

Video Games

Research to improve understanding of what players enjoy about video games, and to explain their preferences for particular games

Prepared for the British Board of Film Classification
by Cragg Ross Dawson: Arnold Cragg,
Catherine Taylor and Ben Toombs

A.	<u>BACKGROUND</u>	2
B.	<u>RESEARCH OBJECTIVES</u>	2
C.	<u>RESEARCH METHOD & SAMPLE</u>	4
D.	<u>SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS</u>	6
E.	<u>DETAILED FINDINGS</u>	14
1.	Some basics	14
1.1	At what age do people start playing video games?	14
1.2	Platform choice and acquisition	15
1.3	Game choice and acquisition	18
2.	Patterns of use	20
2.1	Variations by age and life-stage	20
2.2	Variations by gender	22
2.3	Frequency of playing and time devoted	24
2.4	Playing against the computer or with/against others	28
3.	What's to like? The appeal of video games	29
3.1	Entertainment and fun	32
3.2	Escape and relaxation	33
3.3	A challenge	38
3.4	Social benefits	42
3.5	Graphics	44
3.6	Storylines	47
3.7	Skills and education	48
3.8	Humour	50
3.9	How distinctive is the appeal of video games?	51
4.	Violence as an element in the appeal of video games	56
5.	Specific games	61
5.1	Grand Theft Auto	61
5.2	Championship Manager	64
5.3	The Sims	65
5.4	Manhunt	65
6.	Gamer concerns about playing video games	67
6.1	Isolation and 'addiction'	67
6.2	A poor, unproductive use of time	69
6.3	Violence: gamers	72
6.4	Violence: professionals	80
7.	Parental concerns	86
7.1	Isolation and unsociability	88
7.2	A poor use of time	90
7.3	Violence and bad behaviour	91
7.4	Cost	95
7.5	Other concerns	96
7.5.1	Sex	96
7.5.2	Health	97
8.	Supervision and regulation	97
8.1	Parental supervision	97
8.2	Regulation	100

A. BACKGROUND

A large majority of video games sold in the UK receive a rating under the voluntary Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) system, but some games, about 6-7% of the total, are referred to the BBFC. In determining what classification to give, the BBFC employs much the same approach as it does to films and DVDs. However, as a medium, video games of course differ from films in a number of ways, and especially in being interactive.

There has been little recent or credible research into the ways video games are distinctive as a medium or into how games may generate different reactions in players than films and DVDs do in viewers.

Many video games involve violent action and some people fear they may desensitise players to violence. Media interest in this subject has been growing. Some research in the US appears to support the hypothesis that playing video games can make people more aggressive. There is some pressure on both sides of the Atlantic for games to be more tightly regulated.

Meanwhile, the technology continues to advance, enhancing interactivity and delivering ever more realistic graphics. The newest developments may complicate the task of classifying games and increase anxiety amongst those who worry about the medium.

B. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The BBFC commissioned this research project as part of an effort to ensure that its approach to classifying video games is grounded on a good understanding of the medium. They drew up a list of questions they wanted research to address, as follows:

- why do people play video games?
- what effect do they feel the experience has on them?
- does the element of interactivity inherent in a video game significantly alter the experience as against, say, watching a video?
- what differences are there in playing a game and watching a film or video?
- what motivates players to complete a game?
- what challenges are posed by the games they enjoy?
- which games are the most enjoyable (and why)?
- what do gamers say about violence as an element in the appeal of

games? Does this differ by type of game (is violence in a sports game different from violence in **Manhunt**)?

- which games offer the most immersive experience?
- how do they choose which games to play?
- do they tend to stick to the same genre, or play a broad range of games?
- what distinguishes a 'good' game from others in its genre?
- how do the incentives/disincentives that some games include (for example, a player losing points if he/she engages in anti-social behaviour) affect a player's choices? Is engaging in illicit pleasure worth the loss of points?
- what considerations lead gamers to play on their own or with others?
- how does playing a game alone compare to playing with others online?
- is more satisfaction derived from beating other human gamers over beating computer-controlled opponents?
- do children and parents play together?
- do parents consider games to be 'toys'?

The above list was not treated as comprehensive; it was assumed that other questions would emerge as the research progressed. The overall objective of the research was to try and ensure that the BBFC had a good and up-to-date understanding of:

- how gamers relate to the medium
- what it is about games that makes them attractive; the interplay between – the visuals, the adrenalin rush of playing, the reward of finishing, the social benefits of playing, etc
- what the implications are for the classification of games relative to films and DVDs (are there grounds for applying different criteria to the classification of games?)
- how games are perceived by the public in general and by parents of gamers in particular

It was explicitly stated at the outset that the research could not resolve the issue of whether playing games desensitises people to violence in a way, or to a degree, that has regrettable effects on their behaviour. This important question was acknowledged to be beyond what the proposed research design would be able to deliver.

C. RESEARCH METHOD & SAMPLE

The research was qualitative and consisted principally of interviews and discussions with people who play games. There was also fieldwork with parents, people involved in the production of games, games designers and games reviewers writing in the specialist press.

Games players

16 paired interviews (two respondents who knew each other and had similar attitudes towards gaming) and eight group discussions (seven/eight respondents) were conducted with games players. Basic controls over demographics and frequency of game playing were as noted on the table below.

GAMES PLAYERS								
	AGE	SEX		CLASS		INTENSITY		
		M	F	ABC1	C2DE	LIGHT	INTERMEDIATE	HEAVY
PD 1	7/8	✓		✓		✓		
PD 2	8/9	✓			✓		✓	
PD 3	9/10	✓			✓		✓	
PD 4	9/10		✓	✓		✓		
PD 5	11/12	✓			✓			✓
PD 6	11/12	✓			✓			✓
PD 7	12/13	✓		✓			✓	
PD 8	12/13		✓	✓				✓
PD 9	13/14	✓			✓	✓		
PD 10	14/15	✓		✓				✓
PD 11	14/15	✓			✓		✓	
PD 12	16-18		✓	✓		✓		
Group 1	16-18	✓			✓		✓	
Group 2	16-18		✓	✓		✓		
PD 13	18-21	✓			✓			✓
Group 3	18-21		✓	✓		✓		
Group 4	18-21	✓			✓		✓	
PD 14	22-25		✓	✓				✓
Group 5	22-25	✓			✓	✓		
Group 6	22-25	✓		✓			✓	
PD 15	26-30	✓			✓			✓
Group 7	26-30	✓		✓			✓	
PD 16	30-40		✓		✓	✓		
Group 8	30-40	✓			✓			✓

Light was interpreted as those who play once or twice a week on average, 'heavy' those who play four/five hours a day several days a week, and 'intermediate' are those in between these extremes.

The above fieldwork was distributed over a number of different locations within the UK, including the greater London area, Croydon, Radlett in Hertfordshire, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle and Edinburgh.

Parents

Four group discussions and two paired interviews were conducted with parents. Each discussion would involve four fathers and four mothers (not couples) with children seven to 17 who play video games. Most had bought video games for their children. One of the two paired depths was with a couple, the other with two single mothers.

The fieldwork with parents took place in some of the same locations as that with gamers.

PARENTS OF 7-17 YEAR OLD CHILDREN WHO PLAY VIDEO GAMES AT HOME	
Group 9	Parents who do not play (and have not played) video games
Group 10	As Group 9
Group 11	Parents who used to play video games but no longer do so
Group 12	Parents who play video games nowadays
PD 17	Parents of children 12-17 who express concerns at the time their children devote to video games
PD 18	As paired depth 17

Professionals

Three professionals involved in the production of games were interviewed individually. There were two interviews with professionals writing for the specialist games press, and one group discussion with four writers for specialist magazines.

The fieldwork described above was conducted in September and October 2006 by five Cragg Ross Dawson researchers: Arnold Cragg, Catherine Taylor, Ben Toombs, Africa Munyama and Lisa Malangone. Arnold Cragg prepared this report after internal discussions.

D. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Some basics

1. The probability is that people are starting to play games at a younger and younger age, though the universe of gamers overall may be aging as it gets bigger. It is not uncommon for children as young as three to play video games. Professionals believe that the number of adult gamers is growing.
2. Households where there are gamers often have more than one game console; these are passed on rather than discarded and they are popular as gifts. Children usually have their console (much more rarely a PC) in the bedroom (in part to avoid dominating the living room TV).
3. The technology is thought to be charging ahead in terms of processing power and graphics, so that the newest consoles are the most desirable; PlayStation 2's dominance was upset by Xbox 360 (in part because of its better internet capability) and this is in turn expected to be superseded by PlayStation 3. Sony and Microsoft seem to be head to head competitors, whereas Nintendo is seen as pursuing a different strategy.
4. Gamers of course have different tastes in games and there is an immense variety to choose from. Amongst the young, especially boys, word of mouth and 'peer group pressure' is a powerful influence on choice; a few hot games are played, for a period, by 'everyone'. **Grand Theft Auto (GTA)** is the most striking example. Children share and trade games with friends and play in each other's houses. There are fashionable games amongst adults also, but older players seem to divide into 'casual' and 'hard-core' gamers, and play a greater variety of games than the young.
5. The reputation of a game seems to develop by word of mouth and there are few references to marketing. But it is noticeable that gamers often know long in advance when a new game is scheduled to appear; advertising and previews on internet sites play an important role here. Magazines, with their free demo discs, are probably influential with many of the young, although they are not much talked about. Comment in the media generally, usually negative, has helped some games (for example **Manhunt** and **GTA**) into prominence.

Patterns of use

6. These are very varied. Individual gamers differ in how often, when, and for how long they play games, depending on: what else is happening in their lives; mood; what they are playing, especially whether or not it is new or an internet game.
7. Generalisation is hazardous because of the variety of behaviour. Patterns worth noting include:

- as would be expected, school children typically play a lot in the evening and at weekends, and young people play more in winter than summer because outside activities compete less strongly in bad weather
 - many gamers play every day, but others play in irregular bursts; many young players play to the limits of what they are allowed by their parents
 - it is common for gamers to play for four or five hours at a stretch, and many have stayed up all night playing, especially on a new game; committed male gamers quite often play as soon as they wake up
 - most gamers, but especially males, note that they very often play for longer than they intended; once started, it is difficult for them to stop
 - undergraduates, the unemployed, and people professionally involved in the industry are prominent amongst those who regularly have very long sessions
 - most gamers and professionals believe that gaming appeals more strongly to boys and men than to girls and women, but professionals say that this male bias is steadily weakening
 - there are exceptions, but girls and women typically play fewer games and have shorter sessions; males are more likely to make time to play, females to fit playing around other interests and activities
 - most boys talk about video games more than most girls, and share their gaming experiences more
 - most males expect to go on playing as they get older (though less intensely), whereas women often expect other priorities to squeeze out video games
8. Different games have different playing modes, and different players have different preferences. Most young players play against the computer; they like being engrossed in a game, on their own, in their room. Watching someone else play is not usually regarded as interesting unless it is a very new game. Men who play sports games, especially football, like playing with a competitor, or in groups. Massive Multi Player Online Games are of course played with many players on the net. Many parents think there are risks attached to their children playing online games.

What's to like? The appeal of video games

9. There is huge and growing diversity in video games and of course gamers respond to different elements. The answer to the question 'what is their appeal?' is the same for games as it would be for novels or films: lots of different things, and different strokes for different folks. Any summary is bound to be reductive.

10. Gender differences are prominent in what gamers like about playing, as they are in patterns of use. Girls and women tend to play different games – more driving, 'strategic life simulation' (**The Sims**), and puzzle games, less first person shooter, hack and slash and sports games. There are certainly exceptions, but it is probably fair to say that girls and women stay calmer and set achievable objectives whereas boys and men tilt towards jeopardy and excitement. In part because of the games they play, the social rewards of gaming – bragging about it, helping each other, playing against each other – are less evident amongst girls than boys.
11. Gamers play games because they enjoy it; they are curious, they persist, they find it rewards them in various ways and is, in the round, an easy, absorbing way to pass the time that compares well with the alternatives of chatting, reading, playing a board game, watching TV or a film.
12. An important strand in the appeal is certainly escapism. You escape *from* everyday life; to play you need to concentrate and doing so distracts you from your usual preoccupations. Moreover, games are a safe environment in the sense that what happens is structured by learnable and reliable rules. A game is also reliable in that, if you know it, you know what the experience will be like. Many gamers find this dependability makes a video game more effectively relaxing and de-stressing than more passive activities like watching TV.
13. You also escape *to* excitement and adventure or an alternative you. Games enable players to do things they could not, or would not, do in real life; they play at being people they are not. Many players, and especially boys, like the stimulation of this; they like games because games are different – more action-packed or more predictable, simultaneously more perilous and more under your control – than real life. Moreover, games offer what feels like adventure without risk; however many times you crash, you are never going to get hurt. Simulation games, perhaps especially those online, offer an escape to a different 'reality' and many gamers find this highly seductive.
14. Competing is central to the appeal of many video games; they set a challenge to which gamers respond. Gamers want to win, to do better than they did last time, to get to the next level, to complete the game. Problem resolution is usually the key to progression in games, and most games have a modular structure, so gamers are continually confronted with another little problem that opens the door to the next; the challenge keeps renewing itself. Sports games offer a challenge of a more conventional sort; trying to beat your opponent(s).
15. Because they are often challenging, games deliver a sense of achievement. Gamers are in control, and when something happens, they have made it happen; films and television are passively watched and are not, many gamers find, as satisfying. Online games are challenging in a different way; the multiplicity of players produces uniquely complex interactions and relationships which generate passionate involvement amongst some gamers.

16. Many parents and gamers think of video games as profoundly antisocial because gaming is so often a solitary activity, an alternative to relating to other people. But part of the pleasure for many gamers, especially boys and men, is social. Gaming is an important talking point and sports games are played in pairs or groups with an atmosphere not unlike a 'real' sporting event. Players of online games feel they make significant connections with people they have not met.
17. The quality of graphics attracts comment and good graphics clearly contribute importantly to gamers' enjoyment. Graphics on recent games are frequently described as 'amazing'. There are games that are said to be 'staggeringly beautiful'. The brilliance of a game's graphics is quite often quoted as a reason for liking a game. It may be that the better the graphics, the more easily players become immersed in games. The expectation that graphics will keep getting better excites many gamers, again more men than women because of the nature of the games they play.
18. For most gamers, but with emphatic exceptions, storylines appear to be a relatively weak element in the overall appeal of games. Gamers may have some curiosity about how the elements in a game will come together in a final resolution, but it is their progression through the game, rather than a strong story line, that grips their attention. In part this is because they solve problems to make progress, but cannot influence the ultimate outcome. In **Tomb Raider**, for example, gamers steadily unlock the inevitable narrative; they are not held by the story, but by the problem solving.
19. Games are better at developing action than building character and this contributes to the weakness of storylines; gamers may not *care* very much what happens in the end so long as the action is exciting and they make progress. However there *are* gamers who find some games emotionally powerful – more powerful, in some ways, than films or books. An affecting account of how a game can make a player cry is quoted in the body of the report (page 54).
20. It is often said that playing video games develops eye hand coordination and reaction times; getting better by improving in these ways is one of the rewards of playing. Some gamers also claim that playing is educational; it familiarises you with ways of being and doing that you would otherwise not know about. It is sometimes laughingly conceded that much of this learning has little relevance to ordinary life. However, many gamers would insist that playing games is mentally stimulating (more stimulating than watching TV typically is).
21. Humour is not a conspicuous element in the appeal of games. Nevertheless, some are described, especially by boys and men, as 'a real laugh'. When there is humour it often arises from an acute dissonance between everyday life and what happens in a game; gamers find themselves 'doing' things that are vividly, and humorously, unlikely and out of character. A kind of humour

also arises in other sorts of games in which characters with cartoony appeal behave in cartoony ways.

22. Gamers seem to regard video games as distinctive – unlike anything else. They are occasionally compared with board games though most gamers unsurprisingly regard the latter as very much more limited. Comparisons with novels are rare, although the investment of time is similar. The most common references are to television and film, in part because these are also screen based. As already noted, games are appreciated as more involving than either television or film because nothing happens without some input from the player, who as a result feels triumphant or frustrated according to how things go.
23. Gamers appear to forget that they are playing a game less readily than filmgoers forget that they are watching a film. There are a number of reasons for this: gamers have to participate in the game for it to proceed; they get used to saving and restarting games; the action in games is often highly unreal; graphics are not as real looking as film. The fact that gamers may not be very engaged emotionally is also relevant. This is not to say that gamers do not concentrate intently whilst they are playing; many do, and parents report that it can be impossible to get their sons' attention whilst they are playing. However intense concentration, and fierce determination to win or make progress, are not the same as deep emotional involvement.

Violence as an element in the appeal of video games

24. We need to note that many games, including some of the most popular, do not contain any violence at all. However, violence is conspicuous in many games, often running throughout the game, so that much of the tension and excitement and progression is dependent on violence.
25. Some 'violence' – like **Spyro** for example – is symbolic and not intended to look remotely real. Violence in many more recent games, by contrast, seems to have been designed to look as real as possible, involves a lot of gore, and appears intended to be a focus of interest in itself. As graphics have improved, wounds and suffering have become more real looking, along with weapons and scenery.
26. Some gamers certainly enjoy both the violence and the fact that it looks as real as it does: 'it's just good!' Some like the fact that they are inflicting the violence; they say straightforwardly that what makes the bleeding 'fun' is knowing you've just hit him. They would rather kill someone in a game than watch someone being killed in a film.
27. This is a difficult subject. A number of points may be made that, taken together, make the incidence of violence in games more comprehensible and perhaps less malign than may initially appear. First, violence, in the sense of eliminating obstacles, is built into the structure of many games and it

would be impossible to progress without it. There are technical reasons to do with how computers work that help explain why weapons are a mainstay of games. Most gamers see eliminating enemies as another step in the game rather than something to savour for itself. Second, violence contributes mightily to the tension in games not least because gamers are not just shooting, they are also vulnerable to being shot. Most gamers concentrate on their own survival rather than on the damage they inflict on others. Third, the opportunity to be violent, without being vulnerable to consequences, clearly underscores the appeal of some games as escapist; the violence helps make the play exhilaratingly out of reach of ordinary life. Fourth, the point made above; gamers seem not to lose awareness that they are playing a game and do not mistake the game for real life.

Gamer concerns about playing video games

28. This heading should not be taken to imply that it is usual for gamers to worry about playing video games; most are happy they do and intend to go on playing.
29. However, many gamers would acknowledge that it is possible to devote too much time and thought to games. Playing very intensively can make gamers isolated, anti-social and boring (because they neglect other interests). Perhaps more seriously, to become obsessed with a game can lead to prioritising an electronic world over the real one and this is regarded by gamers as 'sad'. Games are part of a good life but not a substitute for it. It appears to be online games like **World of Warcraft** that are most 'addictive' and which have the most potential to distort personal priorities with unhappy results.
30. Playing video games can be compulsive and soak up time. Some gamers seem to feel a bit sheepish, looking back, at the amount of time they have spent playing. The sense of achievement games deliver is often fleeting, partly because 'it's only a game', partly because, for many, playing is a rather cold, emotionally shallow experience. Gamers do not dispute that it might have been better if they had been doing healthier, worthier things like studying, playing outside, housework, etc, but they enjoy games and do not at all agree that watching TV or a film, or reading a book, are self-evidently better uses of time.
31. Gamers in general recognise that the amount of violence in games is an issue; most are aware of media interest in the subject. Some young gamers, under 15, find some of the violence (usually in 18+ games) upsetting, and a few report having nightmares. They are uncomfortable about gore – very bloody deaths – and also about 'wrongness' – the perception that wickedness is prevailing over innocence. Shooting the enemy from a distance is a lot less troubling than stabbing 'a civilian' close up.

32. Some adult gamers are also uncomfortable about vivid and imaginative slayings involving blood and wounds. They wonder vaguely and inconclusively 'where it will end' – what images will the newest technology deliver, and are there limits to what is acceptable?
33. However most gamers are not seriously concerned about violence in games for the reasons given at paragraphs 23 and 27, and also because they think violence on television and in films is *more* upsetting than violence in games. Film images are more 'real' than computer graphics, and film creates a more compelling illusion; they feel these two factors transcend the fact that games, uniquely, inspire ownership of the violence because they are interactive.
34. Gamers are virtually unanimous in rejecting the suggestion that video game violence encourages people to be violent in real life, or otherwise desensitises them to violence. A few appear to think that playing 'a lot too much' may make people aggressive. And some feel that people 'who are already unhinged in some way' may be inspired or prompted or pushed over the edge if they play violent games obsessively. Gamers exonerate games of any responsibility for real violence because they are so confident that their own propensity to be violent has not been affected by playing games.
35. Some professionals are concerned that violence is such a conspicuous feature of video games; 'the depravity of it and the unflinching enthusiasm with which it is displayed'. They worry about the trend towards more realistic depiction of wounds and suffering. However they also point out that there are technical reasons why games depend on the elimination of elements, and believe that most gamers treat violence in games as a sort of code. Like 'ordinary' gamers, professionals quote their own feelings and experience in support of their contention that playing video games does not desensitise to violence.
36. There is no consensus amongst professionals on whether interactivity makes the violence in games worse or not so bad; it is perhaps worse because gamers are making the decision to commit it, perhaps not so bad because having to decide reminds them it is only a game. Most professionals agree that violence on TV and in films is much more upsetting to look at than video game violence.

