# VIDEOGAMES
## STEPPING UP TO THE NEXT LEVEL

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Videogames in my life

Like many people, I love to play computer games. I have three games that I like very much: Counter-strike, GTA Vice City, and GTA3. Some months ago, I played GTA Vice City every day. I was addicted to that game. So every nite, I couldn't sleep. On those days, I said to myself, "Tomorrow, I will not play". But I didn't stop. As soon as I came home, I played the game, and it was the same every night. I dream about the game. Some months later, I stopped playing because I throught the game had lost its charm. And now I can sleep better.

What I'm trying to say is that even though a game is cool, we shouldn't always play it because we could become addicted and not sleep at night. The effect of the game could impact our friends.

Daniela, 11 years old

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## 🎮 Presentation

After dedicating the first booklet, Kids and TV: Watching Wisely, to television, the second issue of this series now analyses videogames. Learning about videogames is crucial to helping children and young people become more critically minded about this much appreciated activity. Several studies have shown that parents find it difficult to deal with this reality—which, despite not being a recent one, has been in constant evolution because of the launching of new games and the permanent technological developments that have intensified the diversification of game platforms, such as the Internet, mobile phones, and portable consoles.

This project presents the conclusions of previous investigation projects as well as those of an exploratory study done with parents and children aged 10 to 12 years old. About 150 children involved in the research were given voice through creative writing and drawings. A selection of those materials illustrates this booklet. This publication was created within a Media Education project developed by researchers of the Communication and Society Research Centre of the University of Minho, an institution that has been studying the relationship between young people and the media for over two decades. This project was awarded the first prize for European Media Education by the Evens Foundation (Belgium) in 2009 and won the 'Evens Prize for Media Education 2009'.

Joana, 10 years old

# 🎮 What is a videogame?

The difficulty in defining videogames starts with the name. Computer game, videogame, or even digital game are some of the terms used to refer to them, depending on the type of platform used to play—computers, consoles connected to TV sets, or portable consoles. Moreover, mobile phones are also becoming popular playing devices. It is also important to mention the typical machines that can be found in cafés, games rooms, or Lan houses (places similar to cyber cafés where customers pay to use a computer with Internet access and take part in a local network with the objective of playing online with other users).

In conclusion, and because it is necessary to use a consensual term, the word "videogame" seemed appropriate. Beyond the meaning itself, the use of the element video (whose Latin root, ver, means see) underlines the visual factor and the multimedia features that characterise this type of entertainment. In a videogame, the player interacts with a



My favourite games are GTA and Sims 2. At the moment, I play Sims 2 because the game is about real-life people. A person can buy certain items, but when the money runs out, she has to search for a job online or in the newspaper. The characters can throw parties, but to invite guests, she has to use the telephone to call people.

Catarina, 11 years old
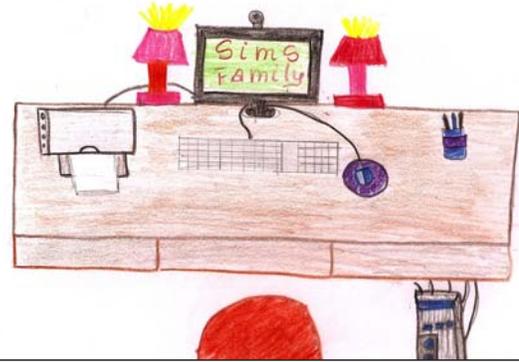

Daniela, 10 years old

digital device that allows the player to dive into a virtual environment where there is some kind of goal to achieve. Games also involve some sort of opposition and are organised by a set of rules.

Due to their features, videogames are classified as media together with traditional media like newspapers, radio, and TV, and new media such as the Internet and mobile phones. They are essentially forms of entertainment but also vehicles of information. Videogames constitute cultural objects that convey ideas and values. Therefore, they should be analysed taking their creators and distributors in to account, but above all considering the way they are used and how they impact young people's daily lives.

Magda, 11 years old



Videogames are the modern version of the games of previous generations. Videogames can be used as learning tools, and they are attractive and contribute to the psychological well-being of the player. They can foster new knowledge and new skills. But when used in excess, they can have harmful effects.

