

**Video games may help or hinder
Effect on kids unclear**

By Brian Lee TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Bailey S. Latour plays on an Xbox every other day for a couple of hours.

As the 13-year-old Southbridge resident's thumbs and mind get a workout playing "Rainbow Six: Vegas 2," and "Run for Action," decades-long and often conflicting research on the impact of playing video games continues.

Last month, Michigan State University scholars published a study of nearly 500 12-year-olds. It found that video game playing, regardless of whether the games were violent, was tied to creativity.

A Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, citing a 30-year-low in federal juvenile crime stats, wrote that the perception that the availability of video games was leading to an epidemic of youth violence was "a myth."

The professor, noting 90 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls play video games, wrote that people serving time for violent crimes typically saw "less media" before committing their crimes than the average person.

Another recent study by researchers from the Indiana University School of Medicine found that violent video games can alter the brains of young men after a week of playing. The results indicated that boys who played violent video games experienced changes in regions associated with cognitive function and emotional control, with the changes possibly long-term.

While trying to revive a fallen character from death on his game, Bailey said he's not obsessed. He doesn't go back and forth to the video game stores.

"I have friends that are like that," Bailey said. "One kid, when he gets bored with a game and he completes it, he'll go to GameStop and trade it back in for something else."

"I can see why they play so long," adds his father, Scott L. Latour. "Because it really is hard, and time-consuming, to learn the controls. If you watch his hands going, he uses all the buttons."

The game makers should "put in a little bit of math, science and social studies," his mother, Sharon M. Latour, suggested.

Mrs. Latour said she wants her laid-back son to find other interests.

"A lot of people feel that it's not good for the kids. In some aspects I do agree with that. But for the most part I have to say you have to have a brain to be able to look for the things that are hidden (in the games), and you have to think."

Dr. Thomas E. O'Leary, a pediatrician with Harrington Physician Services in Dudley, said his own children play the games. "They are getting more and more detailed, and the graphics and interaction are awesome. But it's generally the same old thing — go into a maze, shoot people, get killed."

Dr. O'Leary said he hasn't seen an uptick in aggression among children because they're playing video games that depict violence.

But socially, if the child has an underlying phobia or anxiety, video games can provide them an opportunity to isolate themselves, Dr. O'Leary said.

The bigger concern is lack of physical activity, Dr. O'Leary said, referring to "the good old days" when after a meal, kids played sports or games outdoors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends children perform at least 60 minutes a day of physical, mostly aerobic, activities; the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends less than two hours a day of media.

Dr. O'Leary suggested that while Nintendo's Wii fitness video games work well with older, less mobile people, it isn't an appropriate substitute for children getting needed activity. Parents and kids who think otherwise are fooling themselves, he said.

Also, the doctor said he's noticed older kids having trouble getting up to go to school.

"Their parents say, 'They're so tired, something's wrong.' You get to talking to them, they don't go to bed until 2, because they're playing some online game with kids."

Society, though, is likely to see more video game principles in everyday life, according to Mark L. Claypool, director of the Interactive Media & Game Development program at WPI.

"We're at the tip of the iceberg" for video games being used for purposes beyond entertainment, which he said was exciting for game developers.

Video games do well by tapping into humanistic needs of reward and punishment, and those gaming mechanics have been used to design "ulterior motives" such as teaching a student or patient about math, science, reading or how to manage their health, he said.

Mr. Claypool's job at WPI gives him the excuse to play video games — about five hours a week when he's teaching, 10 to 15 hours a week during vacations.

"In some sense I play more than I maybe should because I have lots of other interesting work to do, and in some sense, less, because there are so many games to try."

Mr. Claypool said he plays for the experience of knowing what the genre is like and so he can talk intelligently about it, and to see if the game broadens his horizons.

Worcester public school officials don't use Xbox, PlayStation 3 or Wii, but instructional tools resembling video games are used, said the district's information technology officer, Bob Walton.

Some Worcester schools have an interactive "game" interface called Headsprout that teaches reading, and 11 schools use a program called Fast For Word, which, based on brain research, uses a game interface to teach reading and to stimulate parts of the brain related to retention and comprehension.

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