Parental concerns

37. Not all parents have any significant concerns about their children playing video games. Many are relieved they are in their bedrooms quietly playing games rather than: roaming the streets; frequenting internet chat rooms or porn sites; noisily under their feet in the kitchen.
38. However some are regretful about the amount of time their children spend gazing intently at screens in darkened rooms. They do not like the fact that it

happens indoors, and is all 'unreal'. Parents would rather their children were involved in more physically active, sociable and traditional pursuits – playing football, or pulling on gum boots and building a den in the woods. They complain that children who play a lot of games become monosyllabic and unsociable, emerging from their rooms pasty-faced and zombie-like after hours of incomprehensible engagement with a fantasy world. Parents who play are unsurprisingly better informed and less bothered than parents who have never played. Negative attitudes amongst the latter are often driven by bewilderment; games are a mystery and their negative image in much of the media means they are not given the benefit of the doubt.

39. Some parents recoil from the violence in games, and are surprised by it. Most are aware of publicity surrounding a possible association between video game violence and real violence but, like gamers, tend to think that only people with some unusual, pre-existing propensity to be violent would be prejudiced by the violence in games. They are confident their own children have no such propensity. However, some believe they have noticed children imitating the language, and some of the actions, in games.
40. Parents do not seem to have thought much about interactivity as a factor possibly aggravating the effects of game violence on children. Again like many gamers, they think the greater verisimilitude of film is more upsetting. Some concede that repetition – the fact that violent scenes in games are frequently replayed – may justify worrying about game violence.
41. Parents in general are more frightened of 'stranger danger' from the web than they are about sex in games. Many seem unaware that there is sexual content in games like **Grand Theft Auto** and often seem disposed to be more indignant about sex than about violence.

Supervision and regulation

42. Many parents see the amount of time their children devote to video games, rather than the content of specific games, as the problem. They try and ration access but with very uneven success.
43. Some parents have never had a video game box in their hand and the classification of video games appears to be less familiar and less respected than the classification of films. Some parents simply ignore classifications; either they do not think about it, or they feel restrictions (however sensible in principle) need not apply to their own children.
44. Those parents who are motivated to enforce classifications are often defeatist about doing so: children get access to forbidden games elsewhere, from friends; fathers frustrate mothers; relatives give their children age-inappropriate games; older siblings or friends buy out-of-age games; etc. Many parents seem inhibited about exercising authority in this area; some keep the issue at arm's length because they are conscious they do not really know anything about games.

45. There is widespread agreement that some regulation of video games is needed. Some professionals believe that regulation will become more important as the technology develops. The current classification system is generally regarded as fit for purpose and some professionals admire the common sense with which it is administered. The problems are in the area of compliance; many parents buy their children age-inappropriate games and retailers are said not to take game classifications as seriously as those applied to DVDs.
46. The video game classification system does seem to be recessive relative to that applicable to film. Reasons for this include: most parents have not themselves grown up with it; when they buy games, some parents have little appreciation of what they are buying and are therefore more vulnerable to pressure from their children; some parents are more concerned about sex than about violence and assume that sex is not an issue with games.
47. Some professionals wonder if enough has been done to ensure that the public are aware of the classification system, understand it and appreciate its importance. The case for raising the profile of the system will strengthen if, as many expect, graphical representation of violence approaches the 'realism' of film. The newest consoles apparently have blocking devices, and if these are effective there may be a need to educate parents about their use.

E. DETAILED FINDINGS

1. **Some basics**

1.1 At what age do people start playing video games?

The average age at which the gamers in the research sample had started to play was about seven. Boys generally seem to start at a younger age than girls. There are a number of patterns: younger siblings tend to start earlier because their interest is stimulated by older brothers or sisters; the children of gamers start earlier for the same reason; going to school stimulates interest via peers.

"They start as soon as they go to school and speak to their friends."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

The trend appears to be for children to start at a younger and younger age; there are three year olds who play video games regularly. Precocity is a feature of consumer behaviour in this market (see also under Regulation, Section 8).

*"I have trouble getting on because my six year old wants to get on... She's better than me on some of them... She's on **World of Warcraft** at the moment. You are supposed to be 12 years to play on it but she's six and she's playing."*

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

It is also probable that the universe of gamers is aging; adults who played as children continue to play, and more games are produced for an adult audience. Both gamers and professionals expect this to continue. Many gamers (though men more than women) expect to continue to play video games when they are older – they concede they may not have as much time to devote to games but they expect the appeal to hold up. Moreover the expectation often is that games will get better and better as the processing power of computers expands and games designers develop game structures in imaginative ways.

“If you play when you are younger, as you get older you are still going to enjoy doing it.”

“The games are going to get better and better.”

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

1.2 Platform choice and acquisition

Many gamers have more than one platform, and it is not uncommon for households to have consoles from Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo as well as a PC. Portable consoles are also common, especially amongst younger gamers (whose need to have games on the move is comparable to the more universal need to have music on the move).

Even young players often have a lot of equipment to choose from; in this sample, the two eight/nine year old boys in paired interview two each had a Playstation 2 and an Xbox, one also had a PSP and the other a PlayStation 1 and a Game Boy.

In some cases, having a range of consoles reflects a single player’s passion for gaming and insistence on having the latest available equipment, the best graphics, the widest selection of games, etc. More often, several consoles in the home results from there being several gamers: older models are handed down from parents to children, or from older to younger siblings. Younger children often cut their teeth on otherwise neglected consoles; the Nintendo Game Boy is often mentioned in this role.

Most gaming households seem to feel there is virtue in variety; generally the preference is to have an Xbox 360 as well as a PlayStation 2 rather than two PlayStation 2s. However two families in our sample had bought a second PlayStation to prevent their children fighting over it (in one case they continued to fight over the PC).

As noted, many young gamers play on consoles passed on by parents or older siblings. Under 15s who have new consoles have generally been given them by their parents for birthdays or Christmas, and gifts are important for many older gamers also. However a surprising number of gamers still in their teens say they saved up to buy consoles themselves, or contributed significantly to purchases subsidised by their parents. Relatives – uncles, aunts and grandparents – are often mentioned as donors of consoles.

The extent to which parents fully understand what they are buying, and its implications, when they give platforms to their children is very variable. Those who are or were gamers themselves of course know perfectly well; many look forward to introducing their children to gaming. However there are some who have very little grasp of what playing video games is like, or of what games their children will want to play (see also below Section 8).

Ownership is sometimes obscured by inheritance and sharing, but most gamers over about ten seem to have a console in their bedrooms. Many parents want to avoid the main family TV being dominated by games playing and this consideration argues for consoles to be bedroom-based. Most parents are much more reluctant for their children to have a PC in their bedrooms than a games console (see also below Section 7.5.1).

Choice of console is influenced by a number of factors. Confidence that the technology is always moving on means that anything new is assumed to be better – better graphics and better game play. There is strong peer pressure amongst the young to have the new consoles soon after they are launched. However price is a constraint in many households; young unmarried men in their 20s are those most likely to upgrade early to the most recent consoles (and most firm in their determination to buy the PlayStation 3 when it appears). Some parents resent the pressure to buy the latest console, in part because they know it will lead to pressure for further expenditure on new games.

There did not appear to be much brand loyalty to Sony or Microsoft as platform producers. As already noted, many gamers have more than one, and the young often play on friends' consoles. Console brands do not appear to be cool in the way that games can be; a console is cool if it is very new on the market, but not because it is a particular brand.

The main differentiator appears to be the quality of the graphics and here newest is best. Graphics make an immediate impression and the general opinion appears to be that the more lifelike, 'real' (more like film), the images, the better. The Sony PlayStation 2 raised the bar on graphics but has been overtaken by the Xbox 360 which in turn is expected to be bested by the PlayStation 3. Graphics as an element in the overall appeal of games is discussed further below (see Section 3.5).

Game repertoires are another important differentiator. The PlayStation 2 is praised for the number and variety of games available for it. The Xbox 360 is said by some to have a greater number of *exclusive* games. Good games are ultimately expected to become available on all platforms, but many gamers are very impatient to play the newest games.

PCs and the Xbox 360 are preferred by those who want to play games with others over the internet. The Xbox 360 potential here is said to be much superior to the PlayStation 2. Many gaming respondents, and all the

professionals interviewed for this study, said they believed that internet gaming will grow rapidly (see also Section 2.4).

"Sometimes when I'm playing a game on the computer I'm also on MSN... You can get games on MSN that you play against the other person."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

"Xboxes are good because they've got Xbox Live... which you can play against people all round the world, on the internet."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

A few gamers prefer one platform to another because they like the controls better, often because they are more familiar with them. Some, especially those who like strategy games, prefer a PC for the same reason.

"I don't like games on the Xbox and that because there's too many buttons and it's too fiddly, whereas on the PC it's just keyboard in one hand, mouse in the other, much easier to control."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Inability to master the controls is often quoted by parents as a reason for not being interested in games. The Nintendo Wii control is said to be modelled on a TV remote in the hope that this familiarity will make it easier to master and thereby make gaming more accessible to older audiences.

Despite its having produced some of the most popular of all games, Nintendo is mentioned less often by gamers than PlayStation and Xbox. On prompting it is sometimes regarded as pursuing a different strategy and its consoles are not subject to the same comparisons. Professionals, unsurprisingly, generally have stronger views on how it compares with the others, and see Nintendo as radically different in its approach to what gamers want.

"(Nintendo) don't see games as an extension of the real world in the way that a lot of people developing for PlayStation and 360 do. They see games as a place of pure imagination."

Games reviewer 1

Although volume and quality of sound depend on other equipment, not the console, it is worth noting briefly here that serious older gamers often have surround-sound systems.

"A very large amount of people who've got home cinema also have played games."

Professional involved in producing games 2

Loud sound effects and stereo music are said to be an important part of the gaming experience, perhaps particularly for players of war games.

1.3 Game choice and acquisition

What games they choose to acquire of course reflects what gamers *like* about gaming and this is discussed at length in subsequent sections. A number of influences on choice are briefly noted here.

Peer pressure is important amongst the young, who want to be playing what other kids their age are playing – the games everyone is talking about, often the latest games. There is kudos in having (or just knowing about) the newest games and certain games are cool, though often not for long. Boys who know the latest cheats in popular games are sought after in the playground.

“It is like when you have a puppy, everyone wants to know you. When it grows a year older they don't want to know.”

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

*“If you have **Lego Star Wars** you are cool.”*

“No.”

“But you get a bit of respect.”

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

Games, and especially new games, are discussed amongst young game players, especially boys; young people know what games their friends are playing.

“They obviously talk about it at school. They all seem to know what everyone else has got.”

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

Word of mouth is yet more important as an influence on choice amongst boys than girls. Boys typically play more games; their interest in knowing about games is keener. Social interaction related to gaming, and especially discussion of how you are doing in a game, is less common amongst girls than boys, partly because girls are typically less interested, and partly because they tend to prefer games they play on their own (eg **The Sims**) rather than games played by a group of friends (eg **FIFA Football**). A few of the girls interviewed for the research seemed faintly embarrassed to be talking about games but this was not at all the case amongst men and boys.

As well as talking about them, boys share games. If one of your friends gets a hot new game, you expect to have a go on it, or to borrow it for a day or so. Parents report that their children lend and borrow games regularly.

"If someone recommended a game, they'd generally bring it around to your house and you'd have a go of it anyway."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

Magazines are an important medium informing young players about new games; they often come with free demo discs enabling gamers to trial games. However one professional with responsibilities for marketing said that the influence of magazines is declining as the average age of gamers goes up; older, more casual gamers are less interested in buying magazines and advertising is said to be migrating to more general media.

There were very few unprompted references in these discussions and interviews to advertising or to marketing activity. Many gamers give the impression that they, or their social group, make their own minds up about which are the games worth playing. They present themselves as independent minded, not easily influenced by magazines or marketing.

"I don't rely on the review of a magazine too much... I wouldn't go out and buy a game because a magazine said it was good."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

However it is noticeable that gamers very often know about forthcoming launches of games. These are anticipated keenly, especially if they are new versions of existing favourites. Publicity about new games clearly reaches many gamers.

*"Some games are secretive. Like **Halo 3**. They only brought out one trailer. Usually you know it's going to come out and you get demos for it and stuff. But with that one there was only one trailer and you can only get it if you've got an X-Box 360."*

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

Young gamers often say they save up and buy their own games, but many games come into households as gifts from parents or other relatives. Parents come under pressure to buy the fashionable games and many have little idea what the images and action in the games are like (see also below under regulation, Section 8).

*"All their friends had that game (**GTA**). It was the buzz game of the moment."*

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

"You think - 'Oh just get her it'. You want to get them what they want, then you spend a year regretting that you ever bought the bloody thing."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

A few young respondents said they sometimes rented games from Blockbuster or the like, keeping them for a week and then exchanging them for something else. One or two said they rented games to see if they were worth buying.

In some areas there are game exchanges where gamers can trade in games they have finished or got bored with. Parents are often alarmed at the amounts spent on new games and some encourage trading.

“At one time they used to own lots of games... Now they have two games. As soon as they've played on that and played it to hell, they go and take it to the trading shop and trade it in... With Trader it does make it a lot easier. Before it was parents shelling out all the time. Now they will get two or three games and then trade them in. You aren't shelling out so much.”

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

2. **Patterns of use**

Variation was built into the sampling controls, with respondents divided between light, intermediate and heavy gamers. It is important to make clear that patterns of use vary enormously within as well as across these crude categories. Indeed the nature and level of any individual gamer's involvement with games often varies: he or she will have periods of playing intensely, and other periods when they hardly play at all; how long they play for, and what they play, varies by mood.

“It depends what mood you're in. If it's raining outside, then you'll play on it, but if it's sunny you think – 'I'm not playing on this today, I'll go out with my friends.'”

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

“You go through phases of going out of it and going back to it.”

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Generalising in the face of all this variation is hazardous but some broad patterns may be noted.

2.1 Variations by age and life-stage

For those of school age playing games has to fit around school and other activities. Portable consoles are occasionally taken to school but most school pupils play outside school hours.

"After school my son will always go to the PlayStation."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

"I go home (from school), play straightaway until I've had my tea, and then I go out until about nine and then come back here and probably play until about ... I don't know, I play until I get bored."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

The balance between gaming and other leisure pursuits, and the time devoted to gaming, varies enormously. Some parents impose restrictions of one kind or another (see Section 8.1), either limiting time on consoles, or insisting that their children engage in other activities. In general it seems that school age children play video games more in winter than in summer because outside activities compete less strongly in the colder weather.

"I mostly play it if the weather's not good because... I play out more than I play in."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

It was often said by these research respondents that one of the attractions of gaming is that it is 'something to do'; video games absorb 'free time'. Graduates quite often report that they spent more time playing whilst at university than before or since. Periods of unemployment and of illness/convalescence are likewise identified as times of exceptionally intensive play because they are clear of work obligations. Young gamers often assume that they will play less when they are older and in employment; they do not expect to have the time.

"I know people of 17 or 18 and they don't play all the time because they've got jobs to go to. They don't have very much spare time."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

Personal circumstances obviously have significant effects on both desire to play and opportunity. Gamers living with their parents and socialising with other gamers play a lot because they have the time and are stimulated by interaction with others. Romance and co-habitation are often less conducive to long periods spent gaming; other priorities intervene.

"My son is 16, so he has found ladies a bit now."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"I play less and less because my priorities are changing. When I lived at home with my mum and dad it was like my time, it was leisure time, but now I live with my girlfriend and my time revolves around getting to work, spending time with her, socialising, doing housework."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Many older gamers *make* time to play; video games are a key interest and many hours are devoted to them in evenings and at weekends. The professionals interviewed – aged from late twenties to early forties – were amongst the most enthusiastic and intense gamers in the whole sample. They of course had a professional reason for playing, but in every case it was clear that they played because they enjoyed it as well as because it was their job.

2.2 Variations by gender

Many gamers of both sexes say that girls and women are less interested in games than boys and men. Parents with both sons and daughters often report that their sons are more interested than their daughters.

"It is not the be all and end all to my daughter but to my son it is. He lives for his PlayStation."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

Most male gamers appear to regard women who are keen on games as unusual.

"Women aren't very good at wasting time. Blokes are better at wasting time."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

There were some enthusiastic female gamers in the sample but with very few exceptions they appeared to devote significantly less time to playing than the enthusiastic men, and they played a more limited range of games. Female players seem to see video games as an entertaining option for occasions when there is nothing more sociable or dynamic on offer. It does not seem that they *make time* to play as often as many male players do. Broadly, girls seem to fit gaming around other interests, whereas for many boys/men it is an important interest in itself. A consequence of this is that boys quite often get their mates round and play together, whereas gaming for girls is a way of occupying time when they are *not* with their friends. Dance and karaoke games, popular amongst some girls, are an exception to this pattern.

It did not seem from these accounts that many school girls are preoccupied with gaming as they go through their day, as boys are prone to be; many boys look forward to playing and think about strategies.

"In school you look forward to playing it after school."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

"Because you are concentrating so much on it, sometimes you find that you don't pay much attention at school because you are thinking about it too much. You can't wait to get home and play it."

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

A range of other indications suggest that gaming occupies a more important place in the minds of male than female gamers. No girls or women in the sample reported playing until they fell asleep, and then starting again as soon as they woke up, whereas many men had been through periods when they did this frequently. Partly because of the games they choose to play but also because they prioritise other activities, female gamers, with occasional exceptions, seem able to play for shorter periods. There *are* obsessive female gamers, but they appear to be rare. Whereas males are liable to get hooked and play for longer than they anticipated, the pattern of female play is more often periods of about half an hour or so. They seem better able to stop once they have reached an objective – got up to another level – and not to lock on immediately to the next objective. **The Sims** is a favourite game with girls and women (see Section 5.3) and although it can be absorbing for hours at a stretch, it also rewards a ten minute check on what is happening.

As already noted, men and boys often talk to each other about games. It is also quite common for them to help each other reach the next level; women seem much less likely to do this. Girls in general think gaming will prove to be a transitional interest; they do not expect to play when they are older, often, it seems, because they assume they will have better things to do. Boys by contrast usually think – ‘why wouldn’t I?’ – although most anticipate having less time to devote to it.

“I don’t know many girls who are older, like late teens or twenties, who play computer games, but I know a lot of men that do.”

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

Professionals believe that the bias towards males in gaming is diminishing and will continue to do so.

“The gender divide is much less marked than hitherto.”

Games reviewer 1

“More women are playing games. I think we are in a time of great change.”

Professional involved in producing games 2

They point out that the bias amongst gamers reflects the bias amongst games producers; the people devising games are much more likely to be male than female. This of course affects the type of games produced and thereby the audience for games.

“When you’ve got the majority of males in an industry, then it’s going to end up producing male type content.”

Professional involved in producing games 1

It is clear from many gamer accounts that involvement and immersion in gaming is contagious in the sense that children who grow up with older siblings or parents who play a lot are likely to play a lot themselves. Girls who become keen on gaming following the example of their brothers often become 'hard core' gamers, playing games more often associated with boys.

*"I've got three younger sisters who, because they were brought up with me, they're quite comfortable with games and will happily go and buy their own, and they'll buy gamey games, long Japanese role playing games for instance, like **Final Fantasy**, **Harvest Moon**... These are hardcore serious games that you might think are aimed at boys but in fact have a huge female popularity."*

Group of game reviewers

Although enthusiastic gamers may be more numerous amongst boys than girls, almost all children have some familiarity with games. It may be, as one professional proudly claims, that more children know how to play games than know how to read.

"The last research the BBC did, the percentage of children between five and 10 who game, both boys and girls, is 100%. Game literacy is now higher than actual literacy at that age."

Games reviewer 1

2.3 Frequency of playing and time devoted

As would be expected, frequency of play varies enormously by individual. Some gamers play regularly for an hour and a half or so a day, and then more intensively over the weekend. Others play two or three days a week, but often for five or six hours each session. Yet others may not play for weeks and then play intensively, three or four hours a day, every day for a week or so. Some younger respondents play to the limits of what they are allowed.

"I play PlayStation 2 for an hour and a half and then I play my Nintendo for about two hours."

"I try and play for as long as possible. I beg my mother."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

School pupils and university students are amongst those who play most regularly. Gamers in employment usually have a more sporadic pattern of play, though they may play for longer at any one session. For obvious reasons, evenings and weekends are generally favourite times to play for those in education or employment. Although many (especially male) gamers are prepared to *make* time to play, computer games come strongly into their own when there is nothing else to do.

"Because I play until, say, eleven, some of my friends say 'That's sad'. But what else can you do? You can't go out on a bike ride at eleven o'clock at night, so computer games are good."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

It is perhaps worth noting here that some parents do not allow their children to play in the late evening because they feel it interferes with sleep (though, and see Section 3.2, some adult gamers play in order to wind down and relax so that they can sleep).

"I don't let my son play it before he goes to bed as it keeps his mind active and it is a nightmare. They do get so wound up."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

At the other end of the day, it is not uncommon for male gamers to play as soon as they wake up, especially at weekends. Some parents say they have to intervene to prevent their children playing before going to school.

"I play as soon as I get up. It sort of wakes me up."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"At the weekends you wake up and start playing."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

Some gamers, and especially girls/women, play for short periods of half an hour or so. But many, including some girls, report having long sessions, sometimes all night. One parent in the sample said that her 15 year old son regularly played "from eleven to eleven", stopping only briefly for lunch and tea. Long sessions quite often cluster in periods when interest in a particular game is exceptionally intense, or when there are few other demands on time.

*"On **The Sims** I usually play for hours and hours. The games with levels and stuff I usually play them for half an hour at a time."*

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

"The longest I've played was... from eight in the morning until about five in the morning, with a tiny break in between... which is ridiculous."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"If you are really into a game then you really want to get on with it and you could sit there all day."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"It depends on what shifts I'm doing but I'd say a couple of hours a day or if you are on a roll then you might do an all nighter... nine or 10 hours."

