

Effects of cyberworld on the human psych



“We live in an age of Nintendo. Nintendo games let people manipulate imaginary creatures on a screen. The secular culture often makes us feel like these creatures. We feel manipulated from without by banks, market forces, government regulations etc. We do not feel in control of our own souls from within. We have a Nintendo psychology.”

Interestingly enough, I stumbled across this quotation recently from a publication of the *Prayer Book Society of Canada*.

The Nintendo/Pokemon Craze

Japan-based Nintendo's children e-game Pokemon (Game Boy Pokemon video game, Pokemon Trading Cards etc) appeals to children's psychology like no other game. Ironically, the creator of Pokemon went back to his childhood creative roots to fantasize the games; he did not draw on his college psychology lessons.

Child psychologist Christine Wekerle claims that when children play with the Pokemon trading cards, the process of dealing with the characters stimulates the memorizing, computing and categorizing aspects of their cognitive psyche. Likewise, Yuka Nakajima, a New York-based children's social worker claims the Game Boy Pokemon video game plays on human instincts and exploits the emotional aspect of human psychology. It thus stimulates children's psychological development.

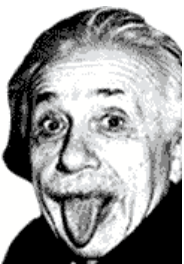
There is anecdotal evidence of fathers eulogizing the benefits of the Nintendo video games; it enables the child to develop a sense of self-worth by mastering a complex, demanding task, it strengthens the community, and while playing the games the child cannot watch regular television etc.

So Pokemon games have developmental and cognitive appeal for the growing child; or so some fathers, child sociologists, psychologists and the Nintendo company, tell us. Then where is the catch?

Again, ironically, it lies in the popularity of the Nintendo/Pokemon. It has spawned an obsession (mania, if you will) such that school kids in America go to any length, even violence, in order to lay their hands on these e-games. Can these obsessions/mania, and the consequent violent behaviour, cast their ominous shadow during the adult lives of these children?

Other child psychologists tell us that the Nintendo video-game systems are mindless, addictive, antisocial, electronic devices. They make children detached, aggressive and antisocial.

Virtual reality/teledildonics



Virtual reality (VR) has become a part of parcel of the cyberworld we live in today. And typical of such a world, even the term itself is contradictory. Virtual means unreal or imaginary or fictitious. Reality is something substantial or tangible. The two terms have been married together to give us out-of-the-world experiences. Predictably, it was the ubiquitous Nintendo that was among the earliest to capitalise on the potential of VR in the form of its e-game system called Virtual Boy

Teledildonics, a revolutionary form of e-sex, utilizes the concepts of VR and touch technology to give frustrated adults the opportunity to enact out their wildest sexual fantasies. Just put on the bodysuit, gloves, goggles, connect to the computer and, through a combination of high-tech audiovisual and tactile sensations, users are free to try on different personalities, perversions, and physical appearances. Two people are recommended, though one can play with the computer as partner. I prefer to call it a form of e-masturbation.

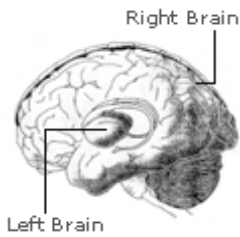
Proponents of teledildonics (and there are many!), like Ruth Westheimer, sex therapist and author of *Sex for Dummies*, tell us that it is definitely the safest form of sex; you cannot contract AIDS, for example, through teledildonics. Others, like Glenn Cartwright, professor of psychology at McGill University, tell us that it spurs the human psyche to grapple with the concept of consciousness. It enables people to explore sexuality, gender roles, personality and identity; a step towards better understanding between the sexes.

On the flip side, it is merely a hideously expensive, high-tech sex-aid; it cannot replace the actual act. Neither can it make their actual love life (if they have one; people who go for these sex-aids usually don't have) any better.

The biggest psychological implication of VR/teledildonics stems from its relationship to reality. If we are to consider reality and fantasy to be opposite ends of a spectrum, VR is juxtaposed in between, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. Even without VR, many people do not know the difference between fantasy and reality. With VR thrown in to

queer the pitch, will it create a new class of schizophrenics? How long will it be before a VR-experiencer goes out to try the real thing? Will VR/teledildonics usher in a whole new world of technology-induced disorientation?

Teenagers and the Internet



Teenagers undergo powerful biological, psychological, intellectual and social changes, all of which produce enormous tension within and around them. Therefore, understandably, the effect of cyberspace and Internet is even stronger for them.

The cyberspace is a tool for dissipation of tension. Adolescents find it easier to fight/fend off their inner demons under cover of the blissful anonymity of the Internet, without the 'bad vibes' from their environment.