Ana, 11 years old

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# 🎮 Videogames and technological evolution

The first videogame, Spacewar, was launched in the early 1960s in the USA, but it was not until a decade later that two other games (Computer Space and Pong) celebrated the birth of this form of entertainment. From then on, the launching of consoles and personal computers proliferated, which allowed for more sophisticated games, a lot of which became successful worldwide.

Today, the videogame industry is vast, often compared to that of cinema in Hollywood. The development of some games is done in various countries simultaneously and includes tasks such as storyboarding, designing, scripting, creating the universe and voice of the characters, advertising, and distributing.

It is interesting that videogames have played a major part in equipping our houses with increasingly sophisticated devices. The graphic components of modern computers are now more powerful not only to allow for easier Internet access and more updated word processors, but also to run games that require technically powerful equipment.

Considering the amount of game devices that are permanently launched as well as the diversification of the offer of games with endless interactive possibilities in conjunction with the development of the Internet, it is all about what the future holds in terms of videogames.

Bárbara, 10 years old

# 🎮 Different types of games

The essential elements of a videogame are the existence of some kind of challenge, the game environments, and the objectives that the player has to pursue. This universe is managed by a set of rules and targets that the player only gets familiar with after long periods of contact with the game.

As happens with television and films, videogames are also organised by typologies, depending on their different elements. Although there is no consensus in terms of an unambiguous categorisation, it is easy to understand that there are differences between a car race game and a strategy game, or between one played against the computer and another played against other players (live or online). Some games take two to three hours to finish whereas others may take weeks to complete. Videogames are therefore a diverse and complex reality.

Daniela, 11 years old

Carina, 11 years old

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## 🎮 Interaction with games

One of the most fascinating features for players is the possibility to interact with fantasy worlds as if entering a story, embodying a character (also called avatar), and having power over the course of the story.

The idea of a player fighting dragons alone in the bedroom seems to belong to the realm of imagination, but the increasing development of the Internet has given players the chance to play Lan games in interactive play communities, so this activity does not necessarily lead to social isolation. Nevertheless, some players may show signs of alienation from reality when they have more contact with the people they play games with than with the ones who are a part of their real lives. It is crucial to pay attention to children— when they are wired to a network of players, are they connected to reality or isolated from the world?

According to some authors, it is possible to create social dynamics through videogames, such as groups or clans that constitute virtual communities of players gathered around common interests and sharing knowledge and opinions about a game with their fellow players, as well as forming teams and solving problems.

The interactions that children and young people establish through games are simpler and probably more frequent. Borrowing a game, sharing strategies to overcome obstacles in the game, or simply meeting to play (online or offline) are forms of entertainment that promote interaction.

It is important to bear in mind that there is some danger of losing social ties due to excessive use of videogames, which normally manifests itself in the decrease of interaction with friends, family, and people in general. This can be an accurate indicator of excessive consumption. Another major issue is online data sharing. Children can become obsessed with the idea of thriving within the game community and therefore give more information than they should without knowing how it can be used.

When we are on vacation, you come to my house and you play my games, and you know what games I play.
Alright, but then you need to come to my house and play my games.

Sara, 11 years old

One day, during the winter holidays, I was at home doing nothing when I heard the telephone ring. André asked me if I wanted to go to his house to play computer games. I accepted the invitation because I had nothing to do at home. I was very happy.

Gonçalo, 11 years old
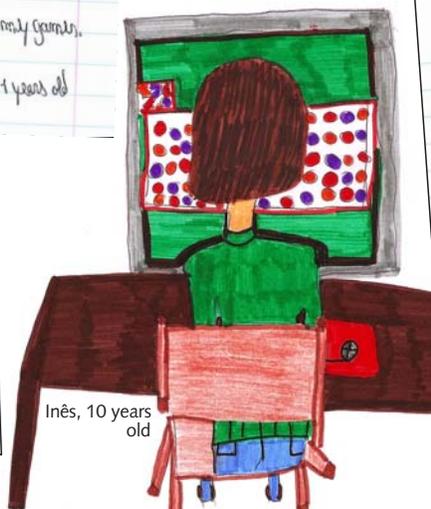
Inês, 10 years old

If I were a videogame creator, I would creat a game with several avatars. It would be a multiplayer game for the PS3 called Rising Hero. The game would have time gateways and villains interested in world domination. All players would have online friends. The heads of the thieves would be the worst character. The best part of game is that I would be a character with two places: One will be in class, a normal boy with a normal teacher; the other will be out of school, an avatar, a "neo human" who will save the world.