*"I'm probably more. It's more like four to six hours a day because I'm really into this one game (**World of Warcraft**) at the moment."*

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

*"I wouldn't go out till I had finished. I mapped my day around **Grand Theft Auto** and if I hadn't finished a mission I wasn't going to my lectures... I would get up and the PlayStation would be on from when I fell asleep playing it and I would play it before breakfast. Normally I played about five hours a day, but if I wasn't doing anything all day then I'd play all day."*
PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

Getting into a new game commonly results in long sessions.

*"When a new game comes out, like **Grand Theft Auto**, and you've been waiting for it, you don't want to stop."*
PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

*"The first few weeks it's an obsession with me and I like to get the character (in **Halo**) up, get him strong, get him all these things he has to get. Then it'll tail off near the end."*
Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

The length of sessions is one of the concerns of parents (and see Section 7). Many are exasperated by the sheer number of hours their children devote to video games. Long sessions can create tensions with partners also.

"They can't just do it for an hour. It is either four hours or a week"
Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

*"I've been playing **Living**(?) for about six weeks now, five or six hours a day. I get an earache for that from my girlfriend... If she gives me enough stick I come off it and give her some attention."*
Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Many gamers acknowledge that they often play for longer, sometimes much longer, than they intended when they sat down. Time passes unnoticed.

"I was round my friend's house and I was playing in his computer room on the same game and I realised it was three or four in the morning... It doesn't seem like you are spending that much time on it."
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"Some games can tell you how long you have been playing overall and there was one I had played for 94 hours and that is like more than three days straight. I don't think you feel guilty but surprised. It just shows how immersed you are."
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"Time can go really quickly. There's a bit of escapism and you get caught into it and the rest of the world just sort of fades into insignificance. You can look up and it'll be dark outside."

"You think – 'I'll just play this for an hour' – and it turns into eight hours."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Getting to the next level regularly takes longer than gamers hope or expect, and this is one factor prolonging sessions.

"If I get to a certain level of a game that I can't do, I get really frustrated with myself and that usually makes me play for longer because I want to finish that level."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

For many (mainly male) gamers, gaming is straightforwardly compulsive; you play until you have to stop.

"It is easy. It's there, and you just keep doing it and doing it."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

Concerns about 'addiction' are discussed further below (see Section 6.1). It is perhaps worth noting here that gamers of both sexes sometimes seem sensitive or a little abashed about the amount of time they spend gaming. On the other hand there were in the sample many respondents in all categories, 'light', 'intermediate' and 'heavy', who had plenty of other interests they did not neglect. One 'heavy' 12 year old was a regular in the church choir, spent a lot of time in the gym and did not take his console away with him on holiday. An 18 year old in the same category played a lot of chess. Several were enthusiastic skateboarders or footballers or played in bands. 'Light' and 'intermediate' gamers often said they prioritised other activities, including watching television.

"I'd rather watch telly, but if there's nothing on telly I'll go and watch my Xbox."

"When I was younger I played every day but now I play two or three times a week because now I go out more. I usually go out every night now, go and play football, go and meet my friends and all that."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

"It is not the most important thing, but it fills the gap when I am in the house and there is nothing else to do. I won't put the computer over seeing my friends. It is not a priority... If I am in the house I am playing because there is nothing else to do really."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

2.4 Playing against the computer or with/against others

Gamers play with other people in different ways. Some play with their friends in the sense that they are in the same room and playing the same game, but not competitively – taking turns at the controls of a one-player game. Not many gamers are enthusiastic about playing like this. It is boring watching other people at the controls and they do not like waiting their turn.

“The Sims is more on your own because... there's nothing to say when it's someone else's go... Most of the time I play on my own.”

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

Having your friends around can be fun but many young gamers prefer to play on their own because there are no distractions – they can become thoroughly immersed in the game. Having people around interferes with your concentration. Being engrossed in a game seems, for many, a precious private space.

“Sometimes it's nice when you come home after you've been playing out, it's nice to sit and play by yourself. But other times, when you don't play out, it's nice to be together and talk and stuff when you're playing.”

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

“If there is a decent enough storyline to keep me entertained, I don't want to have to bother talking to other people. I just want to play.”

“And you don't want to kind of hand over the game.”

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

“I wouldn't play a game with other people. I would say – 'let's sit and watch TV'. I'd watch TV every time (if friends are there) because it's just easier.”

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Some young boys say they think it is more difficult, and therefore more engrossing, to play against the computer. It is also occasionally argued that some games are not so good when configured for more than one player.

“Generally the one player modes are better than the two player modes.”

“Football Manager is better as one player.”

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

However many gamers, and especially those in their late teens or early twenties who play sports games, notably football, love the competition and the camaraderie of beating their mates. Many play at weekends, after a session in the pub.

"Most of my games are with mates. You get more sense of enjoyment competition wise... I like to beat my mates. It is a massive competition."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

Life stage is sometimes a factor influencing whether gamers play on their own or in groups.

"When I was younger, at uni, we used to play in groups, but since I've moved out of home it's just me."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Many of these respondents played games competitively via the internet. Sometimes they were playing friends, but often, as in the Massive Multi Player On Line Games (MMPOLG) they were playing people they had never met, often living in other countries. These games, like **World of Warcraft**, are amongst those generating the most passionate interest and commitment. Parents are often reluctant to allow their children access to the internet in any form (Section 7.5.1) but young gamers familiar with internet games are often intrigued by the idea of playing people from all over the world. Knowing you are playing real people whose only connection to you is via the game, but who are as determined to beat you as you are to beat them, is, for many, a seductive and relatively new attraction of video gaming (see also further below, Section 3.4).

"In the olden days it was a very sort of selfish activity. Now it's massive, with the internet, and you can play with hundreds of people anywhere in the world at any time."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

*"It gives something different to the game when you are playing against people rather than the computer... Far more enjoyable... I could be playing against someone in Florida at **Halo** and talking to them as if they were next door."*

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

3. **What's to like? The appeal of video games**

Just as their patterns of use vary, people of course differ in what they like about video games. Many gamers have preferences for particular genres, but they often like different things at different times or in different moods; they have more than one game on the go. Some have narrower tastes than others.

"I like to play all games. I like adventure and all that lot."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"I play football games... I don't play strategy games, I don't find shoot them up and beat them up or anything like that interesting."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Gamers respond to different elements in games. Professionals emphasise this and believe that the trend is for gamers to expand their repertoires and play a variety of games.

"People look for different things in games. Lots of games are about skill and getting the highest score. Lots of games have stories so some people are literally trying to get the story out of the game in the way that they'd read a good book, to fantasise. Other people play it for social reasons, because all their mates are gamers. Other people, it's just part of an entertainment mix, purely for fun, in the same way they might pay football or read a book for fun... A bunch of people are into games because they're looking for innovation."

Group of game reviewers

"Increasingly there are fewer people who are exclusively tied to the one type of game."

Professional involved in producing games 2

There is huge variety in what games offer players, a variety plausibly comparable in extent to that offered to readers of novels. **The Sims** is a world away from **Medal of Honour** which in turn is nothing like **Geometry Wars**. On top of this, there is of course much appreciated variety *within* games.

*"A good game, like **Halo**, is where it's not all the same all the time. It's not all the same thing."*

"You want something that changes, like you can turn it on and not have the same thing that you've just done again..."

"You want to be doing something different all the time."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

The research did not catalogue all the games respondents were playing 'nowadays' but over 100 different games were mentioned. One 18 year old man reckoned he personally owned some 70 games.

In the face of this variety generalisation is again difficult but some patterns and trends emerge that are worth noting. Gender differences are prominent in what gamers like about playing just as they are in patterns of use. There are exceptions but female gamers are in general much less interested in fast action, first person shooter, 'swords and sandals', 'hack and slash' games than males. Young boys are prone to boast about having played 18+ games, but girls appear not to regard these games as cool in the same way. Girls and women rarely play football games, whereas these are popular amongst many males, and girls/women seem in general to be less interested in keenly competitive games. In part for this reason, they play less often in groups than the men. More broadly, the social rewards of gaming – talking about how you are doing, playing together, helping or beating each other – are less a part of the attraction for females than males.

It is probably fair to say that most female players – with some exceptions – seem to get less involved in playing, less ‘immersed’ than most of the males, although they are often very determined to do well in the sense of beating their best time, or getting to the next level. Their emphasis is more often on relaxation and ‘chilling out’, although many enjoy the excitement of driving/race games.

*“Puzzle games, platform type games, pretty straightforward games really. Nothing that requires too much thought... **Crash Bandicoot**, that sort of thing. Little cartoon characters running along the screen. You’ve got to collect objects and it’s quite straightforward... When I play it’s to relax a bit.”*

“It’s like your own ‘down time’ and you want to just do a bit of chilling out and you don’t want to concentrate because you’ve been working all day. It tends to be like a driving game where you can just drive, or a game where you don’t have to think a lot.”

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Many male gamers think women are different to men in their attitudes towards games. According to the men, the key differences are first that women are not as willing to devote time to playing as men, and second, that they are not interested in fighting. Men thought this explained women’s liking for ‘puzzle games’, which are an entertaining distraction for brief periods, or **The Sims**, a virtual world echoing some women’s real life interests.

“A lot of them are fighting and action games and girls want to do their hair and makeup and things, and not many games do that.”

*“**The Sims** you can dress up and all that, change outfits, build a house. Girls play **Sims**.”*

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

*“(Girls) won’t play shooting, will they? Like **Doom 3**, because it’s like pump-action shotguns in people’s faces and stuff, blowing their heads off. But they might play **Nintendo** or **Spyro** or something like that. Or **Crash Bandicoot**.”*

“Boys like more gore, don’t they? Blood and guts and stuff.”

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

“Guys definitely like football games and violent games whereas girls are into puzzle games... I do play the puzzle games. It just keeps your mind active.”

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

By their own account, and those of their parents, it seems that most female gamers play fewer games than the men and boys. With some exceptions they seem not to have an urgent curiosity about what new games will be like.

*"My son will play **Star Wars**. He could be dead in five minutes and he'll start again... And he'll play the football ones. Whereas my daughter only plays one game – **Sims**."*
Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

Some age differences also deserve brief mention. As would be expected, young gamers – males aged up to about eleven or twelve, females a few years older – enjoy fantasy contexts like **Spyro the Dragon**; they are not so desperate for 'realism'. After about twelve, male admiration often switches to more credible, 'real life' settings. Some men avoid fantasy, which they think of as childish, in favour of scarcely less likely but grittier 'realism'.

*"All **Grand Theft Auto** style games where one person is on a mission to do something, I like all them sort of games. I ain't too worried about dragons and aliens and that, it's too unrealistic. I mean I know a lot of **Grand Theft Auto** is unrealistic, but it could happen."*
PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

Whereas many adult male gamers enjoy violent action, boys aged up to about eleven are often uncomfortable about violence especially (and see Section 6.3) if it involves 'innocent people'.

3.1 Entertainment and fun

Trying to break down the appeal of video games into constituent elements, as in the sections below, risks complicating what may often be quite simple: gamers play for the fun of it. Video gamers like playing because they are curious, they persist, they find it rewards them in various ways and is, in the round, an easy, absorbing way to pass the time that compares well with the alternatives of chatting, reading, playing a board game, watching TV or a film. It is quite common for people to say, in response to the question – 'why do you play video games?' – that it is a convenient diversion, a way of not being bored.

"It is just something to do."
"Chilling out."
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

It was clear, however, that most of the gamers in the sample felt more positive about playing than this response suggests. For most of them, playing was not the default position, taken up for want of anything better, but what they actively wanted to do. This was more consistently and emphatically true of male gamers than female, but all respondents, including girls and women, played because they enjoyed it.

"It's fun."
PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"It's something to do that doesn't cost a lot and is good fun."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

"Chess is like a game you play when you're in a caravan and it's raining... Video games, people choose to do it over everything else."

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

The fun comes in a huge variety of different guises, difficult to summarise. Games like **Dance Mat** or **Sing Star** are boisterous family activities not a million miles from 'Twister'. In complete contrast, Nintendo's **Professor Kawashima's Brain Training** is entertaining and challenging after the fashion of crosswords or sudoku. Football and golf games evoke some of the pleasures of playing and watching these sports and, in the case of **Championship Manager**, of being in charge of a team. Those who like driving games regard them as successfully simulating many of the challenges of driving fast. The many games involving violent action test reflexes, and are strategically as well as tactically challenging; those who play them find them totally absorbing. These and other games afford opportunities not readily available in everyday life on a risk-free basis; however aggressive and foolhardy you are, you live to compete/play again.

Games licensed from films or toys – like **Lego Star Wars** or **Indiana Jones** – include, with varying degrees of success, some of the entertainment values of the parent property. Younger gamers often enjoy them because they are enabled to direct and even reconfigure well known characters and situations.

"Say you have a game based on a film, if you see the film it is quite good playing the game because you know all the characters, what they do. Much funnier."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

In short, before attempting to separate out various strands in their appeal, it is important to emphasise that video games are played for fun, though what gamers regard as fun obviously varies.

3.2 Escape and relaxation

Gamers are no more reflective about their reasons for playing video games than people normally are about watching television or pursuing any other leisure activity. Under interrogation many come to the view that gaming provides an effective escape from the preoccupations of everyday life. Video games demand active engagement – you have to concentrate because you are in charge. Giving your attention to games means that other concerns are reliably edged aside.

"It puts everything else invisible to you, apart from the computer game. So you forget about your mum and dad telling you off for coming in late."

"It's like you're here and you can forget about everything else."

"It's a bit like escapism. You just forget all about your class work, and say – right, I'm doing this for half an hour."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"It's like reading a book... You sort of escape... It takes your mind off anything else. It takes your mind off work. It helps you to switch off."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Being interactive makes video games, for many gamers, a more effective distraction than television. Gamers are actively playing rather than passively watching, and therefore more involved.

"TV – if I've been at work I'll just sort of sit there and stare at it and not really watch it. Whereas if I'm (playing a game)... it's occupying your mind and so you're not just staring and thinking about things you've got to do the next day."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Their degree of involvement is, typically, intense. They are totally absorbed, often for long periods.

"His (husband's) concentration span seems endless during a game."

PD16 F 30-40 C2DE Light Edinburgh

Many gamers say they play to relax or relieve stress. Playing helps them wind down by chasing away their preoccupations and transporting them to another place.

"It is a nice way to unwind. Some of the games anyway."

WHAT SORT OF GAMES?

"Where you shoot people."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

"It's good if you just want to do something to wind down after work."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

"I find it quite stress relieving."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Playing games is often said to be more relaxing, as well as more distracting, than television. In part this is because it holds your attention better, in part because you are in charge and not subject to the twists and turns of a plot.

"I find it more relaxing than TV. Games, you can do what you want."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

Games have a structure that players become familiar with; however fast and furious the action, the game follows its internal structure – it obeys its rules. A video game, even if you are losing, has reliability, even predictability, to a greater degree than television or social interaction. For all its frustrations, a game is a known quantity and to this extent constitutes a safe place to be.

"When you're playing a game, you know what it is and you know it's quite enjoyable. Whereas you can sit and watch telly and there'll be nothing on and you're just sort of flicking... It's a different kind of relaxing."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

One professional interviewed laid great emphasis on this quality of games. Whereas life is liable to be capricious, games reliably reward concentration and effort. There is a reassuringly consistent justice and fairness about games that makes them a comforting refuge.

"Everything is beautiful and you get to be a hero, and if you do everything right then everything will go right. This is one of the most seductive things about games. What is really fantastic about games is not flying cars and spaceships, it's... the way you were always told the world was going to be, and then it isn't, whereas in games, if you do this preparation work that you're supposed to do, the thing you're trying to do will go well and you'll get the credit for it. One of the reasons that adults find them so engaging is that most of us have lives where that really isn't true. Where you do everything right and it still goes wrong. Or it does go right and the credit goes to someone else.

*"If I have a bad day and something goes wrong... People letting you down, things not coming out right, I do think – I can't wait to get home and play **Warcraft** for four hours. There will still be victories and defeats but everything will be as it should be. Everything will be fair, measurable. If I do well, I'll get prizes."*

Games reviewer 1

A session on a game is said by some to be a good way of calming down if you feel angry, and this works even if the game you are playing is violent.

"Sometimes when I get really angry I go upstairs and play some games and it calms me down."
PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

One gamer in the sample, a businesswoman, played regularly in hotels, saying video games helped her relax before going to bed.

We should note in this context that many gamers *look* far from relaxed when they are playing. Often they are not only concentrating intently but physically alert and active – bending with their bodies, stiffening to avoid crashes, on edge. The feeling of relaxation, of having a break, comes from immersion and not thinking about anything else. It is more about de-stressing than passive relaxation and relies on the principle that a change is as good as a rest.

Of course not everyone's priority is to relax; many are looking for stimulation.

"Playing a game would be more active. When I want to relax I'll just watch something on telly."
PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Gamers look to games as a means of escape not only *from* ordinary preoccupations but also *to* activities and environments that are far from ordinary. Playing games enables them to do exciting, exotic things they cannot do in real life.

"Playing games is about escaping – doing stuff that you can't ordinarily do."
*"Yeah. Like in **GTA**, I like to lose myself in the game and think – Oh I can shoot that person. And sort of go round beating people up."*
"Yes, or just steal a car."
"It's the fun of knowing that you can do those things in a game, but obviously you can't in real life."
PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

*"It's (**RuneScape**) just good. You feel in control. Something you can't do in real life, going round shooting people, but something that's fun."*
PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"What you can't do in real life you can do in a computer game."
Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

In the context of gaming, stimulation and relaxation can amount to the same thing, not least because however perilous and exciting the action, games players enjoy immunity. Gaming offers an escape from responsibility; there are no consequences.

*"It's taking time out from reality."
"It's something you can't do in real life. You can't go
round shooting Germans."
"It takes the stress out of the working day, takes you away
from reality for a couple of hours."
Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett*

*"You can't actually go outside your house with a very
large gun... It is about doing something that you can't do.
It is like racing games. You can't drive a souped up Golf
around here."
"And it doesn't matter if you crash."
"It is like living in a dream."
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham*

Of course gamers often want different things at different times, depending on their mood.

*"It is your mood... If I'm in more of an aggressive mood,
then I would try and beat my time on the driving game.
Whereas if I was not in an aggressive mood I would play
Mario or something like that."
"Probably also it's the kind of day you've had at work. If
I've had a mad busy day at work then I don't want to
come home and play something I've got to put any
thought into. I'd just play a straightforward platform
game. Whereas maybe if I've been at home and I'm
bored... then I'll play something a bit deeper."
PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester*

A danger for many video game players, perhaps more male than female, is that they play with a view to winding down and then get caught up in it, playing on longer than they intended.

*"You get caught up in it and end up staying up too late.
Then I do get a bit annoyed with the fact that I've got lost
in it and have to get up in the morning... But I don't ever
think – 'Oh, that was a waste of time' – because that's
what the computer game's there for. It's sort of to switch
off, so I don't feel I'm wasting my time on it."
PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester*

Although relaxation is clearly a benefit for many, it is also quite common for gamers, especially amongst the young, to end a session feeling agitated and wound up. Games can be very frustrating and gamers quite often need some less demanding recreation – watching TV – to settle them down.

"Watching a TV programme you can sit there and relax but I can't relax when I'm playing a game, because I'm constantly focusing and getting agitated when I can't do something."

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

"Before I go to bed I watch telly for a while. When I play games, they can get me quite frustrated and agitated and I can't get to sleep."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

"In the evening, before I go to bed, I would probably rather watch a film, because watching a film you can just lie back and put your feet up."

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

"I find that when I play a game I can't go to sleep straight away afterwards. Your head is racing, buzzing. Sometimes it can take up to an hour. Sometimes I watch TV after a game, to relax."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

It is perhaps worth emphasising that whilst a *benefit* of playing is often identified as relaxation, the *motivation* to play at any particular time generally seems more dynamic than this suggests – a thirst for excitement, a need for stimulation, response to a challenge. Referring back to section 3.1, many people play games because they are exciting and fun and they get very caught up in them.

3.3 A challenge

Video games can be difficult and gamers find it satisfying to work their way through them, attaining different levels, and getting better at it. Many gamers play because they enjoy responding to the challenge games set. Television and films are not challenging in the same way – you yourself are not doing anything, not affecting outcomes – and do not deliver a comparable sense of achievement.

"(If) I've completed what I wanted to complete, or beaten my time... I would feel more of a sense that I've actually done something... Whereas if you just start watching TV I don't suppose you feel you achieve a great deal."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

"It's like watching TV but there is a sense of achievement."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Many games have levels, and levels within levels. Games are therefore punctuated with thresholds of various kinds and this is of course one of the reasons they are as compulsive as they are. Players are reluctant to stop until they reach the next level, and absolutely hate to stop if they have not got to a

point where the game can be saved (because they do not want to have to go over the same ground again). Completing a game, and climbing to the next level, demand concentration and skill. Failure is frequent and frustrating; success accordingly produces a feeling of triumph. Boys in particular respond to the challenge set by games, in part because their standing amongst their friends benefits from completing games.

"You think – right, I'm going to do this... It's just sort of determination to finish the game – 'I've completed that'. It's the satisfaction of completion."
PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

"It's like it's your own work. You've got something to show for what you've done... If it takes a while, it really is a sense of achievement (getting to another level or finishing a game)."
PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"It's nice to say – Yes, I've finished that game'... The sense of achievement you get from it – the bragging rights to sort of turn round of say – 'yeah, I finished that one, that was easy'."
PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Young gamers are often in a hurry to finish games (so that they can announce this) and it is pursuing this goal that keeps them playing over unusually long sessions.

