

Video games: ¿a cultural modification of the game or an addictive solution?¹

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As a psychoanalyst of children and adolescents I want to use this space to expose an issue that worries and interests me and that is related to modifying children's play; this fact is apparently associated with the breakthrough of electronic games. There is no doubt that technology has introduced many changes in our lives, some positive and useful and others that may be questioned, such as the way in which it has been introduced into the world of children, making significant changes to the game. Thinking about the benefits and implications of incorporating technology in children, one could say that, on the one hand, it provides entertainment, the opportunity to create virtual spaces, shorten distances etc., and on the other hand, we can also see that children have lost the enjoyment of playing specific games, those that children used to play with: ball, marbles, jump the rope, little cups, cars, etc. All these toys required the use of the imagination, the creativity to change them and, primarily, the use of the body, vital for achieving the ends, nowadays these have been displaced by virtual "games".

Playing is a vital development activity, since throughout play all the skills that facilitate maturation and learning are put into practice. Children learn through play, with pleasure and entertainment; this is a natural activity that provides satisfaction and it is practiced in all cultures since its inception. Probably, playing has had variations according to the different periods and characteristics of the group; however, it has always had the same function: to exercise, to entertain and to entertain-one self.

Some psychoanalytic thinkers have been concerned about children's play. Freud (1920) mentions about play *"It is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life and that in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the*

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situation. But on the other hand, it is obvious that all their play is influenced by a wish that dominates them the whole time –the wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do.³ He also distinguishes the play as a way to process the detachment, he perceives this fact when watching his grandson playing with a reel and he finds it similar to the child's behavior when his mother is getting away.

Melanie Klein (1929), watching her young patients, postulates that: *"Through play a discharge -of masturbatory fantasies, a projection of unconscious fantasies and a personification in toys or in characters of the world's internal imagos game- is produced. In addition to that through the games they may represent important aspects of the id, the ego and the superego in their more persecutory and protective aspects."*⁴

For Winnicott (1972) "Playing has a place and a time. It is neither found inside, nor outside, that is, it is not a part of the disavowed world, the not-self, what the individual has decided to recognize (With great difficulty, and even with pain) as really external, beyond the reach of the magical domain. To be able to control what is outside is necessary to do things, not just to think or to want, and doing things takes time. Playing is doing"⁵

This author places the game in a space between the mother and the baby and he calls it **Potential Space**; this space changes according to the vital experiences of the baby and the mother and the interaction between both of them. This space is linked to the inner world through the psychosomatic action and the external reality with its own characteristics.

Playing is an achievement of the emotional development and it begins when the child is able to rely on the environment; through playing one can make contact with what is corporal, with people and it allows dealing with anxiety. The ability to play has a sequence: at the beginning, the baby acts as if he were fused to his mother and she is the one that gives him the illusion of omnipotence, when making him feel that she is an extension of himself. In the following months, he begins distinguishing her as another distinct from him. Afterwards, he begins to play alone, in the presence of the mother; at this stage, she is the continent of the drive overflow and of the external reality, incorporating her own playing experience.

In the activity of play, the child uses the external reality by manipulating specific objects at the service of the inner reality; throughout this work he unfolds his ability to

³ Freud, S. (1920) Libro XVIII, *Más allá del principio del placer*, p.17

⁴ Klein, M. (1920) Obras completas, Tomo 1: Cap. La personificación en el juego de los niños

⁵ Winnicott, D. (1972) Realidad y juego

fantasize. Therefore, the game helps him to deal with the aggression, and the destructiveness. The toy-object can be **damaged, destroyed, repaired, got dirty and cleaned, killed and a thousand times revived**, discovering unlimited scopes of imagination, favoring dissociation processes, helping the oscillation from the schizo-paranoid to the depressive position.

What are the video games?

Video games begin to appear after World War II, they come along with TV progresses and electronics development, they are attractive games of mechanical entertainment, which are in a virtual place, they are numerous and diverse and they begin being divided into: action games; recreational; narrative games where the computer is used as a means to tell a story; constructive games, where the player can build, according to his needs, for example, virtual cities; simulation and strategy games.

At the time this article was written, Minecraft, was the favorite game of children under 10 years old; allowing to create virtual worlds, this game, on the one hand, stimulates creative aspects and on the other, addictive ones, especially when the child is alone and without adults or peers with time to share with, as it's the case of a 9 year old boy addicted to Minecraft, this minor, only told stories about the game, giving the sensation that the only existing world was that of Minecraft.