André, 11 years old

Ana Carolina, 11 years old
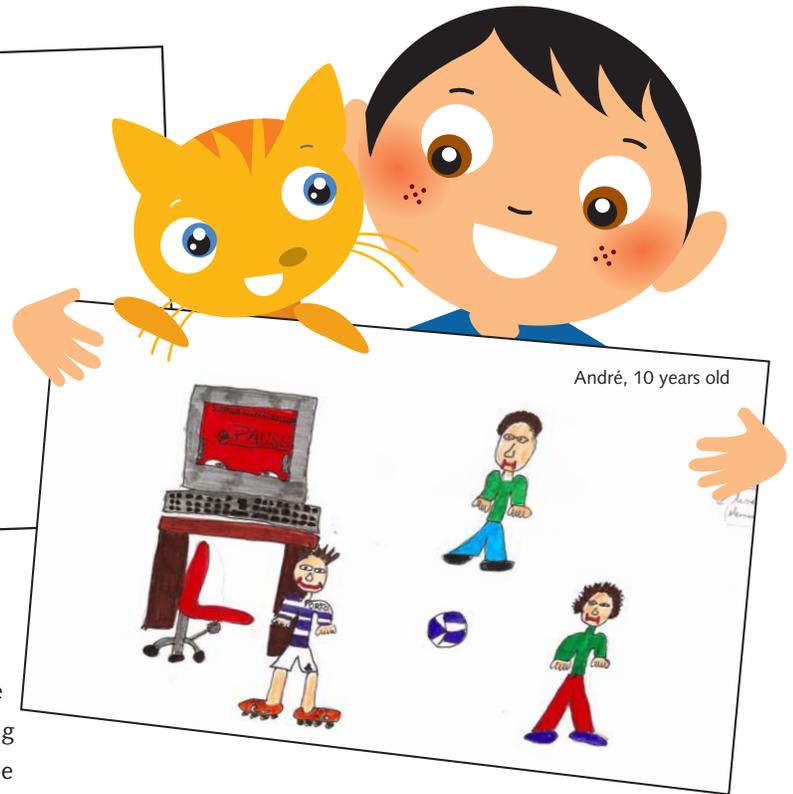
André, 10 years old

## 🎮 Potential of videogames

Videogames are mainly regarded as entertainment or free time activity, just as reading a book, listening to music, going to the cinema, or playing sports, whose contribution to the development of physical and cognitive skills is commonly accepted. The imaginary worlds of images, sounds, and stories of videogames can be a good way to stimulate players' fantasy and creativity.

Moreover, recent research has underlined their potential for cognitive development because achieving success requires decision-making skills, speed, and coordination. Furthermore, for many children, videogames are the entrance gate to the digital world.

The motivational factor is often referred to as key in videogames. If the level of challenge is low, players tend to lose their interest. On the other hand, if the game is challenging and its objectives are perceived as attainable, the player will commit fully to reaching the targets.

These experiences can be interesting in children's upbringing: When they try hard, they achieve their goals, and these become more and more challenging as the level of complexity increases. Nevertheless, it is necessary to find games with adequate levels of difficulty because an excessively difficult game may lead to frustration.

# 🎮 Videogames and violence

The possibility to simulate situations of extreme and increasing realism makes games both fascinating and threatening. Videogames are also appealing because of the sense of power they give to players as everything seems extremely real. On the other hand, when this is combined with violence, gunshots, death, and blood spraying the screen, the situation legitimately worries educators.