*"When I was younger I used to lock myself away when I got a new game, until it was completed... When you played one of those games like **Donkey Kong** or **Mario**, you had to say – 'I completed it in two weeks' – and if you said you'd done it in five days you'd have to bring your memory card to show you'd done it in five days."*
PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

It is occasionally argued that being in a rush to finish is a mistake; you do not give yourself time to savour the game.

"You can complete a game but you are in a rush to complete it and then you can't enjoy it. I've completed some games in a couple of days but I haven't really got to know the game and I haven't really enjoyed it. I've just rushed it."
PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

The intensity of the feeling of triumph gamers get if and when they complete a game depends on both the individual and the game. Some gamers seem to enjoy the game play without responding very strongly to the challenge of getting to the end. The degree to which games have a linear progression from beginning to end (or an end at all) also varies and this clearly affects motivation to complete. Some games, notably **Grand Theft Auto**, include

such a rich variety of different 'missions' and 'side plots' that getting to the end may seem relatively unimportant. People go back to **GTA** but are less likely to return to a game like **Tomb Raider**, with its stronger narrative structure.

*"Once you've done it you just put the game away and that's it – never get it out again... For me **Tomb Raider** is finished now."*

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

There is some evidence, from adults more than children, that the sense of triumph gamers get when they complete a game can be rather fleeting. It feels great the moment you get there but can quickly give way to anticlimax, even a feeling of sheepishness that you have devoted such an amount of time, and felt so triumphant, when it is 'only a game'.

We should note that the challenge set by a particular game is renewed if it evolves into a new game. Gamers often lock on to series of games; they find sequels are often an improvement on the original.

*"There's a lot of games that get updated, like **Pro Evolution** and it's not that I think the first one is crap, just that I think the latest one is the best. **Boxing 99** was crap but **Boxing 2004**... Every year they get feedback, the technology improves."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

The ease or difficulty of making progress in a game is one of the most delicate judgements games designers and producers have to make. If a game is too difficult, gamers get bored and give up. If it is too easy there is no challenge, no satisfaction and no kudos. To be successful, a game needs to have the right level of difficulty (and plenty of variety).

*"It's got to be challenging, yes, but not too challenging. A nice in-between somewhere."
"I need it to be hard so that I can't just do it straightaway, so that it takes a bit of my time, but not so much that you have to mess around getting cheats and things like that."*

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

*"It's good to be difficult, but not too hard... Easy games are very irritating. There was a game called **Star Wars** and that was just fun, I guess, but very repetitive and it was just too easy and you didn't find it a challenge."*

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Video games of course set different sorts of challenges and gamers differ in what motivates them. Some players respond to the clarity of scores; a better score, or a quicker time, is a straightforward and unarguable indication of improved performance.

"With driving games I have to beat my time, and then I have to beat my time again and again, whereas with a fighting game it just sort of occupies me for a bit and then I get bored with doing the same sort of thing."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Two and multi-player games offer more conventional player-on-player competitive challenges; players fight to overcome each other rather than just 'the computer', or the hazards/tests built into the game, though these of course provide the competitive structure. Whether or not gamers prefer the challenge of the computer to the challenge of competitors seems to vary. Progressing, on your own, through the labyrinthine intricacies of a game generates intense involvement over long periods amongst many gamers. Many of the young in particular seem to prefer this to competing against one another, where the satisfaction of beating your opponent(s) is perhaps more ordinary. Gradual migration away from first person shooter to sports games appears to be quite common amongst adult male gamers and it is widely agreed that sports games are more fun if you are playing against mates rather than against a computer.

"I liked going around blowing everything up and shooting people. Now it's golf."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Once you complete a one player game – 'defeat' the computer – that is usually it; gamers tend to put the game away and play a new one. If you have a human competitor, interest is often more sustained, not least because the outcome may be different next time.

*"I prefer a game where it's me versus you, rather than me versus the computer. I prefer to be sitting next to someone trying to beat them... In **Grand Theft Auto**, once you've beaten the computer you've beaten the computer, but with interactive games with people, like you never truly beat them unless you beat them, beat them, beat them, and they never ever beat you."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

Two or multi-player games, especially sports games, can be more fun, because of the interaction with other gamers and the competitive ambience, but winning delivers a different sort of satisfaction to completing a difficult game on your own.

"With multi-player, it's just more of the fun side... It's more interaction and knowing that when you get killed it's irritating but when you kill them it's just as irritating for them."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

However, as already noted, MMPOL games generate particularly intense involvement and this despite the fact that they are usually on-going, continually evolving and therefore impossible to complete. Clearly the challenge of on-line games is of a different order; the balance is often towards frustrating opponents as opposed to working out a puzzle (though these objectives are far from dissonant).

"The (internet) games change every time. It's not just the same repetitive tactics that the computer uses. Every one is different and does it in a slightly different style... And it's more fun to know that you're not just against the computer but you're actually irritating someone specifically."

"One-player is more of a challenge, it's more of a puzzle, you've got to think your way through it, whereas on line the game is simple – you just annoy other people."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

An attraction of online internet-based games is that the greater number of adversaries/participants produces a greater variety of game play. Intense involvement also seems to result, at least in part, from reluctance to jeopardise hard won positions vis-à-vis colleagues and competitors. A good player makes his/her position in the game stronger by playing well and playing a lot. If you do not put in the effort your position is liable to deteriorate; the temptation is to keep playing to avoid this.

3.4 Social benefits

Many parents and indeed gamers (see Sections 6.1 and 7.1) think of video games as profoundly antisocial; people closeted in their rooms for hours, often on their own, glued to a screen. In many households, the sociable thing is to watch TV together. By contrast, if you feel like being on your own you play a video game.

"Some nights you want to be with people, talk and watch Eastenders, and some nights you just want to be on your own and play games."

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

There are however significant social benefits to playing. Some of these belong straightforwardly to games such as **Sing Star** and the various 'dance mat' games which are designed to be played amongst family or friends and which can reportedly be relied on to generate an exuberant atmosphere. These games are clearly very different from the other main genres and we do not know how popular they are, although many of these respondents knew of them and a sizeable minority had played them at one time or another.

*"The **Pop Idol** game – we have so much fun with that, such a laugh."*

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

As noted in the previous section, games generate a lot of conversation and social interaction, particularly amongst boys. Gaming is, for many, a major hobby that takes up a lot of spare time. They often play on their own but they also talk about it, share games, share 'cheats', boast about their prowess, compete against each other, help and deride each other, etc.

"If you complete a game you go into school and brag about it."

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

"They used to come in (to school) with print outs of cheats and you always used to be swapping them and things like that."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

Games in two or multi-player mode bring gamers together for what can be a boisterous social occasion, perhaps especially if the game is football. (Moreover, once you have got the console and the game, the evening's amusement is free.)

"It's a lot cheaper (than going out). We'd get eight to 10 people round, have a soccer evening... Play the world cup, the whole tournament – four or five hours... First person shooter games are more setting yourself individual challenges. With football you get your mates round and it's social."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Some gamers certainly prefer playing against another person rather than against the computer because they are better motivated, or think of it as more fun. But the social benefits are important also. When players are at the same location, each intently concentrating on the same activity, even non-sports games can generate an exciting collective atmosphere. One professional thought playing 'cooperatively' in this way was video gaming at its very best.

*"There's a game called **Halo** on Xbox and my mate has two TVs. We were playing in two separate rooms and it was four against four. If you're playing on one screen you can see where everyone is, what their game plan is. It became like a real battle, eight people, two TVs, two rooms, it was brilliant. The atmosphere was amazing."*

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

*"The most fun I used to have with (my 17 year old son) playing games was when we had two pcs and we could play cooperatively. That, for me, is when gaming is the most fun, when you've got like an office and everybody is playing **Quake** and you can hear everybody and you're shouting"*

Professional involved in producing games 1

This point may not belong under the heading of 'social benefits', but one or two respondents who regularly played games like **World of Warcraft** over the internet referred to 'making friends with people you never meet'. One professional interviewed had friends she 'knew' only in their gaming roles, and there were others who said they felt they got to know other players 'really well'.

*"It (**World of Warcraft**) is genuinely mentally stimulating. I have good friends now whom I've met among games people, whose weddings and christenings I've been invited to, across the world. We have this kind of shared experience that you'd have no other way."*
Games reviewer 1

As video games producers continue to exploit the growth in processing power and offer a wider variety of games, and the market consequently broadens, non-players may cease to see gaming as odd or geeky. Gaming may be 'normalised' and come into the mainstream alongside films, television and the internet.

3.5 Graphics

The quality of graphics attracts a lot of comment amongst gamers. The steady improvement in their quality over the last two decades is regularly noted. New consoles are expected, by professionals as well as gamers, to deliver yet better graphics and this contributes importantly to their desirability; many players, perhaps particularly the young, are excited by the prospect of playing on PlayStation 3 because they expect the graphics to be 'amazing'. Anticipated improvements in graphics are a reason why many gamers expect to go on being interested in video games as they get older.

The brilliance of a game's graphics is quite often quoted as a reason for liking a game and graphics are a frequent talking point among the young; good graphics are cool.

'Good' applied to graphics often means 'realistic'. This word is adequate shorthand but we need to note that not all games are aiming at realism – they depict creatures and contexts that do not exist in the real world. Good graphics in this sort of fantasy game mean polished, not pixilated, eye-catching, cool. **Lego Star Wars** is an example of a game with what are regarded as excellent graphics that are not aiming at realism.

However, the most remarked development in graphics over the years has been the progression towards a more filmic quality, so that people, scenery, cars, weapons, etc, look more real, more like film, less 'cartoony' (though many believe graphics are always and easily distinguished from film, see Section 6.3). Within this overall merit of 'realism', good graphics are appreciated in slightly different ways. A few games are admired for their

beauty; the characters and settings are lovely to look at. Beauty seems to be admired particularly by the heaviest gamers, among them those professionally involved with video games.

"There are different reasons for wanting to carry on. It might be playing against another real life opponent, or else the game is so beautiful you have to carry on and see the next thing."

Professional involved in producing games 1

*"In **Okami** the whole thing looks like a Chinese brush water painting. It doesn't look like anything you have ever seen before. It is staggeringly beautiful. You play a wolf who's a sun god who has taken wolfish form and he has been given the ability to use his tail as a paintbrush and the things he paints can become real. It's a fabulous game!"*

Games reviewer 1

Most games, however, are not aiming at beauty, and it is the quality of detail that attracts admiration – footballers whose faces you recognise and who sweat; walls that splinter and crack before disintegrating impressively when the stone hits them. In some adventure games it is the scope of the settings that impresses – huge vistas of elaborately furnished landscapes.

"It's not just the violence it's the beauty of it, because if you look at a game that's been really well done and is realistic, I appreciate that."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

*"The graphics on (**FIFA**)... the facial characteristics of the players, the tackling and dribbling skills. They are very realistic... It's revolutionary how they actually are mimicking the players... With **FIFA 06** on the TV screen some people think they are actually watching Match of the Day, it's that realistic now. The sound and commentary etc. That is what's attracting people."*

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

*"**Unreal Tournament**. It's set in the future. That's good because there's loads of weird types of guns and everything."*

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

Good graphics are quite often said to intensify involvement. The feeling from professionals as well as gamers is that the more realistic scenes and action look, the more gripping they are.

"The graphics matter... If they look a bit more real I get more into it."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

*"People want a much more immersive experience and the next generation consoles are going to enable this to happen. In **Fight Night**, the boxing game, the characters are so detailed that when someone is struck sweat flies off them. There's a much greater connection between the player and the game, the emotional content of the game."*

Professional involved in producing games 1

Gamers adjust to a higher quality of graphics quickly and soon take it for granted; the graphics on older games and consoles rapidly become strikingly deficient.

There is an argument that improved graphics will not inevitably result in images being more easily confused with reality. Currently graphics are treated as mere representations of something real. The better they are, the more they invite scrutiny and comparison with real things, and the more they are identified as unreal.

"The more real a face becomes the easier it becomes for people to compare it with a natural face, to its detriment, rather than accepting that it's just an abstract representation of a face."

Group of game reviewers

Professionals focus on different things when considering where greater verisimilitude (if that is what it is) will lead. Some appear to feel that games developers will have to become more restrained in their inclusion of violent action if graphics start to look like film.

"The photorealism is beginning to become apparent now with the next gen consoles. There's less and less differentiation between what games look like and what films look like, but then you've got the interaction of the game... There is going to be a greater need for games developers to look at what people can actually do in the game, because the immersion is so much deeper now... Up until now, if you shot a character in human form on a PlayStation 1 or a pc it's very like pixilated, and it doesn't have that visual impact of a film. Now it's getting to the point where the stuff that you can do, like facial expressions, characters that track you with their eyes, it's becoming really photo real development. There's going to be a much greater level of immersion in it, so that comes with extra responsibility."

Professional involved in producing games 1

On the other hand, better technology, including better graphics, (together with greater familiarity and social acceptability generated by the passage of time) is expected to expand the audience for video games, and a broader audience may mean a smaller proportion of violent games.

"The more the market expands... the more the inclination towards violence in games is going to be diluted. A more diverse audience requires a more diverse experience."

Group of game reviewers

3.6 Storylines

In comparison with graphics, storylines – clear and compelling narrative progression – are less often mentioned amongst criteria for assessing games and seem relatively unimportant to many gamers. The tension and suspense in gaming usually arises from the immediate situation, rather from speculation about the ultimate resolution. With a few striking exceptions in this sample, notably among the professionals, it is a sense of progression through the game, as distinct from a strong linear storyline, that is appreciated. Gamers like clear and coherent objectives and do not like games when it is unclear how to progress, or when they seem to get stuck doing similar sorts of things. The best games combine a sense of progression with a lot of variation (see also discussion of **GTA**, Section 5.1).

WHAT DO YOU WANT IN A GAME?

"A good story, good game play."

"Something that grabs you as well, something that keeps updating itself and good artificial intelligence from the computer so you don't get bored doing the same thing."

Just a bit of variation in the game."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

Unlike the sort of involvement generated by most novels, gamers often do not care much, when they are in the middle of a game, how it will ultimately end. They are absorbed by the detail of what they are doing at each stage, and the attendant excitement, rather than speculating about the end.

"A lot of people are not looking for story, they're looking for thrills and kicks."

Group of game reviewers

The storyline in games is of course constrained by the structure through which the gamer has to pass. In **Tomb Raider** what you are trying to do is unlock the inevitable narrative; you are not held by the story but by the problem solving. This is not to say that the story is wholly without interest or importance. Players of **Tomb Raider**, as they move through the levels and travel around the world, may well wonder how everything will be resolved at the end. Games like **Final Fantasy** have numerous successive incarnations each of which sustains and develops the story. This story clearly contributes to the character and appeal of the game. Nevertheless it is the immediate challenges that seem to keep gamers playing; they are not gripped by wanting to know what happens but by what they have to do to make progress in the game.

Some professionals – and those in this sample all devoted a lot of time to playing games – speak rather differently about the interest of storylines than most gamers do (Section 3.9). Ordinary gamers seem not to get very involved in stories, in part because they do not care much what happens except in so far as this affects either the excitement of the action, or their progress through the game.

3.7 Skills and education

It is often said that playing video games improves hand eye co-ordination and reaction times.

“You’ve got to have good hand-eye co-ordination, and that’s what it teaches you.”

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

“Probably it teaches you, when you’re younger, that sort of hand-eye co-ordination and different things.”

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Playing video sport games is sometimes said to develop skills ‘in real life’.

*“I think my football actually got better by playing **FIFA**.”*

*“With positional play in football you learn a lot from **FIFA**... They are written by pros so you learn a lot from it. You learn a lot about golf as well.”*

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

And some players think that driving games may improve their driving, claiming that games are used by professionals as training or to warm up.

*“**Formula One**, I think my reflexes, because it’s so realistic with the mirrors... The real Formula One guys, whilst they are waiting to go out on their test lap, they are actually playing the games because the tracks are so realistic.”*

“Well, it’s what airline companies use to train pilots.”

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

However, it is also occasionally acknowledged by adult players that the potential learning from many games has little or no relevance to real life.

“If I was going to storm an embassy there’s a few things I now know, about grouping people, taking them into the shadows. But that’s not very useful is it?”

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Younger players quite often argue, not always very convincingly, that they learn useful things from games.

*“You do get a lot of knowledge from it, because, like on **Moonscape**, it tells you how to do things, how to fish, in real life, how to make certain things. It tells you how to make steel, and cakes and how to mine. You wouldn't want to go mining for clay or anything, but it tells you how to make stuff.”*

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

From this perspective, games can be regarded as educational because they broaden experience of what life is like, whether 'ordinary life' (**The Sims**) or the lives of people you would not normally meet (**GTA**).

*“It (**The Sims**) shows you how you could grow up in real life... It can show you that if someone gets a really good job and you get a rubbish job you can always go higher.”*

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

*“People that live on the edge, like gangsters and stuff, you don't really hear about them. If you play it (**GTA**), then you know.”*

“You learn about stuff.”

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

People who spend a lot of time playing games sometimes refer, not to learning useful things – they acknowledge that what they learn has no relevance to real life – but to mental stimulation. Games are complex and to play them well you have to learn a lot about them and the world they create.

*“My brain actually enjoys the process of gaming. People like learning and games make learning colossally entertaining. It's just that most of what they teach you is meaningless twaddle... About **Warcraft**... the things I know, the geographies I could describe, the principles of its alchemy, the ideas of its history... My brain loves soaking it all in... There is a great deal of reality in the challenge and the achievements and the skill required and all the rest of it. All these things are real but they operate within this completely make believe environment that has no impact on your real life whatsoever.”*

Games reviewer 1

It is of course possible to learn how to play chess or bridge by playing electronic versions. Some games, for example **Caesar**, are quite confidently identified as educational and someone who has spent many hours playing it may well know more about the Roman Empire than someone who has not. However, references to skill development, and to educational value, often seem a little desperate; in the interview situation some players want to make the case but often seem not to really believe it themselves. They play games for diversion and enjoyment and not at all with the idea of learning things or getting better at anything other than the game itself. It is worth noting however that non-gamers, notably parents, are often deterred from playing because they *lack* the necessary skills. Acquiring skills with a view to

applying them elsewhere in life is not a motive for playing, but having a go and discovering that your level of skill is hopelessly inferior to that of your offspring certainly discourages many parents.

3.8 Humour

Humour does not immediately stand out among the qualities players seek from video games, and many games seem, on the face of it, to be devoid of humour. The action, and the contexts, of many first-person shooters, and platform games, are intended to be dramatic and exciting rather than amusing.

However, when they are asked why they enjoy playing, gamers often say that games are 'a real laugh'. The humour usually arises from the acute unreality of events – players become involved in actions that are absurdly remote from their everyday life and this absurdity makes them laugh. Sometimes it is accentuated by age inappropriateness. For example:

"My brother was playing on it once and he was in a car with a prostitute and he was only about nine or ten... It makes you laugh... If it was in a film, it's like dirty, but in a computer it's funny."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

Gamers do things in games that are flamboyantly dissonant with their own self images and also with anyone's notion of reasonable behaviour. This outrageousness can obviously be amusing.

"It is quite funny... The ambulance comes along and then you beat up the ambulance drivers."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

In many games aimed at younger players the humour is of a different sort – cartoon like characters with appealing ways whose cuteness generates an on-going light-heartedness, charmingly comical rather than laugh-out-loud; **Spyro the Dragon** is an example. Children are occasionally said by parents to laugh when they are playing **Lego Star Wars**. The appeal is more in the area of amusement than emotional engagement.

IF I AM WATCHING YOUR (SEVEN YEAR OLD) SON PLAY, WILL I HEAR HIM LAUGH?

*"Yes. Anyone playing a game of **Star Wars** will laugh all the time. Definitely."*

WILL HE GO THROUGH A GAMUT OF DIFFERENT EMOTIONS?

"That I'm less sure about. Not to a very great degree."

Professional involved in producing games 2

Adults can apparently amuse themselves in games like **Star Wars** by distorting the iconic characters and the well known storylines.

How distinctive is the appeal of video games?

A strong element in the image of video games is that they are new and moreover, as the technology advances, continually renewing themselves. This newness contributes importantly to what seems to be a general sense amongst gamers that video games are different to other recreations, in a category of their own. This distinctiveness also of course reflects other key features of the gaming experience: it is often solitary; it can be very time consuming; it relies on input from the player, and players influence events. When we asked our respondents what gaming was 'like', many had to think for a while; players seem not, of their own accord, to relate video games to other amusements/interests.

The most common comparisons are with television and film, not least because these are also screen based. Young players perhaps see games as like TV or films to a greater extent than adults; early video games of course were nothing like either TV or film.

People make a variety of points about how video games compare with films. They are more *active* because they depend on input from the player, who has to respond for the game to work. Films are relatively passive, because you just sit there and watch them without doing anything.

"I'd say it was a form of escapism in order to do something without actually doing something. It sounds lazy but it is like watching a film but more than that because it requires interaction. You can sit there for a couple of hours. Some people say 'come around, we'll watch DVDs or a box set or something'. It's just the same as that but it is more involved. It responds to the way that you respond so you feel that you are doing something more than sat still."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

"It's more lifelike than a film. You're doing something, not sitting on your arse watching a film."