Another patient when telling me what he had done during the weekend, he began by saying that on Friday he had done nothing special and when I inquired what was that "nothing special", he answered that he had played a game on the computer called GTA 5, in this game there are three friends, with certain psychopathic characteristics. The player must identify himself with one of them and invent strategies to win missions. *It is very exciting because, he says, you can do **anything!**: killing, stealing, watching pornography, go anywhere; run over, driving aircraft, machine gun, feeling everything being very real, even the characters have dialogues.* This game gives the player the omnipotent feeling that everything can be done, adding, *"It's so entertaining and engrossing that you can spend hours playing without needing another player."*

He told me that, at school, most of his friends have, already, played it; that he had started late because his parents were apprehensive and that he did not know what would have happened to him if he had started earlier, because *"you feel your power is unlimited, you can do all you think "*. What got my patient's attention was that at his school it was played by 8 years old children.

What worries me, as a child's therapist, it's that our children have already begun to stop playing to become expert users of tablets, video games and computers; what draws the attention is what you see when looking around: children or adults absorbed by their smartphones or their iPads. A 6 years old patient only knows how to play with video games, up to the point that he asks me to touch the palm of his hand (at the touch mode) to start a game. At 6 years old, he hasn't the slightest idea of how to connect with his peers, when another child tries to play with him, he gets furious if he sees in him a potential winner; he doesn't understand the actual games, the ball falls out of his hands because he is not used to take it, or calculate the distances to grab it; he neither has the strength nor the coordination to eject it; he doesn't know how to use color pencils; play dough and temperas upset him. Leaving the session I observe that he, immediately, demands his mother to give him the cell phone, if she doesn't do it so, he insults and attacks her. When he is visited by his classmates, they shut up the whole afternoon playing these electronic games, without any contact with the outside.

In a major newspaper of Chile, the following news, about some teens' addictions to video, it appears: *"For 4 years I go out once a week at most, and sometimes it takes me two months to leave my room... and every time I go out, I always get that feeling of insecurity that makes me desperately miss this place in which I am right now... away from all, with a screen barrier and an instrument called the Internet ..."* some of these teens have altered their family lives and the life with their peer group and thus they live in extreme isolation, even some of them have stopped eating to keep on playing.

The video game keeps the child busy in front of the computer screen, the smartphone or the game console, in an activity that does not require another to participate (in this sense, it's seen as a mechanism of entertainment by the adults). These games cause an "adhesive attachment" that varies from child to child; in some of them this attachment prevents the subject's identification with significant figures.

Time and entertainment happen with objects-things that are in a different dimension. Reflecting on this, I have several questions to pose.

How does a young child react, when he feels invaded by a series of stimuli out of touch with reality?

What has changed? How addiction to video games begins? What decides the child to replace traditional cars, dolls and balls, with these new "toys"?

Why does the minor need to entertain himself this way?

One may think that this happens because of a failure in parental caregiving representations (in the external and internal world), emptiness and loneliness makes the minor incapable of resorting to these identifications in times of stress. The lack of them produces a kind of empty space that sometimes is filled with new solutions.

I think that, in this way, the use of video games is acquiring addictive characteristics; this reflection makes me turn to the work of Joyce McDougall who noted, while she was interviewing the mother of a young patient referring to her incipient alcoholism, saying, "*The problem is that often I don't know if I'm sad or in a bad mood, if I'm hungry, if I am anxious or if I want to make love, then I start to drink*".

This author finds that the addictive behavior purpose is: "*To liberate oneself from affective states*"; she discovers when she quitted smoking that "*I did it when I was happy or excited, anxious or angry, after dinner, before breakfast, or even when I had a difficult job or a serious phone call. In other words, every time I was victim of a particular emotion, the cigar with its smoke screen dimmed my sensibility and allowed me to escape from my emotional experience, neutralizing, thus, a vital part of my inner world*" (McDougall, J. 1998)

We could say that the addictive object, whatever it is, is an element that replaces a distress or an emotion that can't be represented and that when it is used causes pleasure and sometimes it's able to neutralize, to disperse, and to lessen painful or uncomfortable feelings, possibly of early origin.

What could be the origin of addictions and of this one in particular? As analysts we can say that the quality in the early mother-child relationship is structuring in the way of functioning of the psychic apparatus. According to Winnicott, in the first weeks after the birth, "*An Enough Good Mother*"⁶ tends to feel fused with the baby; he refers to this state as **Primary Maternal Concern**. At first, mother and son form a unit, in which they feed each other; in this encounter the mother libidinizes and, narcissistically, invests the child; this allows the baby to exercise his mobility, to develop his emotions and cognitive characteristics. If this fails, the child will be the one to supply his mother's faults.

