

# The evil empire of online gaming?



IMAGE COURTESY OF MINECRAFT

Ever had a kid in the house addicted to his tablet? Such cases allow one a glimpse into the educational side of gaming these days, including the various skills needed by something like Minecraft, or whatever's got the kid's attention 24/7.

It turns out there are many benefits in multiplayer worlds

By Matthew D'Onofrio

**M**Y CHEST POUNDED WITH ANXIETY as I soared downwards from the sky above. I had goose bumps from the fear of not knowing what threat lay beneath the clouds. The fire that ignited in my heart was fueled by my determination to save the beautiful damsel in distress waiting for me at the end of my intense adventure.

This is how I felt before entering the final battle with the evil Demise in the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, one of my favorite video games of all time. I felt as if I was in Link's shoes, or boots.

Invented roughly in the 1950s, video games have come a long way in impacting our demeanor

and inducing a variety of emotions. Back then, we experienced the simple thrill of scoring on an opponent in *Pong* in 1972 or getting foolishly frustrated over a bad hand in *Solitaire* in 1990.

Today, we are juggling themes of American ex-

ceptionalism, manifest destiny and multiverse after embarking on a bewildering journey in a video game with exceptional storytelling and suspense, *BioShockInfinite*. Or, we are presented with the brutal decision of whether deliberately to shoot at

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hundreds of innocent civilians at an airport in an undercover mission in *Modern Warfare 2*.

This rush of emotions we confront when playing a video game is becoming more complex as video games get, well, more complex as well. Some 155 million Americans are playing video games, and 42 percent play for three or more hours per week, according to a 2015 study by the Entertainment Software Association. What might this mean?

R. GLENN GEHER, CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT of psychology and director of the Evolutionary Studies Program at SUNY New Paltz, describes video games' impact on the human psyche as an evolutionary mismatch. The conditions at hand don't match ancestral conditions. In order to attain what they desired and needed, our ancestors had to venture into the unknown empty-handed and face their fears head-on. But we're not empty-handed today. We have these screens at our fingertips with the ability to simulate any situation and challenge any behaviors.

Although perhaps unnatural, this new phenomenon isn't necessarily a bad thing. Geher says it could go either way. In his article titled, "How Minecraft Actually Builds Social Skills," published by Psychology Today, Geher talks about his eleven-year-old son's addiction to the multiplayer, sandbox game *Minecraft*. Geher points out the game's potential as a tool for developing social bonds and learning social skills such as leadership.

"Good video games capitalize on and exploit our psychological systems," said Geher. "However, so do cigarettes, alcohol, porn and McDonald's. We have evolved to enjoy these fake worlds and be affected by them emotionally and behaviorally. I think we have to be wary of something that teeters on the border between beneficial and dangerous."

Although these virtual worlds may be fake, the way they make us feel is all too real. For example, take *Second Life*, a game-like online virtual world without the typical game objectives and conflicts. The concept is simple: the player creates whoever he or she wishes to be and lives another life in a virtual reality the way that player sees fit.