"More involving."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Because games are interactive, they are, it is often argued, more involving than film. Someone playing a game cannot be passive and let the action wash over them, as they might in a film.

"With a film you're literally just sitting watching, whereas in the game you've got some control over what happens so you get more involved in it... It's like taking part in it... It's more exciting... If you're watching a film and the police have just pulled whoever it was in the film up – it's

a film at the end of the day. Whereas if you're playing a game and it happens to you, it's a lot more like – 'Oh God!' It is exciting and it scares you a little bit more... With a film you just sit back and watch it, you don't really think about it... You're not involved so it doesn't really matter that much to you.'

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

"In a video game you've got control over what happens. You control whether that person in the game lives or dies. In a film all you're doing is passively watching it."

"Instead of watching the movie you're in the movie."

"But there's no consequences."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Games can deliver a sense of achievement beyond anything a film can give you:

*"You've got a lot more power. You are in control. In a film, at the end everything is back to equilibrium. In a game every time you start off, unless you're amazing, you're going to die, and then you're going to re-start it. If I watched **Grand Theft Auto San Andreas** I'd think it was a good film, but if I played it then it was because of me that it all happened. I won because of me, whereas in a film it was because of the characters that this happened."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

They are less predictable than films (because what happens depends on the player):

"You haven't got any control of the films and most of the time you know what is going to happen anyway."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

Though they might not be as relaxing:

"It is good watching a film because it is nice to sit down and put your feet up... But you can't do whatever you want. You just watch it."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

Similar points are made about how games compare with watching television. A television audience is passive, not 'in control' and therefore less involved.

"I'd say it's a bit like watching telly but you're in control."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

"It's better than telly because you have to use your brain more."

"You have to get involved."

"It's a challenge."

"With TV you can sit there and drift off but when you're playing computer games it is more involving."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

For many gamers, being able to influence the action makes games more exciting and fulfilling than TV:

"It's like watching a soap opera that you are actually involved in."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

These comparisons with films and television perhaps underrate the appeal of games as puzzles – riddles to decipher.

"Single-player games, it's a bit of an adventure as you're going through different stages... It's not like reading a book, it's not like watching a film. I would say it's like a puzzle."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Rarely, games are compared with board games. Women are perhaps more inclined than men to see games as a simple amusement, the successor to non-computer games.

"It's like playing a board game... It's all playing a game at the end of the day, it's just that one's computerised and one's not."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Although they are often compared with films, especially in relation to the depiction of violence, parents occasionally see toys as a more apt comparison than films; games and toys are *played with*, you can do things with them, whereas films you just watch.

IS IT MORE THE EQUIVALENT OF A TOY OR A FILM OR...?

"Toy."

"Yes, a toy."

"It is a toy as you play with it, and you manipulate it and you do what you want to do with it... A film they can't change it or make it their own."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

But most parents see little affinity between these electronic games and what they think of as toys. For many of them, games seem threateningly new, technical and mysterious, dissonant with the safe world of toys.

It seems to be very rare for gamers to see games as comparable to novels. The time devoted to each is perhaps roughly comparable but, as noted above (Section 3.6), storylines do not contribute strongly to the appeal of games and books are of course not interactive. Moreover it is not clear that there are great games that rest in the mind, in the way that novel readers would say great novels do, or that expand gamers' notions of what it is to be human. Games are often exciting and generate intense involvement but they seem not to have the emotional range or depth of novels, films or TV.

It is difficult to know this for sure, but gamers appear to lose awareness that they are playing a game less readily than filmgoers lose awareness that they are watching a film. The same relative failure to surrender to an imagined world may even be true if gamers are compared with readers of novels. For a number of reasons, the imagination is not engaged to the same degree, or in the same way; the storyline development is usually weak, the characters have little depth and the player retains a vital degree of control – if the worse happens and he/she dies, they can always go back and start that section again.

For many gamers, playing can therefore be a rather cold experience; interactivity generates a keen sense of involvement because you are 'in control' but the corollary is an emotional shallowness. You care about winning, or improving your performance relative to last time, but you do not care much about what happens otherwise.

We have to note that there are emphatic exceptions to this pattern. Some of the professionals interviewed argued that games are potentially very emotionally involving.

"People are emotive beings and games are trying to create emotion."

Professional involved in producing games 1

A games reviewer said that she often found games moving. Because games are interactive, players get used to being with other characters, or having certain capacities; when the game moves on and the situation changes, gamers have to change as well. Change is often felt on an emotional level, and games can make players sad, especially by creating a sense of loss. In the view of this dedicated gamer, interactivity makes games much better at creating a feeling of loss than either films or books. For her, playing games is often an emotionally rich experience, and she sees implications in this for the issue of violence in games.

"There is a big debate about how extensive is the emotional range of games. Loss is one of the things it can do quite easily because it can give you things that mean something to you, then take them away.."

"This truism which is everywhere, that games won't be taken seriously as an art form or as a creative endeavour, until they can make people cry. But only people who don't play games say that, because people who play and love games blub all the time! Everybody I know who really involves themselves in a game, and has been doing that for many years, has had something that has got to them. Tears of loss, or regret. Absolutely. The emotional stakes are so high in a game because you are actively connected to what's going on. The games industry is so boxed into a corner because it can't talk about this stuff without leaving itself open to worrying questions. If you say that a game can be so emotionally powerful it makes

you cry, then how are you saying that a violent game has absolutely no effect on the person playing it? You can't have it both ways, so the games industry clams up about the whole thing and says it's all just a bit of fun. I know that is flatly not true. If it was true then nobody would play games! They are difficult and frustrating and they ask you to learn colossal amounts of abstract information that is of no use to you whatsoever. They humiliate you. If games weren't doing something really quite magical in people's brains, making you feel things that you didn't feel anywhere else, then you wouldn't see people playing them with the devotion they do.

*"The last game I cried at was **Okami**, simply because it was so beautiful. It was magical, extraordinary, like nothing you've ever seen, a world you couldn't possibly imagine... It wasn't the narrative. It wasn't that I had accomplished something. It wasn't all the things that people tend to talk about in well known games. It wasn't anything I could explain but it just really stung me and gave me one of those little moments."*

Games reviewer 1

*"There's a point at the end of the game (**Shadow of the Colossus**) where everything you think is going to happen has happened, but it hasn't, and the horse is killed in a rock fall. It's just devastating... The impact it has on you. This has been your only friend and companion who has helped you and protected you. I really didn't see it coming. He just dies, then you are alone but you have to keep going. Nothing else can do that. There are countless extraordinary books that are extraordinarily moving, but they can't do that. Films and books can't make you lose anything. You can read about someone else's loss, you can empathise in a book, but a book can't ever take anything from you. But that game took my horse from me. He was my horse. He was my friend by that stage!*

"In that game if I wanted to get from here to here I had a horse and that was nice and quick and I could canter and jump over things and now I can't do that anymore. So in a basic, mechanical way something has been taken from me.

"There are lots of tragic horse deaths in all kinds of films and books but... in a film everything that happens next is pre-calculated so the music will come in on a particular second and you will have your attention moved to something else, and your feelings are then manipulated and extrapolated by what happens next. In a game, I stood there looking down at where he had fallen. Nothing is going to happen until I make it happen. I could have stood there for the rest of my life. I could have put the game down and never played it again. Or started again and tried to make it not happen, which it wouldn't. That changes the character of the experience."

Games reviewer 1

It is clear from this account that games can be very emotionally affecting. We do not know what proportion of gamers is affected to the degree this reviewer describes, but on this evidence it is not right to say that keen gamers 'blub all the time'.

4. Violence as an element in the appeal of video games

We should note that many games do not contain any violence, notably sports games, driving games (if crashes are not counted as violence), and such enormously popular games as **Mario** and **The Sims**. Many gamers play violent first person shooter games and sports games with equal enthusiasm. Sports games seemingly endeavour to replicate the spirit and rules of the sport; they do not tolerate violent play.

*"In football you cannot hack down your opponent because you know you are going to get a card... Whereas in **GTA** you can kick their head in until they disappear and go into red."*

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

"There is some violence in football games – pulling shirts, tackles. But you don't want to be sent off. It's all fun."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

A game clearly does not have to be violent to be popular amongst gamers. However, there *is* violence in a large proportion of games, notably first person shooters, but this is of different sorts and requires some definition. **Spyro** the dragon kills his enemies with fire and ice, but for a number of reasons this is unlikely to be viewed as violence – **Spyro** himself is cute; the context and his victims are all fantasies; it seems clear that the game's designers do not intend the fact or the *manner* of the 'deaths' to be a subject of any interest except in so far as they perpetuate the whole fun fantasy. Similarly with **Lego Star Wars**; characters that are shot disintegrate into their constituent bricks in a way that few people would regard as 'violent'.

*"That (**Lego Star Wars**) is fantasy... When you kill someone their Lego bits just fall off."*

"There isn't blood."

"It is just fun, all the different characters."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

Spyro is an example of how 'violence' provides progression in a game and is regarded by players as symbolic, no more violent than queen takes pawn in chess. At the other end of the spectrum, there are many games in which the 'violence' appears to have been designed to look as realistic as possible and to be a focus of interest and reward.

Moreover the trend is widely regarded as towards this more 'appreciable' violence – violence that is designed to look real. Technological developments in both hard and software enable game designers to make

everything look more realistic, more like film –wounds and suffering as well weapons and scenery. Some gamers believe that violence in games is becoming both more lifelike and more prevalent.

*“Games are getting more violent, more twisted... When I was ten years old you could play like **Duck Hunt, Mario**, things like that. Now it's like **Manhunt, Condemned**, brutal murders.”*

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

There is an argument that violence has become more real-looking by default; improvements in graphics have meant that *everything* in games looks more and more real. Depiction of killings has had to keep pace. However some gamers certainly say they appreciate seeing blood and having choices about how characters are to be killed. They like their violence to look real and to be varied. Violence that is merely symbolic, or resembles cartoon violence, is not so satisfying.

“It's more fun punching someone and their head coming off and blood going everywhere than if you go 'Bang' and they just lie down. The more you injure somebody in a game, the more damage you cause them, the better it is.”

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

“You can shoot people there (in the game) and the graphics are just so real... The fact that it all looks real and you can go wherever you want and it's just like... It's just good!”

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

In many games, violence – the elimination of enemies in vivid ways – is treated as the core activity. Without this violence the games would not exist; progression consists of eliminating enemies and obstacles.

“Some games would be boring without the killing and shooting and all that.”

“It sounds really really awful but that's what it's all about.”

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

*“In the games that I play it needs to have that violence, like **Medal of Honour**, it needs to have the killing and the death. That's part of the reason why they were made.”*

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Many action games allow players to decide if they want more or less gore. The gamers interviewed in this study all said that whenever they had the option they maximised the gore.

"Unreal Tournament... On the options there's blood and you can have it completely off, medium, or high. On medium only a tiny drop of blood comes out if you shoot them, whereas on high, if you shoot them a lot loads more blood comes out. If you shoot them with something big like a rocket launcher or something then they actually blow up and you see all their guts flying. Sometimes bits of guts bounce on the ceiling. I put it at high, and probably everyone does."

"But it's computer characters and they don't really resemble people."

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

It is difficult to isolate the appeal of the violence *per se*, not least because other key rewards and satisfactions of gaming so often depend on the violence. First, it is largely by eliminating 'enemies' that you progress in a game, and making progress is of course the objective of play and a key reward. Second, much of the tension in first person shooter games arises from the violent action; gamers are not just shooting, they are vulnerable to being shot. Staying alive in hectic circumstances contributes importantly to the fun of the game and to gamers' sense of achievement. Third, the opportunity to be violent, without being vulnerable to consequences, clearly underscores the appeal of some games as escapist. Games present opportunities to behave in ways that are exhilaratingly wicked and dangerous – out of reach in real life. Freedom from consequences, and hence a feeling of escaping, is appreciated most keenly where there is violence.

"In some sense the violence is fun... We really like that sort of stuff."

"It's just a game. It's just escapism."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

"Quests aren't real, but shooting ones, you can just sort of go out and shoot someone, so it's just like something to do."

A FANTASY?

"Yes."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"You can be violent in a game and not have any comebacks. It's a form of escapism."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

*"If you get **Gran Turismo**, for example, you are getting a powerful sports car and driving round the racetrack smashing into the barriers and things. I wouldn't do that in real life. You can enjoy yourself and you know there's no harm going to come to you."*

"You can do whatever you want and there is no consequences."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Interactivity of course enables video games players to be involved in the violence, rather than simply witnessing it as they would with a film. Some gamers say straightforwardly that being responsible for it is what makes the violence enjoyable.

"I hit him (in boxing game) with a haymaker and it's all gone slow motion and then I finish him off... Even the bit when you've got to clean up your face and wipe all the blood off ready for the next round is as much fun as going out and bashing him again for another three minutes... There's no fun watching someone else play a game. It's the most boring thing if you are not in control."
Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

"It's better in a game because you can actually do it (be violent) whereas in a film you are just watching it. But I wouldn't want to actually go out and do it for real."
PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

The various implications of *controlling* what violence happens (as in a video game), as distinct from merely watching it unfold (as with a film), are not easy to make out. Control in a violent context has the potential to generate a feeling of jeopardy. Escape can be very exhilarating and there are those who find this a lot more involving than a film would be.

"I like doing stuff in the game that's bad because it's the adrenaline rush that you get when a police car's behind you and you're just going really fast and knocking people down. It's the adrenaline rush."
PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

Moreover, interactivity helps games cater to mood. When gamers get frustrated, they can express this.

*"Like in **GTA**, sometimes if you're really peeved, you just think – right, I'm going to get in a car and run some one over."*
AN OUTLET FOR AGGRESSION?
"Yes. But it is necessary in certain games."
PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

On the other hand, what seems like violence is regarded by many players as formulaic. The 'victims' are in no sense real people (or animals or ghouls), but obstacles to progression in a game. Their removal is a non-event except in so far as it allows the gamer to survive and move on.

“Rome Total War is not about the killing, it’s about the thinking. As a general you have to make decisions. It’s not the killing someone that makes it good, it’s the thinking you have to do.”

IF IT’S THE THINKING THAT IS INTERESTING, WHY DO YOU HAVE THE BLOOD COUNT TURNED UP HIGH?

“It’s quite funny when they blow up.”

“The gory bits are like a cartoon. The strategy part of it isn’t.”

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

Many gamers’ apparently blithe acceptance of violence, even extreme and realistic violence, in games has a lot to do with how closely they are focussed on progressing through the game and how little interest they have in how that progression is achieved. This is made easy for them by the fact that video games invest heavily in action and movement but hardly at all in character. The victims of violence have rarely been brought to life, not matter how realistic they may look; they do not have any stature – they are just a threat to the gamer and an obstacle to progress (but see the games reviewer quoted on pages 55). Moreover, any violence is unlikely to be shocking (in the way that film violence can be) precisely *because* the gamer is in control of it.

Many young male gamers certainly feel the action and the consequent tension are what make playing fun. The sense that it is all just fun – playing – is one reason why gamers find the violence acceptable and give themselves permission to ‘be violent’ in the games.

“It’s entertainment, it doesn’t mean anything. It’s not like you’re killing people, it’s just for the sake of fun.”

“With pretty much all games, if the objective is to kill people... it’s not realistic... It’s the unrealistic bit that makes it fun.”

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

Nevertheless, many gamers do feel uncomfortable about the prevalence of violence in games, and this concern is discussed more fully in Section 6.3.

A few games try and incentivise ‘good behaviour’ by rewarding the ‘good’ and penalising the ‘bad’; the less violent make progress, the more violent do not. There is a version of this in **GTA**, for example, where if you kill a cop you are more likely to get caught and killed. Gamers in general seem not to have registered this sort of incentivisation of ‘good behaviour’ and we are doubtful that it is successful in depressing appetites for violence. What matters to virtually all gamers is the quality of the game play. Beyond this, many gamers would want to test the game by trying both good and bad strategies.

"In a boxing game if you have done something good you get more points and it determines how the game finishes."
"There are games that have pulled it off quite well. If you actually act as a good cop you do get rewarded for it."
"It is good fun being bad but you also want to be good just to see what it is like."
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

It seems likely that many would say they would rather be rewarded for bad behaviour than good, and find this is usually the case.

"The things that you get points from are normally bad things... Bad like killing someone."
PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

5. Specific games

5.1 Grand Theft Auto

The **Grand Theft Auto** games, especially **San Andreas** and **Vice City**, were extremely popular amongst most of the boys and men in the research sample and attracted more comment than any other games. Some female respondents liked them – they found there was more to do than in the average driving game – although they were also thought of as yet more clearly aimed at men than most games.

"That's a different game. That's got a bit of thought gone into it. It's more than just driving. You're not sort of just sitting in the car, are you?... You've got to put a bit more into it than just sitting and driving a car."
PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

"You can move into a room and get a lap dance with a woman, so I really think it's male oriented."
PD16 F 30-40 C2DE Light Edinburgh

A great merit of the games is the imaginative and varied game play. They are perceived as offering an abundance of different vehicles and weapons as well as highly imaginative action.

"There's so many things you can do in it."
"You never get bored with it."
"It's just the different missions and there's helicopters, planes, motorbikes, cars, boats, driving all around. You get cheats for different weapons. You can get everything... a Samurai sword or a machine gun, a chainsaw..."
PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

"It is like an extended film where you can manipulate the outcome. There is that much to do in that one game."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

It is partly the variety of the action that makes the games so compulsive.

"It has storylines. There is always a conclusion. You have to complete missions. You will always think - 'Oh, I'll do one more mission.' Until you start getting crap at it... and go to bed and then try again the next day. It has so much longevity while you are playing it. It is brilliant."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

*"All the missions you do, that's the core of it. But then you can get your gun shooting level up and your girlfriend's up. There's so many little bits and pieces that I still haven't got 100% and I've had the game for like two years. I'm like 79%... **Grand Theft Auto** isn't something you can do in a day, it's a commitment. I completed all the missions but I haven't got 100% because I haven't got – like in it there's certain haircuts you can get, there's so much to do."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

Unusually for games offering fast action, **GTA** is also thought to have a sense of humour. The wackiness and outrageousness of some of the action makes it funny.

"You can do what you want. I just go round beating people up because I am bored. I don't care about the mission. I go and pick a hooker up or something. It is pretty funny."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

The sex clearly makes a contribution to the exhilarating sense of trashing the tedious constraints of everyday life. **GTA** games are amongst the most successful in appearing to expand gamers' experience into areas unlikely to be experienced in real life.

"You go and kill people and have loads of sex and stuff. It is a good game because it's like strategy as well."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

*"**San Andreas**... So much violence, even down to you can become a pimp and collect prostitutes and you can have sex with one of them in a car. The car bounces up and down and you are earning energy because of that."*

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

"We live in a world where violence is always on the front page of the newspaper and it's just taking it to games. So you can do things that go on, shootings and prostitution, that you'd never have thought of doing."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

GTA is said to be one of the first games that invited players to be villains and enjoy being bad.

*"You want to just go mad. You want to do everything in the game that you can't do in reality... It's quite a new thing where there's a game where you are a villain... **GTA** and **Manhunt**, to a certain extent, you are a villain... It's a change."*

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

And also one of the games which most successfully gives the gamer a sense of having a character.

"It's a lot like they see on TV, with the rappers and so on. They want to be like 50 Cent. He's shot someone. I pretend I'm him running around shooting people when I'm playing it."

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

So that the violence comes to feel integral to the character, rather than a mechanic for progressing in the game.

*"In **Manhunt** you just go round killing people. I know it sounds silly but in **Grand Theft Auto** you're killing people for a purpose. In **Manhunt** you're finding people and killing them for money but in **Grand Theft Auto** he's killing people to get to the top of his game. He wants to become the best that he can be."*

*"The difference is that in **Grand Theft Auto** you start thinking that you're the character."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

These qualities give the **GTA** games a staying power rare for this type of game. Many gamers play it intensively over a long period.

"I keep going back and playing that first mission."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

*"You get bored with them (football games) in the end whereas **Grand Theft Auto** you do what you want."*

"Yeah, look at the time. It's 5am!"

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

The games also created a real buzz in the playground; there was a period when everyone was talking about **San Andreas**.

"There's one game that I played on a lot and I quit after a while because I got ridiculous on it. My parents went berserk... the amount I was playing on it!... Loads and loads of people play it in our school."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

Professionals admire **Grand Theft Auto** as much as most gamers, and for similar reasons. They praise its variety of game play and the fact that it gives gamers a sense of being in character.

“GTA had everything. It had a bit of controversy... It wasn't just a strategy game or a first person shooter or a driving game, it was everything all tied in. You became the character in the game. I remember people would take the week off work to play GTA.”

Professional involved in producing games 3

Those who work in the field seem to see **GTA** as unique in the breadth of its appeal, perhaps a triumph of imagination rather than technical inventiveness.

“Everyone loves GTA apart from some people who try to score points by being curmudgeonly about it. There are things about it that are not technically very good. Visually it's not particularly brilliant. The handling of the cars and the way that the on-foot combat is controlled isn't very precise.”

NOT AS GOOD AS VIRTUAL FIGHTER?

“That's right. That's a game which is really about towering accomplishment whereas GTA is about letting you do what you like without thinking about it too much.

*“There are hardcore gamers and casual gamers... Games that are seen as being challenging by the (hard core) community, like **Virtual Fighter**, are extremely technical... You need great accuracy and speed of response... Another challenging game is **Battlefield**, a war game played in 40 man teams... **Grand Theft Auto** is kind of an anomaly. It unites hardcore and casual gamers. Everyone loves it.”*

Games reviewer 1

5.2 Championship Manager

Championship Manager is a good example of a game that convincingly creates roles that gamers would like to fulfil in real life.

