, Thomas Dolby, Steve Vai, and Joe Satriani were able to create the soundtracks for popular games, giving these artists exposure to new generations of potential fans. “Video Games Music Big Hit,” Wilmington (NC) Morning Star, February 1, 1997, 36. Composing music for video games has turned into a profitable means of employment for many musicians. Schools such as Berklee College of Music, Yale, and New York University have programs that focus on composing music for video games. The students are taught many of the same principles that are involved in film scoring. Joseph P. Khan, “Berklee is Teaching Its Students to Compose Scores for Video Games,” Boston Globe, January 19, 2010, [http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2010/01/19/berklee_is_teaching_students_to_compose_scores_for_video_games/](http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2010/01/19/berklee_is_teaching_students_to_compose_scores_for_video_games/).

Many rock bands have allowed their previously recorded songs to be used in video games, similar to a hit song being
used on a movie soundtrack. The bands are paid for the rights to use the song, and their music is exposed to an audience that otherwise might not hear it. As mentioned earlier, games like Rock Band and Guitar Hero have been used to promote bands. The release of The Beatles: Rock Band was timed to coincide with the release of digitally remastered reissues of the Beatles’ albums.

Another phenomenon relating to music and video games involves musicians covering video game music. A number of bands perform only video game covers in a variety of styles, such as the popular Japanese group the Black Mages, which performs rock versions of Final Fantasy music. Playing video game themes is not limited to rock bands, however. An orchestra and chorus called Video Games Live started a tour in 2005 dedicated to playing well-known video game music. Their performances are often accompanied by graphics projected onto a screen showing relevant sequences from the video games. Jason Michael Paul Productions, “About,” Play! A Video Game Symphony, http://www.play-symphony.com/about.php.

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**Machinima**

Recently, the connection between video games and other media has increased with the popularity of machinima, animated films and series created by recording character actions inside video games. Beginning with the short film “Diary of a Camper,” filmed inside the game Quake in 1996, fans of video games have adopted the technique of machinima to tell their own stories. Although these early movies were released only online and targeted a select niche of gamers, professional filmmakers have since adopted the process, using machinima to storyboard scenes and to add a sense of individuality to computer-generated shots. This new form of media is increasingly becoming mainstream, as television shows such as South Park and channels such as MTV2 have introduced machinima to a larger audience. Jonathan Strickland, “How Machinima Works,” HowStuffWorks.com, http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/machinima3.htm.

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**Video Games and Education**

![Figure 10.7 Educational video games have proven to be useful tools for educators.](image)

One sign of the mainstreaming of video games is the increase of educational institutions that embrace them. As early as the 1980s, games such as Number Munchers and Word Munchers were designed to help children develop basic math and grammar skills. In 2006, the Federation of American Scientists completed a study that approved of video game use
in education. The study cited the fact that video game systems were present in most households, kids favored learning through video games, and games could be used to facilitate analytical skills. Ben Feller, “Group: Video Games Can Reshape Education,” MSNBC, October 18, 2006, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15309615/from/ET/. Another study, published in the science journal Nature in 2002, found that regular video game players had better developed visual-processing skills than people who did not play video games. Participants in the test were asked to play a first-person shooter game for one hour a day for 10 days, and were then tested for specific visual attention skills. The playing improved these skills in all participants, but the regular video game players had a greater skill level than the non–game players. According to the study, “Although video-game playing may seem to be rather mindless, it is capable of radically altering visual attention processing.” C. Shawn Green and Daphne Bavelier, “Action Video Game Modifies Visual Selective Attention,” Nature 423, no. 6939 (2003): 534–537.

Other educational institutions have begun to embrace video games as well. The Boy Scouts of America have created a “belt loop,” something akin to a merit badge, for tasks including learning to play a parent-approved game and developing a schedule to balance video game time with homework. David Murphy, “Boy Scouts Develop ‘Vide Game’ Merit Badge,” PC Magazine, May 2, 2010, http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2363331,00.asp. The federal government has also seen the educational potential of video games. A commission on balancing the federal budget suggested a video game that would educate Americans about the necessary costs of balancing the federal budget. Richard Wolf, “Nation’s Soaring Deficit Calls for Painful Choices,” USA Today, April 14, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-04-12-deficit_N.htm. The military has similarly embraced video games as training simulators for new soldiers. These simulators, working off of newer game technologies, present several different realistic options that soldiers could face on the field. The games have also been used as recruiting tools by the U.S. Army and the Army National Guard. Associated Press, “Military Training Is Just a Game,” Wired, October 3, 2003, http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/news/2003/10/60688.

The ultimate effect of video game use for education, whether in schools or in the public arena, means that video games have been validated by established cultural authorities. Many individuals still resist the idea that video games can be beneficial or have a positive cultural influence, but their embrace by educational institutions has given video games validation.

**Video Games as Art**

While universally accepted as a form of media, a debate has recently arisen over whether video games can be considered a form of art. Roger Ebert, the well-known film critic, has historically argued that “video games can never be art,” citing the fact that video games are meant to be won, whereas art is meant to be experienced. Roger Ebert, “Video Games Can Never Be Art,” Chicago Sun-Times, April 16, 2010, http://blogs suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/video_games_can_never_be_art.html.

His remarks have generated an outcry from both video gamers and developers. Many point to games such as 2009’s *Flower*, in which players control the flow of flower petals in the wind, as examples of video games developing into art. *Flower* avoids specific plot and characters to allow the player to focus on interaction with the landscape and the emotion of the game-play. That Game Company, “Flower,” http://thatgamecompany.com/games/flower/. Likewise, more mainstream games such as the popular *Katamari* series, released in 2004, are built around the idea of creation, requiring players to pull together a massive clump of objects in order to create a star.
Video games, once viewed as a mindless source of entertainment, are now being featured in publications such as *The New Yorker* magazine and *The New York Times*. Max Fisher, "Are Video Games Art?" *Atlantic Wire*, April 19, 2010, [http://www.theatlanticwire.com/features/view/feature/Are-Video-Games-Art-1085/](http://www.theatlanticwire.com/features/view/feature/Are-Video-Games-Art-1085/). With the development of increasingly complex musical scores and the advent of machinima, the boundaries between video games and other forms of media are slowly blurring. While they may not be considered art by everyone, video games have contributed significantly to modern artistic culture.

**Key Takeaways**

- The aesthetics and principles of gaming culture have had an increasing effect on mainstream culture. This has led to the gradual acceptance of marginalized social groups and increased comfort with virtual worlds and the pursuit of new means of interaction.
- Video games have gone from being a derivative medium that took its cues from other media, such as books, films, and music, to being a form of media that other types derive new ideas from. Video games have also interacted with older forms of media to change them and create new means of entertainment and interaction.
- Educational institutions have embraced the use of video games as valuable tools for teaching. These tools include simulated worlds in which important life skills can be learned and improved.
- While video games may not be accepted by everyone as a form of art, there is no doubt that they contribute greatly to artistic media such as music and film.

Exercise 1

Think about the ways in which video games have influenced and affected other forms of media. Then consider the following questions:

1. Are there things video games will never be able to offer?
2. Write down several examples of ways in which other forms of media are not replicated by video games. Then speculate on ways video games could eventually emulate these forms.