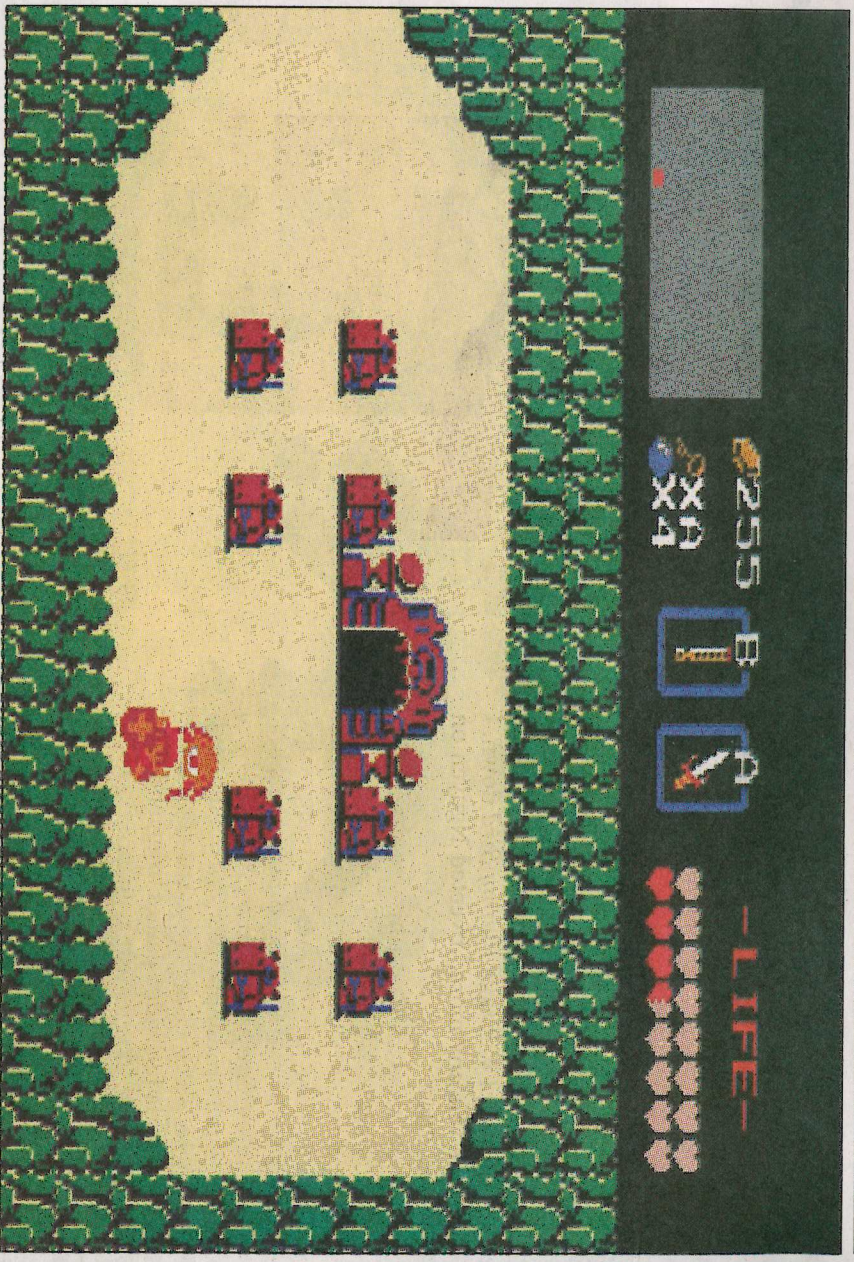


IMAGE COURTESY OF NINTENDO

The Legend of *Zelda: Skyward Sword*, our author's favorite online game of the moment, is all about rising levels of stress... and accomplishment. Psychologists are now discovering that when played with others virtually or side-by-side, such things serve a purpose as a socializing tool.

SUNY NEW PALTZ STUDENTS AMANDA E. GUITAR and DANIEL J. GLASS were able to use *Second Life* to create virtual situations to test Nesse and Ellsworth's 2009 Model of Emotions for Situations that Arise in Goal Pursuit, which basically suggests that emotions are triggered by whether a situation poses a threat or opportunity, whether a domain of the situation is physical or social, and whether the outcome of the situation will be a success or a failure.

These virtual situations ranged from physical ones, such as a situation designed to threaten the subject's personal safety via the task of completing

a hazardous obstacle course, to social ones, such as a situation where subjects were risking being ostracized via a challenge to either make enough friends or be exiled.

The results depended on things like whether the emotion was despair from falling off an obstacle course into a pitch-black pit or embarrassment from getting exiled due to an undisclosed random selection at the end of the social challenge. The study concluded that software like *Second Life* effectively elicited emotional responses.

Perhaps the multiplayer component of *Second Life* contributes largely to the emotions players convey, which can also be seen in the massively multiplayer role playing game *World of Warcraft*. In that game players chat, complete tasks, and perform certain activities with one or more people. Emotions come more naturally when one is actively talking to teammates, especially after one does something stupid or is left exulting from revenge following defeat from the enemy.



IKE *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*, SIMILAR INTERACTIONS with others can be seen in mobile games such as *Trivia Crack* and *Candy Crush Saga*.

to a friend or mocking your buddy after topping his high score, we react to multiplayer video games in a way practically identical to how we react to real-world multiplayer games like chess or dominoes.

The non-multiplayer mobile game *Flappy Bird* was infamous for causing widespread rage and insanity with its simple yet unforgiving mechanics. Creator Dong Nguyen decided to remove the game from the App Store and Google Play Store to rid the world of the addictive evil *Flappy Bird* had caused. "I am sorry, *Flappy Bird* users, 22 hours from now I will take *Flappy Bird* down. I cannot take this any more," tweeted Nguyen on February 8, 2014.

Although *Flappy Bird* is a bizarre case, many games get a bad reputation for allegedly influencing negative behavior, such as the handful of real-world murders and other crimes by young people linked back to the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise.

Video games have the power to hit us right in our feelings and produce a spectrum of emotions. That effect differs for each player. The good or evil influence people feel video games bring about remains subjective. It is foolish to ignore the many uses video games have spawned in the world today and will continue to forge in the future. Anybody up for a round of *Mario Kart*?

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