“Winning your matches by your team selection, bringing in new players, working out your finances... It's the next best thing to owning Newcastle United.”

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

It appears to be very popular among young male football fans because it builds on an existing interest, gives gamers the sense of taking huge decisions and being in control of heroic figures, and tests their judgement about things that matter a lot to them.

Championship Manager is doubly incomprehensible to some parents. From their perspective, little seems to happen, their sons spend hours working out tedious details – football madness compounded by video game madness.

"This team manager thing has got to be the worst game going. He just sits there for hours. They don't do anything, just pick a team and things go round on screen. You know there is nothing in it whatsoever."
Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

5.3 **The Sims**

The appeal of **The Sims** evokes in some respects the attractions of home improvement TV programmes, or with slightly younger players, tamagochis. The game provides predominantly female players with an alternative world on which to focus interest and care.

The Sims also exemplifies the appeal of an environment which can be configured to the gamer's specification and which behaves according to knowable rules. The world of **The Sims** is as absorbing as it is because it is complex enough to be convincingly real, yet gives gamers a degree of control impossible in real life.

*"It's just fun controlling people... My brother just tells me to go away but the **Sims** people can't do that."*
PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

"It's fun because you can make yourself on there... and see possibilities that you could actually do in your life because it's like reality, kind of."
*"**Sims** is my perfect game. I love that game."*
PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

5.4 **Manhunt**

Manhunt is a notorious game because of the publicity connecting it with the murder of Stefan Pakeerah in Leicester. Discussion of it focuses on its violent content and different gamers have different reactions.

Some gamers see **Manhunt** as exceptional in the amount and vividness of its violence.

*"I looked at **Manhunt**, because there was all the stuff in the news. There was a murder and they blamed that game. So straight away I thought I would have a look at it and a mate had it. I played it and I actually enjoyed the idea of the game but the violence was awful. You could choose the degree of violence as well. How badly you would maim someone. If it was real life footage as such, it would have been pretty horrific. You really were sticking an axe in someone and taking a couple of chops to their neck until their head fell off. The screen turns so you can see it all happening. I was quite addicted to it... The idea of the game was good, and the way you play some of the game... where you creep around, I liked, but the actual killing was very grotesque."*
Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

But others think the game's notoriety is not deserved.

*"I was playing **Manhunt** when all the controversy was going on. It wasn't that shocking. I was like – 'what's the big deal'?... It was just different, at the time."*

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Manhunt is regarded as an example of a game that seeks to make violence central to its appeal. However, those who get into the game play often respect it as a brilliant game almost despite its violence.

*"**Manhunt**... is an absolutely brilliant story. Basically it's a guy that is on death row and is a mass murderer and there is another guy that controls all the gangs and the police in the city and he takes him and puts him on a TV show. So he goes around and has to kill people. At the end he gets out and has to go and kill him. It's the story more than anything else. I wouldn't buy it just because of the violence."*

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

Those who look out the game because of its violence seem more often to be disappointed. They seemed to find the game was not worth playing for its violence.

*"People say it was brought out to draw people in on violence... I took it back. It was crap. The violence was somewhat different from **GTA**, a bit more twisted... It was pure violence, whereas **GTA**, you can have a laugh."*

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

Professionals are amongst this game's enthusiastic admirers. It is a good game in that it generates a lot of excitement and tension. Moreover, some think, it is more honest and more revealing than other games in its treatment of violence and the implications of violence.

*"**Manhunt** is the only game that... is actually about violence rather than just depicting violence. The reason that **Manhunt** is so difficult for everyone to deal with is that it doesn't let you dodge this fact, that you like pretending to be a murderer. This says – 'you want to kill people? OK let's do it, if that's what you want to do'. It's an extremely good game and a very moral game, and it's a great shame that the games industry wasn't prepared to stand up for it... It explores violence in a way that a good film or book would explore violence, saying – 'if we're going to deal with this we can't do it shallowly and just gloss over it'."*

Games reviewer 1

*"I think **Manhunt** is a really good game. It's misrepresented. The thing I most like about it is that it really captured this gritty take on John Carpenter films. The reason I found it exciting was the plot was grim but it set up an incredibly naked system of rules. It was very hard, very tense, and to beat it was a real big ask. It also had this reversal of power halfway through where you started off scared and being chased then gradually you took revenge on these people who had massively wronged you. It was pretty violent but you took out crazy henchmen types, rather than murdering your way through some suburban idyll."*

Group of game reviewers

6. **Gamer concerns about playing video games**

6.1 Isolation and 'addiction'

Many gamers acknowledge that intense and prolonged concentration on games has a downside. Whilst they are playing they pay no attention to what is going on around them. They are difficult to communicate with because their focus is so tightly on the game. If they get into a pattern of playing a lot, they neglect their friends and other activities. They spend a lot of time on their own and may get out of the way of chatting with friends.

"I can concentrate on them so much I'm totally not aware of what is going on."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

"Your social life can go down the pan if you play all the time. The reality ones become too real to you and become too much part of your life."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

HAVE YOU GUYS MISSED OUT ON ANYTHING BY PLAYING SO MUCH?

"Talking. Communicating with people."

"Yeah because I've had people talk to me and I've just ignored them, but not deliberately. I'm so locked into the game... Very selfish really. I'm in the middle of blowing 30 aliens up and my energy level is like this, then someone comes up to me and starts a conversation. I'm like – 'hold on a second'."

YOU'RE ABSORBED IN THE GAME?

"Yeah. Transfixed."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

The word 'addiction' crops up in discussions about gaming and it seems to be received wisdom that young people can become 'addicted' to games. It is quite common for young gamers to know people they think of as addicted.

"I know someone who used to come out with us all the time but now he's always on the computer playing games... He's probably got quite a serious problem. He's never come out in two years... He thinks he's fine. He gets home, does a bit of homework, then just plays on it most of the night... His mum is worried about him."
PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

As might be expected, it is much rarer for gamers to think of *themselves* as addicted, although, looking back, they may feel they spent too much time playing games.

"When I was younger it definitely took over my life for a little while."
Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Most gamers are relaxed about the time they spend playing; to be 'addicted' is clearly a badge of honour for some.

*"On **Football Manager** you can click on your manager status and it will actually come up with how addicted you are."*
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"Basically I just got addicted when I was a kid and I can't stop... I love them and I get enjoyment out of them. It's a form of entertainment. It's like going to watch a movie."
PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

Professionals acknowledge that games, especially online games, can come to occupy too important a place in people's lives. Some gamers come to prefer their virtual lives to their real ones.

"The problem is not about the nature of the imagery, but far more about the psychological effects of engaging... in the non-real. We see a lot of problems now, particularly with online games and people spending so much time online, and prioritising that online life ahead of their real life."
*"With **Warcraft** there are many stories of people who had lost their jobs or destroyed their marriages because this becomes a 10-14 hours a day thing... The weekend they'll play 16 hours a day both days, for a year. The games industry doesn't like talking about it."*
Games reviewer 1

Several of the professionals interviewed said they are wary of playing **World of Warcraft**, for example, because they fear they may get sucked in and end up spending a lot more time than they think is reasonable. On the other hand, they also point to the amount of time many people spend watching television and think the word 'addictive' reflects the way games are so often stigmatised in the media. People spend a lot of time playing games because they like them.

"Anything you like doing is addictive... You'd think TV should be labelled as being addictive."

Group of game reviewers

6.2 A poor, unproductive use of time

Playing video games soaks up time. How long it takes to complete a game depends on the skill of the player but is said typically to take about 80 hours. Although playing video games is very compulsive while you are doing it, many gamers do feel uncomfortable, looking back, about the time they have devoted to it.

*"It probably took me 80 or 90 hours to complete **Tomb Raider** over a period of 3 or 4 months, and that's an awful lot of time, considering you've got your job on top of that."*

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

"At one point I would literally sit up for way over 24 hours playing one game, and I thought that was quite sad... I realised when my parents were getting up and I was still awake."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"You might get hooked and just play them through the day and think – that was a waste of a day, I shouldn't have done that."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

It is not uncommon for gamers to talk about feeling guilty.

"I do sometimes feel a bit guilty because I have children and stuff... You think – 'oh, I could have been doing something'."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

Many gamers clearly see their own gaming, at least some of the time, as a path of least resistance, a manifestation of weak will. Games are often preferred to other options for a raft of reasons. Playing a game is so easy; the console/PC is sitting there. Games break up into bits; the temptation to 'just see if I can get up a level' is great (and of course prolongs play once it has begun). Games, as already noted, involve a lot of problem solving; you feel you are achieving something as you solve these problems.

Whilst you are playing, games are very involving. When you are not playing, and thinking about life more broadly, many players feel that they are not a good use of time; video games compete poorly with other, healthier or otherwise worthier things to do.

"I used to do lots of games.... I enjoy doing better things with my time now. I like going to the gym or playing football instead of wasting my time."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"I've felt guilty when I go on playing when I've arranged to meet my friend or something."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

How people feel when they get up after a substantial session of course depends on how the game has gone; if they have made progress they obviously feel better than if they have experienced a lot of frustration.

"If I've been on the same level for the two hours and I've just given up, then I'm thinking – 'damn, I could have gone on the trampoline, or gone to a mate's house'. But if I've conquered something, I'd say 'YES!'"

"I still tend to feel guilty, because sometimes I should do things but I don't. I just sit down and play."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Aware that playing can tyrannise them and lead them to neglect things they would rather have done, some gamers are careful to restrict when they play.

WHAT DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU SPEND PLAYING?

"Ridiculous."

"It's stupid but I do play a lot. But I play at the right time... because I don't play when I could be out. I go out every night... I still get out and do stuff."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

Although gamers often seem to feel a little sheepish about the amount of time they devote to playing, many do not accept that games are more a waste of time than other interests or amusements.

"My girlfriend reads quite a lot and I think that's a waste of time. Fiction. Made up story. Not interested. So I don't reckon you can say it's a waste of time."

Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

"I can watch a film and think – 'that was a complete waste of time!'"

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Some argue that an absorbing game is a better use of time than 'crap TV', and it is not clear that gamers feel more sheepish about devoting long hours to gaming than others feel about watching television. A difference of course is that watching TV is general throughout the population whereas playing games is perceived as a more minority interest.

There is a variety of reasons why gamers are liable to feel uncomfortable if they play a lot: they frequently play for longer than they intended; they neglect other interests, and obligations, as a result; they may well feel they have 'nothing to show' for their time; their uneasiness may be reinforced by criticism from others who have a poor opinion of games (and, often, no experience of them). An aspect of the 'nothing to show' strand here is that games currently enjoy classic status only amongst other gamers. Someone who has read *War and Peace* attracts admiration from a broad cross section of people (although perhaps not from this immediate peer group) more reliably than someone who has completed **Grand Theft Auto**.

The circumstances and context of play – often solitary, close to a screen, inside, usually in the dark, late at night, repetitive and fidgety hand movements – do not help gamers feel good about a long session. In particular, gaming is regularly juxtaposed, especially by parents (and see Section 7.2) with 'being outside in the fresh air' – so much more wholesome.

"I think it is terrible. I want my kids out in the park."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

Strain on the eyes contributes modestly to the much broader general perception that playing video games for long periods is not something to be proud of.

"Sometimes you can't stop because you're really into it, but sometimes your eyes start to hurt and you have to stop for a while and go and get a drink. But other than that you're really into it and can't stop for anything."

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

"You do get that square eyes thing after playing a computer, where you think – 'I have been looking at the screen for too long'."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

A few gamers also mention intensive play as potentially bad for wrists and thumbs.

"I can imagine in years to come loads of men having problems, health issue wise – with their thumbs and wrists."

PD16 F 30-40 C2DE Light Edinburgh

6.3 Violence: gamers

Gamers do not need prompting to talk about violence in games; many raise the subject spontaneously. Violence is a very conspicuous element in many video games and gamers readily acknowledge this. They are aware that concern has been expressed in the media and elsewhere about this violence and recognise 'violence in video games' as an issue.

For reasons described further below, a large majority of the gamers in this sample believed there was no link between violence in games and violence in society. However a number of more minor issues relating to the violent content of video games are raised.

Some young players say they find some of the violence frightening; there are references to games affecting dreams.

"Sometimes if I play gory games, I have nightmares. This one game I had a nightmare I was at a shopping place and some guy came and put a gun to my head and shot me. I woke up crying because I was so worried."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

*"It's just like living on the edge... When you play it at night, it's like **Doom** is scary."*

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

And it is quite common for young gamers to say that they dislike the violence, and feel uncomfortable about being involved with it.

*"I don't really like violent things...Like **Grand Theft Auto**. I don't mind but they are quite horrible. Not nice natured. They might be banning some of the **GTA** because they are so violent."*

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

"I felt a bit uncomfortable because I was like shooting someone's head off and it felt like I was actually shooting someone's head off. I felt really bad."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

Young players sometimes make a distinction between violence involving soldiers, criminals, aliens, etc – which they regard as in some way authorized – and that involving 'innocent people', 'civilians' or animals (cf **Tomb Raider**) which they are more likely to see as 'bad' or 'underhand'.

*“Grand Theft Auto... I didn't really like the guts in that... They're shooting civilians walking down the street. I didn't really like that. The concept of the game is not nice but the graphics is good, more realistic. I just didn't like the way they had people shooting civilians walking down the street. **Star Wars** is different because the characters are not real and the people you kill in **Star Wars** aren't civilians, they're people that are in an army, so they're prepared to die.”*

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

*“The (violence) in **Manhunt**'s a bit petty and a bit behind their backs... murdering them. But on **GTA** it's like what happens in Los Angeles when gangs start killing each other. What happens is you work for someone and a man tells you to do a job. But not innocent people – people who've done something bad, like gangsters.”*

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

Killing people at close quarters, or with anything other than a gun, is also liable to attract negative reactions from very young players.

“I have seen this game where you can go behind people and just grab them and then you slit their neck with a knife. And that is just not good.”

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

Amongst adults, women tend not to play violent games as much as men and raise the subject of violence less spontaneously. However, on prompting women appear more likely than men to object to violence, especially where the graphics depict detail. It is difficult to be certain how deep concern runs. There is disgust with unpleasantly gory scenes, and also some anxiety about the effects on young players (see also Section 8).

“People shooting or hitting ten bells out of each other. I'm not really bothered by it but it is not nice to look at.”
“And it's very graphic as well. Like the blood spurts out and you can see the bullet hole in the head. I'm not into that.”

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

*“They're quite extreme, some of them... An advert for **50 Cent Bulletproof**... I was shocked. I couldn't believe it. It was like a film and it was so realistic and the violence was really, really graphic. I wouldn't want any kid of mine to see that or play that. I wouldn't play it. I was shocked, I really was.”*

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

It is not uncommon for male players to express unease about very young players being exposed to the violence (and sex) in **Grand Theft Auto**.

*"I mean **Grand Theft Auto** you can get prostitutes, kill people. I'm over 25 now so I'm allowed that but ten year olds kids shooting up a city and doing this that and the other. There's got to be something wrong with that."*
Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Degree of concern about violence appears to be affected by a number of features – how gory and realistic it looks (especially among women), the degree of detail depicted in close-up, and how it is related to game-play, especially the extent to which it seems a focus of attention in itself as opposed to a means of progressing towards larger objectives in the game.

*"**Street Fighter**... It's like two monsters fighting and there's a bit of blood spurting out here and there, but it's two fictional characters and it's not that realistic. But where it's actual people holding guns to people's heads, the imagery is very, very different. And it's that kind of game that I'm not interested in. I don't want to see it. But something like **Street Fighter** is not as bad."*
PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

*"(In **GTA**) it's not really close up, you're not getting a lot of detail... That makes a big difference."*
PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

*"The blood is necessary in **GTA**, but in **Manhunt** I think things get a bit too extreme... In **Manhunt**... holding him down as long as you can and then sawing his head off with a wire – that's a bit too much."*
PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

The comparison many gamers want to make is with films; they ask themselves if violence in games should be regarded as in some way worse than violence in films. The first point many make, especially young gamers, is that violence in games does not *look* anything like as real as the violence in films. Films have actors who are, and look, real, whereas in games the people are, despite improvements in graphics, clearly distinguishable from real.

"It's real people in the films, but on the computer it's not."
PD2 M 8-9 intermediate Birmingham

"Graphics on a computer is nothing like as good as film."
PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"It might look more realistic (than it used to) but you are always going to know it is a game."
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

"A game is a graphic whereas a film is real people doing that."
PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

Similarly, the gore in films looks a lot more real than the gore in games.

"If you watch some of the films that are 15 now, and some of the games which are 18, the films are much worse. You can see real blood in the films. Well it looks real compared to computer graphics."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

"Blood doesn't look real on games, whereas blood looks worse on films."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

The graphics in such games as **Grand Theft Auto** are often described as like cartoons. By comparison with films, violence in games is stylised or symbolic, at a remove from reality.

"I would have thought films would be a bit more, like make people more violent, because in computer games it's sort of cartoon people, not real, and in films it's more real people."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

*"There's still very much a cartoon element in **GTA** so it makes it seem not quite as realistic. But when it's a film and it's real people I do think that makes a difference."*

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

The argument is that violence in video games is not as affecting as violence in films because it looks much less real. Gamers believe that film versions of game action would be intolerable; it would be more frightening and upsetting because more real.

*"One called **Resident Evil**, you play the game and it is not so scary because it doesn't look real... My friend had the game and then watched the film and he just cried."*

BECAUSE IT WAS MORE REAL?

"Much more."

"There was a zombie hiding in his wardrobe."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

"Computer games is graphics... You can get scary games and scary films but I'm not bothered about the scary games but if I saw a scary film I would be bothered about it."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

*"If I watched it (the action in **GTA**) in a film I'd be sick... someone's head being cut off and the blood. You'd feel sick. But with graphics it just feels funny. It's just nothing. I just think it's not bad at all."*

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

"In games, it's a story, but when you see it in a film – happening to a real person – it's more extreme... (In a game) it's just killing a cartoon or a character. It's not a person. There's not a proper face behind it."

PD10 M 14-15 ABC1 heavy London

Initial discussion of video game violence in relation to film violence almost always concerns the disparity in the look – computer graphics look much less real than film, and this makes game violence more acceptable. Consideration of the implications of interactivity come later, and gamers are often more reticent about them, and less conclusive. Some argue that being in control of the violence makes the gamer feel responsible, producing a greater degree of involvement than would be usual with a film.

"If you are watching a film you're witnessing it but in a video game you do it. That's a big difference. If you see Scarface go kill someone you are just witnessing it whereas if you are in a game, killing people, you are a lot more involved."

"When you watch a film you don't think that you're the character. When I am playing a video game I believe that I am that person."

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

"The biggest giveaway is if you watch three people watch a movie they'll just be like this (supine). But if you watch them playing a shoot 'em up game they'll be like that (edge of seat), and like that, and if they mess up they'll throw the controller. That shows, in your body language, that you're more into the game and it's having a bigger effect than just sitting back watching a movie."

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

For some, the greater degree of involvement is what makes the game better; they would rather control the violence in a game than watch it unfold on film.

"I'd rather play on a violent game than watch a violent movie because you control the person... In a game you control the person, so it's more real isn't it?"

"Yes, you know what's happening because it's yourself."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

Others sit on the fence, conceding a greater degree of involvement but still finding film violence more upsetting.

"Because you control the violence to an extent in the game, that sort of makes it different... Talking about the difference between the violence on a film and the violence in a game, you're more involved, I suppose, in the violence in a game. I think with some people it probably makes it more realistic because they're involved with it. But I don't like the realism in the fact that it's real people. That's why I don't particularly like violence in films."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

Not many are articulate about this, but the majority of gamers seem to feel that the greater realism of film violence (and the strength of the characterisation and narrative) makes it much more upsetting than video game violence. This difference is usually taken to transcend whatever effect interactivity has on levels of involvement in, and ownership of, violence in games.

Nevertheless, violence in games, especially when it is close-up and gory, seems to generate vague unease – a sense of wrongness – in many gamers (though as we have seen this sense can itself contribute to the appeal). Some gamers seem to have, on occasion, a feeling of incredulity – 'I can't believe I am doing this!' – perhaps analogous to the feelings inspired by risqué comedy like *Little Britain* – 'am I really hearing this?' Non-gamers who become acquainted with the violence in video games often feel more strongly about it than gamers. Similarly, gamers are more likely to condemn violence in games they have not played than in games they have. Violent action is more acceptable when you are acquainted with the game and see it within the particular gaming context. Many gamers seem to end up with the position that, yes, on the face of it extreme violence is regrettable, but in fact it is all right *in this game* and it is all right *for me*. It is all right in this game because once you have played it you realise that the 'people' who die have no character, no emotional depth (because they have played no important part in the narrative, where there is one) and moreover it is all 'just a game'. And it is all right for me because I know I am not violent and it does not influence me.

A few gamers fear that the violence in games may have regrettable effects on some people's behaviour, principally people who become obsessed with games and spend too much time playing them.

"If someone's got that violent side in them they'll sit and play computer games with violence in them for hours and hours and it's not going to do them any favours."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

It is sometimes argued that playing violent games can make a player aggressive in the short term, again particularly if he plays 'too much'.

"I would say that your emotional mood definitely changes when you play a violent game. If you're not winning you can get quite aggressive."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

"I don't like (violent games) because my brother plays them and it makes him really aggressive. There's this boy who lives near us... and he plays like 18 games, for 18s and over. Before he played them he was all right but since he's been playing them he's become a bit aggressive. It's really changed him quite a bit."