⁶ Italics are mine

Regarding the intensity of the bond, McDougall (1998) states: *"Given the anxieties, fears and desires that the mother experiences and transmits to the child, she runs the risk of causing what can be conceptualized as an "addictive to his presence" and to his care relationship. In other words, it is the mother who is in a state of "dependency" of the baby. "*

Sometimes, it is the mother who is not given to that necessary state of dependence, and it's the baby who is left with the feeling of hunger for affection; in this sense, the mother has failed in the ability to create in him the illusion that she is a part of him, that she depends on him. This feeling that there is "something missing" is such an early experience that is not represented, and that is maybe what it's trying to be filled with what is "addictive".

In a group of babies` observation, in which each observer reported about her own experience with the baby observed, all of them (4) reported that since birth these babies were exposed by their mothers or by their caregivers to TV programs, especially while they were feeding them. All of them were astonished and impacted by the loud noises, and bothered by these morning shows` contents being, predominantly, sensationalist and violent.

The observers thought that these mothers` difficulty to devote themselves to the exclusive care of their babies and to support them; the observers also found the mothers` need to be supported by a talking object no matter what it could say. They also noted that some mothers went away leaving their babies in the hands of caregivers that, in their turn, most of the time left them alone, watching TV. Could one think that the children`s state of dependence, as well as the need to be close to their mothers during the first months of life, is as strong as to scare the mothers and it`s from that feeling that they escape?

The Father is significant and his role is meaningful in the structuring of the child`s mental apparatus, as his presence supports the mother; he is able to hold her when she stops being "one" to devote herself to take care of the baby. It is transcendental to the father to recognize that the mother has had a child by him, that both have carried out a project of love, therefore she desires and needs to be narcissistically valued and recognized as such.

The presence of the father comes to providing peace and security, while confirming that what the mother has lost with the birth of the baby (a part of her and

her own identity as she is no longer one, but she is one for two) it's a product of the love of both.

Therefore, the child requires, through constant cares, introjecting mother and father caregivers capable of containing and managing states of suffering or overexcitement; if this is accomplished, the baby can identify himself with these supporting parents and he, by himself, to start relieving his own states of tension and disquiet. When the calming representations of the internalized good parents, with which he could be identified, fail, it also fails the ability to identify himself with those figures that make him feel calm and quiet, then he will search in the external world some solution and he'll turn to an object-thing, to replace the tension and the pain of the concrete absence of the mother.

To the extent that the baby starts maturing, longer periods in which he may remain alone are being established and, in front of that lack, he is able to resort to his own resources, as the use of transitional objects (Winnicott). Then, it can be said that "**The addictive**" is a substitute for the transitional object, i.e. it introjects some aspect replacing the maternal function, but that does not fulfill that task.

McDougall (1998) calls them "**transitory objects**" and not transitional, since they only temporarily solve the emotional tension, as they are somatic but not psychological solutions, replacing the function of the missing mother's primary task. McDougall refers specifically to addictions to substances or alcohol. When I was reading her, I learned about her way of understanding these difficulties and I thought her concepts could be applied to any addiction. Often this is related to the difficulty of children to be alone, to transfer the absence of the mother to a substitute object that does not fail and that is always present in order to fill a void that her presence did not fill. According to the author, these transitory objects are used against three threatening mental states:

1- It may be an attempt to defend himself from neurotic anxieties: The conflict would revolve around the adult's right to have loving and sexual relationships and around the narcissistic pleasure in work and in social relationships.

2- It may be an attempt to deal with acute anxiety states (often, of paranoid nature) or depression (accompanied by feelings of inner death)

3- In many cases, there is also an escape when facing unconscious psychotic anxieties, such as fear of physical or psychological fragmentation or the

fundamental horror to vacuum, in which one runs the risk of wavering the sense of identity.

Facing the addiction to video games in adults, I have noticed that the point number one in the rank makes more sense, as it is often used in replacement of the couple, as a form of narcissistic satisfaction. It is the case of a patient with a neurotic structure that, with difficulties in socializing, when coming back from his work, he begins playing video games, filling moments of solitude; when playing he forgets that while all have a partner, his partners are the videogames.