Adolescents use the Internet as a leisure and communication tool. They look for friends on WebPages, where they chat, gather information, download music, games, cheats, and play. Their interest centres around leisure time, music, concerts, cinema, parties, games, and last but not the least, the prohibited adult sites.

The Internet provides them with a means to search for and experience an identity; an opportunity to try out a variety of roles. Given the anonymous nature of the Internet, this helps in overcoming anxieties and blockage.



The cyberspace feeds their desire for intimacy and the desire to belong. Communication stretching over continents inspires the acquisition of certain social skills. This experience motivates a shedding of prejudice, and develops tolerance towards others. This in turn aids the development of the flexibility that is required in the adult personality.

But turning towards peer groups goes along with separation from parents and family

The Internet provides a means of self-expression and for acquiring new skills. In order to create Websites they need to attain written, graphic and technical skills. Majority of benign hackers and malevolent crackers are in the 15-24 age group; evidence enough of their intellectual ability. They see it a challenge to hack into a systems built by multinational conglomerates. This may be a stepping stone for them to build a robust system when they become adults themselves.

The positive effects of cyberspace

It contributes to flexibility in thinking, an openness of personality and enriches the imagination.

The virtual world offers an opportunity for experimentation with roles.

Non-linear reality can be a tool for familiarisation with the other variations in their character, even their ideal selves.

It can be a suitable realm for direct examination of the unconscious psyche. Teenagers reflect themselves into this world and the computer becomes the home of their other self; a form of Rorschach test.

Meeting themselves in cyberspace could serve as a therapeutic function similar to that of psychoanalysis.

The negative effects

Role-playing can cause the breaking up, multiplication and decentralisation of the self. It can take them into a world of disguise.

Paranoid or schizophrenic behaviours can result from confusion springing from a multiple personality, in those with a tendency towards them. Personality fragmentation is a possible outcome.

Confusion between the virtual and real worlds may cause the teenager to conceptualise the virtual as real. This may carry with it the danger of neglecting reality.

Computer addiction and shyness

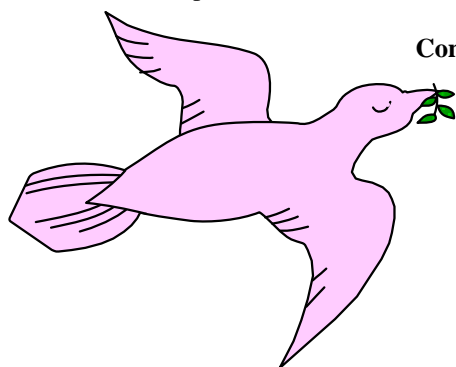
Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University states that teenagers suffering from shyness are likely to become addicted to computers. Computers provide them with the self-confidence they lack in their personal lives. Such youngsters may fail to learn the social skills needed later in life.

The combined effects

However, all said and done, the outlook is not all that gloomy. The combination of negative and positive effects, the plasticity of the teenage psyche and the ability to accommodate to new factors, all carry the promise of a new, multidimensional personality. Even if the teenage personality does break up temporarily, it may be followed by a new form of synthesis in the overall persona.

"Computerwidow(er)s"

Thomas McDonald, a California-based psychologist, has coined this term. According to him, the husband's (less often the wife's) pre-occupation with the 'perfect' computer (as opposed to the 'imperfect' spouse), leads to marital stress and divorce. The computer-obsessed individual becomes impatient with other members of the household because they lack the computer's willingness to obey commands. He becomes withdrawn and unresponsive, preferring to immerse himself for hours on the computer.



Conclusion

The cyber-world is here to stay, whether we realize it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we appreciate it or not, whether we accept it or not. In fact, we have only just experienced the topmost tip of the proverbial cyber-iceberg. So where are we headed as far as our psychological persona vis-à-vis the cyber-world is concerned? I am sure the world had asked itself a similar question after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when the world formally entered the Nuclear age with a big bang (or two; pun unintended!). And just like the world successfully weathered that age, I am sure we shall successfully weather out this one also.

Links to references

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Note by the author

Dr Sanjoy Sanyal (MBBS, MS, MSc) is currently Associate Professor in Department of Clinical Anatomy and Neurosciences, University of Seychelles American Institute of Medicine (USAIM), Seychelles. He wrote this article in December 2005, originally for CONNECT Newsletter, the official newsletter of Computers in Psychiatry Special Interest Group (CIPSIG), now MHISIG, UK. At that time he was consultant surgeon in Ministry of Health, Victoria Hospital, Mahe, Seychelles. The article has been reproduced unabridged by the author for USAIM website for the benefit of its students and anybody else who may be interested in knowing about the psychological effects of the Internet and computers. Keeping in mind the original date of publication, some facts may have become outdated today, and newer developments may have surfaced since then. But the crux of the problem continues.