HOW WAS HE BEFORE?

"He was normal. He would get angry if someone made him angry but he wouldn't try to punch them... He used to be quite good at work and he used to really like maths and now he doesn't."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

It is generally only boys and men who are regarded as being at any sort of risk in this way, but one young girl in this sample seemed to say that playing games made her feel aggressive.

"When you're playing one of those (violent) games you're so controlled that you think it's like real... I've played it before, not like a really old one, just like a 12 one, and you do switch off the rest of the world and just focus on the telly. When I stop playing it it's all weird and you feel like punching someone."

PD8 F 12-13 ABC1 heavy Croydon

It sometimes seems to be suspected that playing too much, becoming obsessed with video games, might tip someone over the edge into violence.

"You get some people that get too into it. You get problems and they go out and do something stupid in real life... You hear about it on the news. They go out on a killing spree... It frustrates me because it's not the computer game's fault."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

A few gamers put the counter argument – that games can provide a safe outlet for aggression that might otherwise find unfortunate expression in real life.

"If you're in a mood and want to hit someone, then you can play the game and it releases you."

PD5 M 11-12 C2DE heavy Birmingham

Most gamers have a robust conviction that only people with some exceptional propensity to be violent are susceptible to influence by the violence in video games. People who commit violent acts are not ordinary gamers but 'idiots' and 'nutters'.

"There's something wrong with the child if they go out and shoot people."

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

"The people who are going to take it seriously are the sort of people who are idiots anyway."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

"It's not the normal people you want to worry about it's the nutters that are looking and thinking – 'I might do that, that looks great, I wish I could have done that!' But most normal people don't think like that. I can sit and play a violent game and not be violent at the end of it but there are people that can be violent and play because they're violent."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

This conviction rests squarely on gamers' beliefs about themselves, namely that they have played lots of violent games and have not thereby become violent, or felt any change in their own propensity to be aggressive. Many reinforce this by citing gaming friends; nobody they know has become violent either.

*"I completed **Manhunt** but I didn't go out and suffocate people."*

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

"I play those games but I've never had a fight in my life! I play shooting games and fight games."

*"You just want to get through it and say you've completed it. It doesn't change mood. Like in magazines, where it says – **Grand Theft Auto**'s made these kids violent – it's not like that."*

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"I can go and execute someone and blow his brains out but I wouldn't really want to go and do that to someone else. I know that no one is really getting hurt."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

*"People see it as bad because it's giving kids the idea that they can go and get a gun from anywhere and they can kill someone and there's no repercussions. But I play **Grand Theft Auto** a lot and I don't have any desire to kill someone. But if they sell a million copies then one out of that million might flip."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

"I certainly don't feel more aggressive. Just because I've been zapping people in computer games it doesn't make me want to go and whack someone else. It probably gets rid of some of the tension. That's probably partly due to the fact that you're playing to relax."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

6.4 Violence: professionals

Like 'ordinary' gamers, professionals readily acknowledge that violence is conspicuous as an element in video games. Some think it is a cause for concern, one which the industry prefers to ignore.

"One of the things I find very difficult is... the level of violence that is now commonplace. The depravity of it and the unflinching enthusiasm with which it's displayed, consistently, astonishes me..."

*"There's an awful lot of people whose taste in games means that their number one hobby is pretending to be a murderer. They go home at night and spend four hours pretending to kill people. The stories provide you with endless rationales about why it's all right to be killing people. **GTA** is one of the very rare games that you are just a bad guy and this is what you do... Most of the games have these interminably tedious moral set ups to excuse your behaviour. There is a massive predominance of violence in games that we don't talk about. It's the big elephant in the room for the games industry... If you look at games where you play a person the overall likelihood is that what you'll be doing in that game is killing people. We don't talk, as an industry, about why that is, why people enjoy it so much, and if it's a problem that they do enjoy it so much."*

Games reviewer 1

Asked why there is as much violence as there is, professionals make a number of points. Violent action is, for many people, exciting, as the amount of violence in popular films testifies. Moreover, many video games are inevitably expressive of the broader cultures that develop them.

"Culturally the idea of a gun is very dominant in American entertainment."

Professional involved in producing games 2

They also argue that there are technical reasons why video games so often depend on eliminating characters, things, settings, etc. The game provides a furnished setting or landscape. The player interacts with this setting, very often with weapons. The weapons destroy people/aliens and things, thereby freeing up processing power, enabling the introduction of new people/aliens and things. For a game to move on, the elements in play have to change; it suits the technology for that change to be getting rid of elements; weapons and 'killing' are the means of achieving this.

"If you put all your processing power into creating slabs of scenery you don't have any capability left in your machine to do any other than move a projectile. The idea of creating hands on screen that embrace people, the facility isn't present to manage the animation overhead, to enable more complex interactions to take place. The most simple interaction is I see something, I shoot it. A self contained object travels towards it and an impact takes place. Crucially what the result of that impact is, is that the object disappears. If something grows and reproduces then it's another level of complexity and you've got to... deal with that."

Professional involved in producing games 2

"The thing about violence in a lot of games, and why it's so common, is that actually, in most games, it's just code. Games are all about cause and effect, about things happening to other things. But showing all that stuff is quite hard. Showing how one thing will affect another thing is complicated. What we fall back on, again and again, is death as a way of saying you have tagged that thing, you have effected the change that you needed to effect on that thing... Death is a way of communicating a completed action that is easy to understand."

Games reviewer 1

"There aren't many great writers in video games. It's a lot easier to programme a game to be a car or a gun than it is to actually put in some great dialogue and then to have convincing graphics and make people believe they are there."

Group of game reviewers

Of course, as processing power increases, the technology can cope with more and more elements and is capable of more complex interactions; the technical 'excuse' for violence becomes weaker. Some professionals believe that games designers will rise to the challenge and games will become less violent as the focus of interest moves to more reciprocal actions capable of developing relationships rather than just ending them.

"Code would aspire to a state of total annihilation because then there are no bugs... The games culture is orientated towards 'no bugs'. So that's where things are constrained and they're made efficient, systematised. Everything we connect with the language of 'nature' and 'growth' and 'organic' and 'emotion' is very difficult to come by. But those are the challenges that people are now taking on."

Professional involved in producing games 2

Some professionals have concerns about the implications of interactivity on the violence issue. In games set in a lifelike rather than a fantasy context, interactivity means that gamers are invited to commit disturbing acts of violence that do not seem merely to expose the structure of the game.

*“The thing is the interactive bit. You can watch a film but you’re not actually controlling anything. With a game you can make decisions. I was playing a game when that first really struck me and that was **Soldier of Fortune**. Near the beginning of the game there’s three guys, all leaning down, blindfolded with their hands tied round their back. There’s a couple of guys waiting there and you could decide whether to execute these three characters who weren’t armed and couldn’t fight back, or let them live. That’s not something you can ever do in a film. That quite worried me because it wasn’t like things I had been used to, like **Quake**, where it’s all very fantasy and you can fire rocket launchers from space pads and things. This was very much a real environment. It really changed my viewpoint.”*

Professional involved in producing games 1

It is argued, on the other hand, that the interactivity has complex implications that are not easily understood. It may be that being in control helps sustain a gamer’s awareness that he/she is just playing a game, whereas someone watching a film may more readily mistake it for reality.

*“The interactivity is crucial but its implications are very hard to understand. Something that really struck me when I was watching **Syriana**, the George Clooney film about the oil industry. There’s a scene where he has his fingernail ripped out, which I found horrifying... I suddenly realised that I had stood up and was standing oblique to the TV. I couldn’t be in front of it and I instinctively turned down the sound because he was screaming. I couldn’t bear it. I wondered why I was responding so strongly to it. I knew it wasn’t real and that I was safe in a nice house. What struck me was that they’ve maybe got it all completely upside down. Maybe the interactivity actually neuters the violence in a way that non interactive things don’t. One of the reasons that **Syriana** is so effective is the way that it’s filmed. The camera is very present and restless in the room and it crouches down behind the guy who is doing the torturing, so what the camera is doing is watching and what you are doing is watching and there is nothing physically around you to tell you that this isn’t real. You are just looking through a window at something awful, and although we are all terribly sophisticated now and it’s obviously just television, actually there is nothing going on there that tells me this isn’t happening. There is nothing other than my intellect to tell me that there’s a difference here. But because games are interactive nothing happens unless you make it happen, and every time you do that you are reinforcing the fact that this isn’t real. I know that on screen I am punching a guy in the face but I know that’s not happening because I’m not doing it, I’m sitting here in my slippers, playing a game. Although there is a closer identification with what is*

happening there's a greater dislocation between those two worlds. We always assume that interactivity intensifies the reaction... Maybe it doesn't. Maybe there's a much more complex relationship here than that."

Games reviewer 1

Interactivity requires a gamer to concentrate hard on the game. It is not open for him or her to just sit back and enjoy the violence, or even express aggression. If you are feeling aggressive, you need to back off sufficiently to have a mind clear enough to work the game.

"There's the argument that (the violence) is a release, that everyone has dark thoughts and bad days, and I do certainly use gaming for the catharsis it can offer. But even if you are really angry and are playing a violent game, what makes it such a good treatment for that feeling is not that you are getting to act out something violent, but the games force order onto your thoughts and require you to be calm to do well. They need you to observe structures and patterns and systems and that makes them very soothing. Even though the game is exciting and there are explosions going on on the screen, what your brain needs to be doing is actually very ordered and systematic. That can be very therapeutic. So there's even a kind of dislocation between what you'd assume that someone would be seeing on the screen and what they will actually be experiencing in terms of what their brain is doing."

Games reviewer 1

A different argument is that interactivity is a benign influence on perceptions of violence because it enables video games to explore moral issues more effectively than books or films can do.

"There is the ability for you to make moral decisions and see the consequences on the screen – which films and books don't allow you to do."

Group of game reviewers

The implications of more and more realistic images of violence, as technology improves, worry some professionals.

"It's the idea that games are going to get much more detailed, to the point where you're looking at films, that quality. So you've got the film experience but with the interactivity. It's getting very close to that now. That's moving into an unknown area. Will this influence people more when it looks more real?... There's this unknown. How is this photo-real, immersive environment going to affect us?"

Professional involved in producing games 1

As noted above (Section 3.5) some professionals say that improvements in graphics will require games producers to show more restraint in the amount and type of violence represented in games. However others question whether the degree of realism in images ought to be seen as the dominant consideration.

“One part of me finds it really unsettling that we will say that as long as you are raping and pillaging and skinning alive abstractions of people that’s perfectly wholesome, but the minute you’re doing it to people who’ve got pores and eyelashes it’s despicable. That worries me because I think violence is violence and cruelty is cruelty and perhaps we should make no differentiation. However there’s no question that it has a much more powerful effect on people when it is more accurately demonstrated.”

Games reviewer 1

Like many ‘ordinary’ gamers, professionals feel that games are unfairly singled out for criticism. They point out that there regularly is horrific violence, vividly depicted, on television.

“Doesn’t media generally desensitise people to violence?... TV news – a lot of it is about violence and showing violence. Film as well. But games, for some reason, has always been a bit of a scapegoat.”

Professional involved in producing games 1

“I routinely come home and turn on the telly at nine and see things that are unimaginably horrible. I saw a thing one night, BBC, some serial killer drama... I switched it on, no warning, there I am and there’s a guy being killed by being trapped in some kind of medical scanner or MRI machine. So you are in there with him and it’s horrifying. The guy killing him is turning everything up to 11 and cooking this guy, whose eyes are filling with blood and he was screaming and dying. It was absolutely properly horrifying. I switched it off and sat there feeling sick thinking – I don’t understand why that is on television. I don’t understand why that is entertainment... There is nothing of that intensity in the overwhelming bulk of games.”

Games reviewer 1

They suspect that video games get a bad press because they are relatively new, and poorly understood by many in the media and in politics.

“When I was growing up too much TV was bad for me. For my parents’ generation too much rock and roll was going to be bad for you. It just seems to be this phase that everything goes through when it first hits the scene.”

Group of game reviewers

"Anything new tends to worry people."
Professional involved in producing games 2

They also share the widespread confidence that gamers know they are only playing a game...

"It's about conquering the rules of the game, rather than going – 'I've shot a man in the head!'"
"The satisfaction is not that you have killed a virtual person, it's that you have kind of triumphed against adversity and beaten the odds and beaten the game. That's the excitement. You're not sitting there gloating that you have left a trail of bodies behind, you're pleased that you've beaten that section of the game."
Group of game reviewers

"I no more feel that I have actually scored a goal than I do that I have actually killed someone. I know it's not real. The emphasis is on achievement."
Group of game reviewers

... and that they can always differentiate between what's real and what is not because they understand that violence in games is code, a structural component, not real.

"The grammar of the game playing experience is about what I think I am being asked to do in the game, what I am being rewarded for doing, how I am being rewarded, what choice I feel I have, how much choice I actually have. It's also about my awareness, as a player, of the structural components."
*"Even a very bloody and violent game like Sony's **God of War**, which is an epic combat with enormous flame bladed weapons and demons and human characters being shredded all over the place, is not violent, in a sense, because that interaction of killing other characters is so much a part of the structure of the game that that's how I experience it, as part of the structure of the game."*
Professional involved in producing games 2

"There's a certain genre of game where the game mechanic means that you are shooting people or defending yourself or trying to achieve something through being stronger or tougher than the other guy. That is violence. It's not real. People don't think it's real. There is no correlation between gaming and real violence."
Professional involved in producing games 3

Professionals quote their own feelings (and those of their friends) to support their confidence that game violence is not conducive to real violence.

"I know that playing a lot of violent games hasn't made me a violent person. Nearly everyone I know who is a hardcore gamer, who plays a lot of violent games, has no violent tendencies whatsoever."

Games reviewer 1

"I have never encountered anyone who played games who I ever suspected thought the line between the game and reality was blurred."

Group of game reviewers

"I play loads of games and it doesn't give me violent tendencies."

Professional involved in producing games 1

7. Parental concerns

Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents who have played video games usually have more positive attitudes towards their children playing than parents who have not. The latter's alienation often expresses bewilderment. They do not understand games, cannot play them, and consequently feel excluded – out of the loop, especially if their children are very committed players. Their mental set is unsympathetic to gaming in part because of the dissonance between their children's absorption and their own ignorance. Unfamiliar with the challenges and delights of gaming, their tendency is to assume it is just a waste of time.

"Mine talks about it. He'll run downstairs and say – 'I've just bought Ronaldo for £15 million. Where shall I play him?' I just think – go away!"

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"Normally they think it's a bad thing because they think it's absolutely mindless and isn't helping me at all."

PD7 M 12/13 ABC1 intermediate London

Children reciprocate; their parents' inferior understanding and performance is treated with contempt.

"I play with my dad."

IS HE GOOD?

"Rubbish."

PD2 M 8-9 intermediate Birmingham

However, it is important, in view of the predominantly negative attitudes described below, to note that many parents can think of worse things their children could be doing than playing video games. Games afford parents occasional peace and quiet, and provide something to occupy groups of friends.

"On Saturday morning I say to her – 'go and play on the computer for an hour whilst I have a lie in!'"

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

"When they have friends round and things you are quite glad to have them go off and play."

"There is a place for them."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

Many are relieved their children are safe at home playing games rather than roaming the streets.

"I suppose if the alternative is them wandering the streets I'd rather they were at home, playing games."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

"I don't want him walking out on the streets with his mates. You can't win. He is sat up there on his computer or XBox or outside, I would rather him upstairs. Nothing on TV. I don't want him to watch Cartoon Network."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

Some parents prefer to see their children involved in a game than lounging in front of the television.

WOULD IT BE BETTER IF THEY SPEND THAT TIME WATCHING TV?

"No. There's so much rubbish on the telly now."

"It's the same thing. They're isolated, sitting doing nothing, not getting fresh air."

"A lot of these games, there is a strategy and you are going to think. If you are sitting in front of the TV you're not thinking."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

And many are relieved that their children play games rather than surf the internet, which they associate with graver perils.

"I'm much more worried about the internet."

"I would prefer her to be sat with her PlayStation than actually playing things on the computer."

"I've always told my kids – no chat rooms, no this, no that."

"Gaming on the internet must be a paedophile's dream, to see a million kids all signing in."

"Yeah. It's a much bigger worry than sitting on a PlayStation."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

"I trust my daughter with the games... but the PC is what I worry about and I will not let her have the door shut whilst she is on the PC. I worry about other people not so much her on the computer."

"Yes, it is the chat rooms that bother me more."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

7.1 Isolation and unsociability

As noted above, some parents resent their children's devotion to playing video games. They complain about the degree of immersion, and of a consequent loss of basic civility. Keen game players are said not to take much part in family life.

"They are completely lost in it. They don't even lift their heads up. You ask them a question – blank."

"Yeah. They don't even look up."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"He just plays too much. He's obsessed."

"It's always one more thing – 'I just want to try to get to this level'."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

"I sometimes would like the boys not to be on their computer as much and I'd like them to sit and socialise with us."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

"As soon as he comes in from school he goes on it. He'll come down for tea for a few minutes. He'll do his homework but now he is addicted, completely. On a weekend he goes out with his mates."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

With some children, some of the time, parents fear that games are taking the place of social intercourse. At its worst, they see their children as socially isolated, relating not to family and friends but to an alternative electronic world that does not require them to speak, or interact with other people.

"My son is permanently on there... Being in control... He can do what he wants to do... With the computer he is the boss and he is in charge and that is what he likes... He is not getting a life. He is just transfixed. He is like a zombie and he just walks around in a trance. He just switches off. He used to be a lovely pleasant little lad and we don't have any conversations now. He has no communication skills... The computer comes on as soon as he gets in from school and he forgets to eat as well. He is just in his own little world."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

Gaming, alongside mobile phone texting, is a development that in some parents' view inhibits development of language skills.

"Texting, phones, the games – all that sort of thing affects their vocabulary, very definitely... The art of conversation is dying big time."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

It is very difficult to assess how serious these parental concerns are. A few parents think there may be trouble ahead; they fear that gaming, perhaps in conjunction with other influences, increases young people's isolation in ways that may have regrettable long term consequences.

"You think how many hours a year they're doing that. You don't know how much damage it's doing to them yet. Maybe emotionally. Kids are very insular these days, they've lost quite a lot of social skills. And you don't know if it's going to make them more aggressive, or less, because it's channelling all their energies into the games... We haven't been around long enough to see the long term effects. It could be a bit scary really."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

The perception that games are 'unreal' – about fantasy worlds that do not exist – sometimes seems to migrate to belief that playing games is 'unnatural'. Children ought to be out playing with their friends, and children who get heavily into games are often perceived by their parents as solitary, even lonely.

"Kids have to be kids and make a mess and scream. I think it does become lonely for children if they are just playing on the PlayStation all the time."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

"They can get too lost in it and they stop mixing with their friends. It hasn't happened to my kids but it has happened to friends of mine... They don't want to know about the outside world. Just get on with their games and that's it."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

One parent in the sample, also a primary school teacher, believes she can easily identify the children in her class who spend a lot of time playing video games; they are the wild kids who did not know how to get on with the others. She clearly associates video games with relatively neglected children and poor parenting generally.

"You can tell the children who do more things with their family. They know how to liaise better. The other children are wee wild things who are just stuck in front of a telly or a computer."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

It is generally acknowledged that many young people *can* play video games and continue to be social beings. It all depends on what sort of child they are and how immersed in gaming they get. Concern is more often expressed about boys than girls.

"My son is very obsessive anyway, about lots of things, he's very introverted. He doesn't make friends easily and prefers the company of the PlayStation to people, sometimes. It's just easier than having to make conversation. My daughter is very outgoing, never ever stops talking. She does play on it but for shorter amounts of time, she'll get bored after half an hour, whereas he'll spend all evening."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

Boys who worry their parents by the degree of their immersion in gaming seem typically to be in the age range 12 – 15. Over 15, interest in girls sometimes comes to the rescue.

*"My 16 year old son is on it, **FIFA 2006, Grand Theft Auto**, all those games. This summer he is just changing, girls are coming onto the scene and he's mixing more."*

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

7.2 A poor use of time

Many parents regret the amount of time their children spend playing video games because it means they are so often on their own, in front of a screen and *indoors*. Video games are associated by many parents with a dark and cramped existence – both literally and metaphorically.

"My concern was through the summer when it was so nice. He was in his room then with the curtains drawn."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"On PS2 my son is so close to the screen, much closer than what he would be watching TV."

PD16 F 30-40 C2DE Light Edinburgh

"I do think that kids should be outside playing. Although playing on the computer for part of the day won't do any harm. I think it should be varied."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

"There's more to life than computers."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

The feeling that children would be happier and healthier engaged in more traditional activities, especially *outside*, is very widespread. Part of what is being expressed here is antipathy to the new; parents like the idea of their children enjoying themselves in ways parents understand and can share. 'Why don't they put their gumboots on, go into the woods and build a den?'

It is quite common also for parents to assume that video games get in the way of study or other civilising influences.

"You imagine that if they weren't doing that they would be doing things... that would be more beneficial, like reading or doing better homework. Homework tends to be very rushed."

ANY EVIDENCE HER SCHOOL WORK IS SUFFERING?

"No, but then I don't know how much better she could do if she was putting more time in it... if this wasn't sidetracking her all the time."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

Video games are rarely regarded by parents as 'imaginative play'. On the contrary, the belief commonly seems to be that games constrain rather than exercise the imagination. Again, it is evident that those parents who reach this conclusion are not always familiar with what it is like to play video games, or with the variety of different sorts of games available. Video games, perceived as new, tend nevertheless to be negatively compared with traditional amusements rather than with, for example, television.