In children, sections 2 and 3 of the classification become relevant, as they are looked for as a way to relieve anxious moments against loneliness and helplessness. The video game comes to cover or supplement the need not to be alone, for example, a 9 year old boy, addicted to them, used them at night when everyone was asleep, because at that time he did not have the company of his family and he felt helpless. Another child of 6 years old, in the first interviews and during the first sessions, talks to me about his games, thinking that we are in one of them, giving the impression that "he is" to the extent that he remains linked to these games, i.e. he feels complete when linked with them, generating in me a great anguish and the feeling of not being in the same world.

As a psychoanalyst I am impressed by the strength with which technology has entered in our lives: we got used to see our children connected to the TV as a way to hide our absence and, would it also be a way of reducing the weight of the presence?

Then they, as soon as they can, look for support with video games; it's common to see children at recess having besides them a telephone that makes them forget their loneliness or their lack of friends. Pornography is seen by children since they are 8 years old through their smartphones, causing them all kind of anxieties, because they do not understand the sexual act and even less the way sexuality is exposed. A child that age talks at the table of "something strange" that alerts the mother and, when investigating, the boy explains that through the GTA game he had gotten into a bar of prostitutes and, with great difficulty, (because he did not understand) he explained what they did.

Thinking about the addictions that some children present, we see they have replaced traditional games by electronic ones. You could say that the mechanism of these new addictions is similar to what happens with the addiction presented by some individuals to substances and alcohol. In that vein, we might add that there is a connection between addictions and the blurring of the family as the holder body, as the structuring source of identifications, with the deficit of the maternal role and the absence of the father figure as the model of the law.

There are cultural and historical aspects that began with deficient parental roles, placing in a prominent place at present the marked increase in women's participation in all spheres of social life; initially, it started during economic crisis, wars and it continued with the struggle for power between sexes. Today, women have entered the workforce to stay; the parenting is a matter that remains in the hands of third parties that not always are prepared and almost never are family members.

Children sometimes wait long hours for parents to come home and others simply fall asleep waiting for them, as in the case of Mary, whose parents bought a house on the outskirts of Santiago looking for better air and space for the family but they did not consider that they work far from home and when they reach it, M and his three siblings are already asleep, and they only see their parents a few moments in the morning amid the hustle of getting up and during weekends when there is little time to share.

The family has undergone significant changes such as the inclusion of assembled families, single-parent family, homoparental families etc. Sometimes, this institution has failed in its role of support, in favoring of positive introjects of parents couple, united in a loving and fertile link in their ability to promote integration and symbolization processes. It can also be seen how other institutions like school, have failed in the collaboration of the training processes, leaving young people in an attitude of helplessness and in the search of fallacious models that cover with immediacy the absence and the emptiness.

The media have also influenced its rapid growth, which is not related to the actual time of the subject; it overwhelms with too much information, so difficult to process and to digest; to this it has to be added the consumerist need imposed by times, which damages the ability to think and to reflect. In short, "What is addictive" comes to replace parents as necessary ideals or to replace good enough parents that contribute to the shaping of the character and, when missing, they are replaced by narcissistic ideals.

Children, who come to our consultation for treatment, are faced with the simple and modest box games, that one that contains the typical materials. At first, it may be a source of contempt because they find it boring for the simplicity of its implements; afterwards, they begin to feel a deep appreciation for it because it helps them to create, to symbolize, to think, with concrete elements... "The Let's do"... begins to fly and so do the imagination, the memories, the conflicts and the ability to repair.

As psychoanalysts, we can think of the profound changes that the culture, the family have experienced, besides the great technological progress. No doubt it has benefited us, but also it has hurt us. It is not the purpose of this paper to qualify or disqualify the progresses of technology, or video games', considering that some of them

suggest the possibility of creating, in others, however, the realism of sadism encourages the omnipotence and the discharge.

I think that as children's psychoanalysts, we should promote the proper use of technology that often contributes to development; we must also consider how it is used, why it is used and how it is used. Perhaps as children analysts we could encourage and promote the effects of the mother-child early relationship, encourage the gathering of the family to talk, to make known the positive effects of pleasant meetings between parents and children and, finally, to stimulate the play in children, the one that allows touching, smelling and fantasizing and, perhaps, why no! guiding our work, spreading what we know, in order to prevent and not always to cure.

To conclude, I want to quote Pablo Neruda who says: "***In my house I have gathered toys big and small, without which I could not live. The boy that does not play is not a boy, but the man who does not play has forever lost the boy that lived inside him, and whom he will greatly miss. I have also built my house as a toy and I play in it from morning to night.***"

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