Physical violence together with cultural discrimination and gender stereotypes are topics that raise social debate, as happens with television. Although some of these concerns are recurrent, violence is an even more relevant topic when it comes to videogames because the level of interactivity is much higher, as is the immersion of the players in the narrative.

The appeal of videogames has several explanations—the release of tension and anxiety, the search for new experiences and emotions, and entertainment. However, the player's personal history is the key to understanding this issue. Some studies highlight the long-term cumulative effects, claiming that long exposure to violent contents can lead to greater vulnerability to violence as well as to desensitisation. In some cases, the pre-existence of aggressive tendencies can cause young people to look for violent media products and contents. Therefore, their consumption can reinforce the propensity to aggressiveness.

For me, it is okay for the videogames to be violent. The creators don't create them with the objective of causing players to become violent. Just because the games are violent doesn't mean that we need to avoid them; we can't allow that this affect us.

Fernando, 11 years old

Luis, 12 years old

Mariana, 10 years old
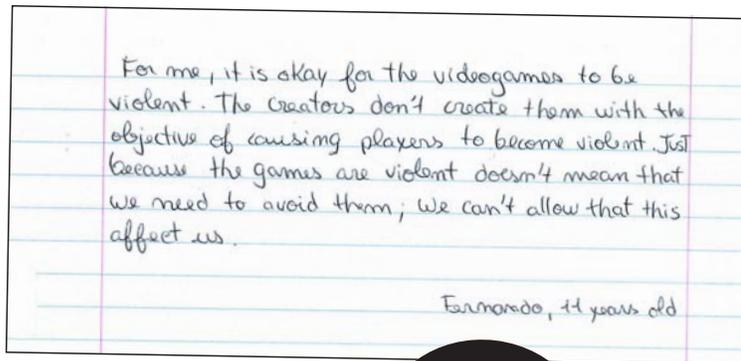
## 🎮 Excessive use and addiction to videogames

In the study "Portugal's Networked Society 2008", 12% of the people who were surveyed (mainland Portuguese citizens over 15 years old) said they played videogames. Of this group, 16.8% played longer than seven hours a week (an average of over an hour a day). A study by Obercom, Observatory for the Media, also stated that had the population of the study been younger, the number of players could have been significantly higher.

The absence of this type of data about people under the age of 15 makes it difficult to say how much time they spend playing videogames. However, there is a general perception that they dedicate a considerable amount of time to this activity, which raises concerns among educators, given the addictive potential of videogames.

Children play games because they are amusing and give them access to sensations and activities that they are normally not allowed to experience, such as driving a car, flying an aeroplane, or being the star player of their favourite team. Playing a game gives them an opportunity to forget about the world around them, similar to what happens when they are watching television, reading a book, or engaging in some other sort of mind-absorbing activity.

It is important to pay attention to whether the time spent playing videogames leads to isolation, or if children stop interacting with their parents, siblings, other relatives, or friends due to excessive use.



Nowadays, it's possible to finish a game in only four hours. If I were a videogame creator, I would creat a game that would take longer to complete than any game I've ever played.

Diogo, 11 years old.



When I play a videogame, I learn how to create new worlds and levels that I can share on the Internet. I also learn that some games shouldn't be played for a very long period of time because they are addictive. These games can impede learning and school performance.

João, 11 years old.

Ana Rita, 11 years old

## 🎮 Playing rules

The hectic pace of modern life together with the extremely diversified offer of technological products causes children to find ways to fill in the periods of time when there is nothing special for them to do. Parents often choose to forbid videogames, expecting to create room for different types of activities that involve more interaction and less sedentary activity. However, if children are not given real alternatives, computers and consoles can easily be replaced by television or mobile phones. Diversifying interactive activities that exclude screens and technological gadgetry is one of the most important responsibilities of parents. It is difficult to manage the amount of time spent playing. There is no ideal time limit. Therefore, common sense should be used in considering the personal characteristics of the player, the type of atmosphere created by the game, the set of rules previously negotiated with the child, and the importance of promoting diversified activities.