"Now you never see children... play with a doll, play houses with the wee boy being the dad and using their imagination. There's no imaginative play now, it's all computers."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

It seems not to occur to most parents that video games might be enriching their children's lives – time well spent. They often hope that interest in gaming will be supplanted by more sociable and traditional pursuits, and/or by more conscientious homework.

7.3 Violence and bad behaviour

Some parents recoil from the violence in video games; it seems to them to be an assault on the innocence of children and self-evidently 'a bad thing'.

"I think they should be able to enjoy childhood in a happy carefree way and that is not being naive but that is how a childhood should be and to me violence breeds violence and it is just negative, completely negative."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

Bad for children but also incomprehensible as an element in games aimed at adults.

"These games... what does an 18 year old want to play them for?... There has to be something lacking in their lives really if they have to go on and play a violent, horrific game of killing people. What is the sense in that?"

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

Parents are quite often taken by surprise by violence in the games children enjoy.

*"I didn't realise the amount of violence in **Grand Theft Auto** and then, in front of my mum, he's (13 year old) got hold of a knife and he's stabbing someone. It was so embarrassing and my parents are like – 'you shouldn't let him have things like that!'"*

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

The degree to which they are thoughtful about this issue varies. Often parents rely on a gut reaction of the sort, 'this cannot be right!', but some do go on to qualify first impressions by considering the violence in its gaming context.

*"My nephew had something, not **Grand Theft Auto**... I did go up and have a look and someone got their head cut off and it was just horrific! Then someone put a spear or something through someone's head and their eye came out. It was really really gory. He seemed to be oblivious to the violence of it because his primary thing was to win... My perception was that the violence was really secondary to the goal of the game. But I was surprised at how graphic it was!"*

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

It seems quite common for parents to assume, once they know about it, that violence is central to the appeal of games. The assumption is that the violence supplies tension and excitement.

"The other (strategy/fantasy) games are too boring. Once they've mastered something it's boring, whereas the shooting games (sustain interest)."
"It's got to be something that's going to scare them to get that thrill or that buzz."
"They get the buzz from doing what they can't do in real life."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

The media has of course speculated about an association between the violence in games and violence in real life, and this association is in many parents' minds when the subject comes up. Some appear to have concerns that delinquent behaviour generally may be encouraged by its prevalence in games, especially amongst young people who play obsessively.

"It is going to be addictable for some children. Not all children but some kids think that that is life and that is what life is all about. Joy riding and pinching cars and it becomes reality if you play it that much I think."
"You hear of kids in America who take guns and go and shoot people because they have seen it on PlayStation games."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

A consideration for some parents is the capacity of video games to inspire imitation. It is said that children who play games imitate the language in them and are introduced to bad language.

"They talk like gangsters after they have played. All these new words that come out of them."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"My daughter starts shouting in an American accent."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

"A lot of them get a lot of things from computers, in violence and the way they speak. I think it's wrong."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

There are parents who believe that some children imitate *behaviour* also.

"In school I don't think the children now know how to liaise with other children unless they're fighting and being violent... There's a lot of fighting, punching and things, and that's certain games they have at home. Wrestling games and different things... Kids do something and go 'But I saw that on my PlayStation... I seen it on my computer, it's a game'... 'Why did you punch him like that?' 'That's on my computer game'.... 'It's a game, why can't we play it?'"

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

However, whilst some parents think young children may well attempt to imitate karate kicks and the like, there is widespread scepticism about the capacity of video games to foment serious violence. If there are people who play video games and then go out and kill people, this is not the fault of the games.

"They're always saying about the people who go and shoot, say, a load of college kids and it's because they've seen a film or they've seen it on whatever game it is. But you have to be an extreme kind of person to be able to do it."

"If you've got a bit of sense then I don't think they do you any harm."

PD14 F 22-25 ABC1 heavy Manchester

"I don't think that a normal child is going to turn into some monster because they watched a video game. When you hear that they watched this and then they went out and did this, there was something fundamentally wrong with the child before they watched the video game. I think a child who is a little bit unbalanced could be triggered."

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

The feeling is that people who commit serious acts of violence are not normal; games may have regrettable consequences for them but not for the generality of people.

"I think it might put ideas into their head. But I don't think it would make the child do it if it were a sound child."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"It's down to the person playing it to know it's not real. If there's someone who doesn't understand the difference between the fantasy world and the real world then obviously you've got a problem."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

Many parents note that violence is common in films and on television and go on to say that they do not see why games should be singled out as an especially bad influence.

"They see a lot worse things on the news."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

"I think if they are going to be violent, they will be violent."

"Yeah, and it could be violence on telly or whatever. I think that violence is in them."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

"It is no worse than watching violent videos and films. Things have happened in real life where people watch violent films and gone out and done terrible things."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

On this evidence, it seems to be rare for parents to consider games as a special case because they are *interactive*. A few worry about this, and also about repetition – the fact that, whereas a film is usually only seen once or twice, very similar scenes from games may be played night after night.

"Video games are probably worse because they're repeated all the time."

*"And they are interacting with it and taking part in it, whereas something like **Hostel**... it's a bit more removed. You are watching people on screen. You are sat here, they are there. You are not taking part... But with the games they can get very involved... With a game you are leading the action."*

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

"If I watch a good film with a good story and a bit of violence then it doesn't make me violent. But it could do if I watched it night in night out."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

Some parents are certain their children easily distinguish the violence in games from 'real' violence. They also believe their children are 'normal' – not potential psychopaths. These two convictions give them confidence that however distasteful video game violence may be, it is not going to have tragic consequences.

"It is the way you bring your children up at the end of the day. I don't think any amount of videogames as far as my kids are concerned will alter them. They aren't going to buy guns and shoot people on the street because they know it isn't real."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

However many believe that there is a need for regulation of video games and also for careful parental supervision (see also Section 8).

"It's quite frightening... Chopping people's heads off. I don't think it's very nice for a six year old. But that's up to the parents, they should be controlling what games they play."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

7.4 Cost

Many parents complain about how expensive consoles and games are. They quote costs of £40 and £50 per game, and say that their children get through games at a frightening rate. In part because they are not involved as their children are, parents are liable to fear being exploited by games producers and others. There are complaints that 'cheats' are released on the internet in order to speed up completion of games and that this damages value for money.

"They release the cheats so that you get through the game quicker and want to buy another game."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

"My son actually rang up Paypal and paid something like £8 to buy some extra weapons and I was livid. But he said he could play it better now."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

As already noted, the cost of games in some households is mitigated by trading or renting. A few parents were in favour of subscription internet games on the grounds that they worked out cheaper. A game like **RuneScape** was said to cost £3 or £4 a month, but was never completed and this compared well with a £40 or £50 game that might typically have a life of a month or so.

7.5 Other concerns

7.5.1 Sex

Many parents, as already noted, are frightened of the web. They fear 'stranger danger' – that paedophiles or other sexual predators may somehow make contact with their children.

Video games do not alarm parents to any comparable degree. Games played against the computer do not have any potential for contact with strangers. Those parents with children who play games over the net seem content that exchanges are sufficiently constrained by the game structure that there is no reason to worry.

Many parents seem unaware that games like **Grand Theft Auto** have a sexual content. Often it seems not to have occurred to them as something to worry about, perhaps because they feel confident it would not be allowed.

"My parents know I play it (GTA), but they don't know what's in the game... that you can get prostitutes in your car and stuff."

"Your mum and dad think that you know less than you actually know."

PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

If they become aware of any sexual content, many parents are disturbed. They fear that it may lead to loss of innocence, or promulgate sexual attitudes and practices of which they disapprove.

"A lot of these games will be about killing. I was more worried about the sexual violence, that they would see women in a different light, through a computer game. I had quite a long talk with both of them about that."

PD17 Parents (kids 12, 17) with concerns Edinburgh

It may be worth noting briefly that some professionals feel that sex is conspicuously *absent* from video games.

"If games were really made by 20 year old boys for 15 year old boys, as some people argue, then we'd see a lot more sex than we do."

Games reviewer 1

They feel it might be better if there was more sex and less violence, though on this evidence few parents would agree.

7.5.2 Health

A few parents worry about their children's eyes, especially those children who sit very close to the screen. There is occasional mention also of prolonged sessions producing sore hands or wrists.

"Sometimes they have a headache or they complain their hands or wrists are sore and I think it's because they're on the computer too long."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

Otherwise, most parents consider that any health penalties of playing video games a lot result from being stuck virtually immobile indoors instead of being out taking exercise.

8. **Supervision and regulation**

8.1 Parental supervision

Many parents, including many who are gamers themselves, attempt to limit the amount of time their children devote to video games.

"I try and limit it – an hour a night."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"I limit my 10 year old to one hour a day playing a game. He would basically play until he fell asleep then wake up and play again."

PD16 F 30-40 C2DE Light Edinburgh

"I make him turn it off. 'That is enough now!... He gets headaches.'"

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

Some find that their children react badly to this parental interference.

"It seems to me it's the challenge (that is gripping)... I do try and get them off. They're in a completely different world, they get really angry if I try to get them off halfway through a game or a challenge. Really angry."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

And that they have difficulty imposing effective limits because their children play in friends' houses.

"If you stop them they would just go to someone else's house."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

Some parents also feel that limiting time spent on games does not achieve much if their children just watch television instead.

"My daughter has had it taken off her a few times but then she just goes and watches TV."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

Many see the amount of time devoted to games as the problem, rather than the content of specific games. This is often because they are unfamiliar with that content.

*"Parents are a bit naive towards computer games... My mum thinks that computer games is still **Mario** jumping up."*

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

In some cases, parents do not know about, or understand, the regulatory classification system. Some of these parents have never had a video game box in their hand, or, if they have, have not noticed any classification on it. Children are said to try and dupe their parents into believing that the classification resembles that on other sorts of games and is intended to give an indication of required skill levels. In this research we did not encounter any parents who believed them.

"I say to my son – 'well that says 15 and you can't play it'. And they say – 'no mum... that 15 means ability'. I think he is trying to pull the wool over my eyes."

Gp 11 Parents who have played, Birmingham

However it is quite common for parents to believe that the classification system is not taken seriously by retailers or other parents (see also Section 8.2).

Some parents do of course try and prevent their children accessing age-inappropriate games. Few feel confident they succeed. Sometimes a mother's restrictions will be frustrated by the father.

"My mum doesn't like my brother playing violent games but my dad will give him a game and tell him – 'there you go'. He doesn't see it as harmful."

PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

*"My sister bought it (**GTA**) for my son for his 15th birthday... He's played it to death. My husband played it and he didn't seem to have a problem with it. He just said – 'it's a game. You're overreacting'. I did make a fuss at the beginning then I let it go."*

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

Or children will access a game that is in the house because one of their parents plays it.

*"They like **Vice City** which I try to put my foot down about because there's too much gore."*

HOW DID THEY GET HOLD OF IT?

"I've got it myself and they go on it."

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

More commonly, a child denied a game at home will play it at a friend's or relative's house.

*"That **Grand Theft Auto** has prostitutes and all kinds. I told him he was not going to get that but every single house he went to had it."*

PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

*"**Resident Evil**... full of zombies charging you and you have to kill them all. I was scared by that when I was about seven. It's an 18 game but it was in my cousin's house."*

PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

Parents are often defeatist, believing that any restriction they impose will be frustrated by other parents or by retailers. Gamers confirm that restrictions are widely ignored (see also next section).

"I don't think you will ever be able to regulate things."

"They will find a way."

"Yeah, or their friend will have it."

Gp9 Parents who do not play, Leeds

"A lot of the games have ratings, like 18, but it's not really enforced."

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

"You can't really regulate anything these days. If a kid wants to get a game that's classified, they'll get it anyway."

WOULD IT BE DESIRABLE TO REGULATE THEM IF YOU COULD?

"Definitely."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

Many parents seem to be inhibited about exercising authority in this area. Ignorance of the territory is one factor affecting perception of the need for discipline and also confidence imposing it. There is a degree of resignation in many parents' accounts; they're tentative, far from adamant, seemingly reluctant to stand up to their kids.

*"They still played it (**GTA**) but I warned them that I wasn't happy with the content. You have to give them a little bit of leeway."*

PD17 Parents (kids 15, 18) with concerns Edinburgh

*"I was a bit reluctant for her (she's 13) to have **GTA** because I find some of them a bit violent. It's peer pressure as well; you tend to do it (buy games) against your better judgement."*

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

*"**Doom 3**... I said to him that I wasn't sure he should be playing that and he said – if I get all my violent urges out on here I've no desire to go and do it elsewhere'."*

Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

8.2 Regulation

There is widespread agreement that some regulation of video games is needed. The emphasis falls on protecting the young, and games players are prominent amongst those insistent on the need to control access to some games. **GTA** is the example quoted most frequently.

"There should be an age limit on them. There shouldn't be eight year olds playing with this stuff."

*"There is loads of swearing in it (**GTA**) and stuff... I personally wouldn't let my kid play."*

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

"I think they should still have certificates on games. I wouldn't want kids of nine or 10 playing a game where they can go around shooting people and having sex with prostitutes... Kids get addicted to games and they might grow up thinking that is the right thing to do."

Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

Regulation is needed not least because parents cannot be expected to play games themselves and come to their own judgements.

"They should be (regulated) because I don't think I could be bothered to play a whole game to check if there's anything in it that's unsuitable for my kids."

PD16 F 30-40 C2DE Light Edinburgh

Professionals believe there is some potential for harm if young children become immersed in games designed for adults. They agree there is a need for a classification system.

"I think there's a grey area where young people who are developing can be hugely influenced by games and can play them for long periods of time etc, and I think they can be influenced by that content. That's why we have classification: it has to be controlled."

Professional involved in producing games 1

Some gamers and professionals believe that technological developments, and especially improvement in graphics, will make regulation steadily more essential.

"I think it's going to become more of an issue as games become more realistic. They weren't realistic enough to be a threat but now they are. It's almost like watching a film, the graphics are that good."

Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

It is noticeable that whilst many gamers and their parents agree that there is a need for regulation, they often attribute that need to other people rather than themselves or their families. Individual gamers rarely see themselves as at risk or damaged by age-inappropriate content.

"It depends on the person watching. I was desensitised at a very young age. By five or six I was allowed to get any film, anything I wanted. I was never worried. It never did anything to me. As long as you are brought up with good morals and know what is right and wrong in the real world, it don't matter what you watch."

Gp6 M 22-25 ABC1 intermediate London

Professionals confirm this; people agree there should be regulation but do not see themselves or their children as bound by it.

"There's a BBFC 18 on the box and most people know that means it's adult – for 18+. But there is a perception in some quarters that it refers to everyone except my son or child... How do you get across the fact that we think your child should not be playing it?"

Professional involved in producing games 3

Professionals also point out that the newest consoles enable parents to block age-inappropriate videos. None of the parents who took part in the research referred to this capability.

"The technology should become the parents' friend, because both PS3 and Xbox 360, it's comparatively easy for parents to just click one button telling the machine it can't play anything over 15 or 18 rating."

"Yeah. The 360 has a lock built in, the parental lock. The kid can't turn it on, it has a password."

Group of game reviewers

Nobody seems to feel that there is a clear need to adapt or fine tune the basis of current classifications. As already noted, many parents have scant familiarity with it, but the logic of having age-appropriate labelling on the film model is usually agreed. A few parents and gamers want to argue that age is a less important factor than upbringing.

"I can understand why they are there and I agree with it but I don't think that they stick to it as much as possible and a lot of it is not to do with the age of the person but the mentality of a person."

PD15 M 26-30 C2DE heavy Leeds

*"It depends on who you are and how you have been bought up. I remember finding a demo (of **GTA**) when I was nine or ten and that is probably what made me carry on buying the series, but I am not now stealing cars and shooting people. You are impressionable but there is a limit. It has got to be based on upbringing as well."*
Gp4 M 18-21 C2DE intermediate Birmingham

And a few want to 'interpret' age guidelines rather than simply apply them.

"I always look to see the age and I just assume that if it's got an 18 rating it's not suitable for my 13 year old daughter. So if she brought one home it would go back again."
BUT WITH A 15 YEAR OLD YOU'D THINK IT WOULD BE ALL RIGHT?
"There's a big difference between a 15 year old watching an 18 and a 12 or 13 watching an 18."
"Yeah. And for a 13 year old to watch a 15 is not so bad as a 10 year old watching a 15 year old thing."
PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

Professionals do not always agree that games have been given precisely the right classification. However it is noticeable that professionals appear to be significantly more careful that their children abide by the classification than are gamers and parents in general.

*"There are a couple of 3+ games that I don't think are suitable for him (he's seven), and a couple of games that are 12+ that I think are suitable... There's a game called **Need for Speed**, a street car racing game rated 3+. I think it's a glamorisation of crime and there's a female character, shot in video, who I find too sexualised for a 3+ audience...
But I use the ratings almost without thought and it is very rare that I would question them. And I educated them about that before they actually started playing games, so my eldest would be uncomfortable playing a 12+ game."*
Professional involved in producing games 2

It does not seem that many parents fear that classification of video games is counter-productive because it encourages children to aspire to own and play games classified as too old for them. Inevitably when they talk about playing 18+ games young boy gamers are more proud than abashed, but researchers did not get the impression that having classifications had much incentive effect on young children. The reputation of particular games, based on their content, seemed to count for much more than the classification per se.

*"It (**GTA**) was the game to have... I just think she (13 year old) had this idea that how cool would she be if she was the one that got it."*
PD18 Parents (kids 13, 13, 16, 17) with concerns Radlett

In general, professionals think the classification system is appropriate and well run.

"The BBFC do about the best job anywhere in the world. We don't have the double standards you see so much in the US, particularly to do with sex and violence."
Games reviewer 1

The problem identified is less with the nature of the classification system, more with compliance/enforcement. Some professionals think that the classification needs to be more prominent on the box, and/or that there needs to be advertising to improve parental awareness.

*"I've been playing **Call of Duty** online and the amount of kids who aren't 15 on it is horrifying... I just think parents are ignorant of the classification on the box... Has there been any public awareness advertising?"*
Group of game reviewers

Many parents and gamers believe the classifications are not taken as seriously as those applied to films, videos and DVDs. They say they are widely ignored.

THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM?
"Well it doesn't work does it?"
"The parents go out and buy the games anyway."
Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

"The rules on selling games are not as strong as the rules on selling videos and DVDs."
Gp8 M 30-40 C2DE heavy Radlett

*"**Grand Theft Auto** and all that. You can get your hands on them easy. Shops will sell them to you."*
PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle

"It doesn't occur to anyone... In the computer game shops they will sell you an 18 game."
PD11 M 14-15 C2DE intermediate Leeds

"It doesn't do anything."
"It doesn't mean nothing. I was buying video games at 15 from HMV... My little brother can get away with it and he's 14... If he doesn't get it off me he'll get it off some one else."
PD13 M 18-21 C2DE heavy Richmond

Many gamers in the sample had played games classified as suitable only for significantly older children.

*"There was one where you were kick boxing and you ripped the guy's head off... **Mortal Combat**."*
how old were you when you were playing that?
"10 or 12."
Gp7 M 26-30 ABC1 intermediate London

And many parents had supplied inappropriate games.

*"My mum and dad took me out and we got it (**GTA San Andreas**) at Christmas.*
PD2 M 8-9 intermediate Birmingham

"I send my mum in shops to buy."
PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

*"We bought him **GTA** when he was almost 10."*
Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

*"I didn't have a clue what **Grand Theft Auto** was about but I had heard so many people talking about and saying how shocking it was, and the swearing and things, and I must admit I bought it for him (12 year old)."*
Gp12 Parents who play video games, Radlett

If the classification of video games is indeed less vigorously enforced than film/DVD classifications, part of the explanation must lie with parents. When they are interviewed in research many parents seem to agree on the need for a system. In practice, many do not make any effort to enforce it. It is not entirely clear why this should be; a number of factors are relevant.

The video game classification system is recessive relative to that applicable to film for a number of reasons. Most parents have not themselves grown up noticing game classifications. Many are less familiar with the content of video games than with that of films and therefore have fewer/weaker convictions. Some parents unreflectingly trust the category; a game is only a game. When they are buying games, some are like illiterates in libraries and they focus on what their children say they want, ignoring content. Many parents feel more vulnerable to pressure from their children in relation to games than films because they are so much more ignorant about games. Some may well feel that classification of games is less important than classification of filmed material because they are more concerned about sex than about violence and assume that sex is not an issue with games. They may come to the same view because, as their children report, a game is 'only a graphic' and therefore less real and less 'scary' (see also above Section 6.3).

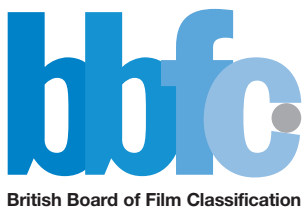
"Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, the film is a 12A, the game is 7+. The games aren't as scary as the films. If you have watched the film you feel scared whereas if you play the game, you can compare how much scarier the film is."

PD3 M 9-10 C2DE intermediate London

Some professionals seem to feel a degree of frustration that allegations of bad taste are levelled at the games industry, yet the classification system is not about matters of taste.

"When Keith Vaz, for example, is talking about taste, nowhere in the guidelines or parameters that have been set by either PEGI or BBFC is taste mentioned. What is taste?... It is very difficult."

Professional involved in producing games 3



The British Board of Film
Classification
3 Soho Square
London W1D 3HD
Tel. 020 7440 1570
Fax. 020 7287 0141
www.bbfc.co.uk