Depending on the cases, it can be important to establish and negotiate reasonable and coherent rules from an early stage, and it is crucial that those rules are formulated based on the child's commitment to them. For that reason, the playing rules should be appropriately explained. Depending on each specific case, they should account for children's age, their level of development, and the characteristics of the game itself.

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# 🎮 Videogame content ratings

In Portugal, the responsibility to rate shows in terms of age groups and quality is up to the Commission for the Classification of Films (Comissão de Classificação de Espectáculos, "CCE"). This organ of the Ministry of Culture also rates videogames using the Pan-European Game Information rating system, which was created to help parents make more informed and critical decisions and purchases concerning videogames.

The classification by the General Inspection of Cultural Activities is obligatory and done by the labeling of videogames considering two criteria: age and content. As far as age is

concerned, this system does not contemplate the level of difficulty nor the skills required to play a game, but rather the adequacy in terms of children and young people's protection.

This information is complemented by symbols referring to the content of the games. A short list of these symbols is presented bellow, as well as some of the criteria used in the ratings. In case consumers disagree with any of the ratings, complaints and comments can be submitted online via the PEGI website.

**PEGI 4**
The content of videogames with this rating is considered to be appropriate for all ages. The child should not be able to associate any of the characters on the screen with real-life people. Characters in the game should be totally imaginary. The game should not have sounds or images that might scare young people.

**PEGI 6**
In this age group, children can be exposed to a higher level of violence. However, aggression should only be turned against imaginary characters. Partial nudity can be allowed, but never in a sexual context.

**PEGI 12**
In this age group, children might be exposed to slightly more explicit violence, as long as it only involves imaginary characters. Any type of violence against recognisably human or animal characters should not be graphic. Slightly more explicit nudity might be presented.

**PEGI 16**
This rating is applicable when the representation of violent or sexual scenes resembles real life situations. More extreme bad language, the concept of the use of tobacco and drugs, and the depiction of criminal activities can be content of games with this label.

**PEGI 18**
The adult classification is applicable when the level of violence presented by the game is extreme or includes elements of specific types of violence. Extreme violence is more difficult to define because it can often be subjective. Nevertheless, these depictions of violence can cause a feeling of shock or revulsion in the player or viewer.

**Gambling**
This game encourages or teaches gambling.

**Bad language**
This game contains obscene language.

**Sex**
This game portrays nudity, sexual activities, or sexual references.

**Discrimination**
This game contains discriminatory representations or other contents prone to encourage discriminatory perspectives.

**Violence**
This game contains representations of violence.

**Drugs**
This game refers to or portrays the use of drugs.

**Online gameplay**
This game can be played online.

**Fear**
This game can be frightening.

Fonte: PEGI

Visit the following sites for further information:
Show Classification Commission— Comissão de Classificação de Espectáculos (www.cce.org.pt/jogos1.htm); Pan European Game Information—PEGI (www.pegi.info/pt/index); or other web sites such as Learn and Play with EA of the company Electronic Arts (www.aprendaejoguecomaea.com) or UMIC—Knowledge Society Agency in Safe Internet Use (www.seguranet.pt).

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### Suggestions for schools and teachers

**1. Educational games.** Some trends in education claim that videogames should be used for learning. Considering the interest, emotions, and motivation they evoke, the idea is to use that power in educational contexts to teach scholastic content. The main challenge is to find games that combine the pedagogical factor and the entertainment components inherent to games. In contrast with commercial games, the investment in educational games is in no way comparable.

 **2. Educating to use games.** If the school system ignores youth cultures, it is possibly sending out the message that it is irrelevant in young people's lives. Creating tasks and activities that allow young people to vocalise their habits and preferences and compare them to their classmates' can be an interesting strategy in raising awareness of excessive use. Moreover, these types of initiatives also stimulate diversity and the willingness to experience different game-related activities. It is also important to motivate students to reflect upon game contents in a critical and constructive way.

**3. Videogames as reference.** Identifying the factors that trigger the fondness of videogames is an interesting exercise that can make children use them as tools in traditional learning environments. It is not only about making the learning process fun; to do so would imply that children do not enjoy learning. Games can be used as a reference to explain the meaning of focus or to suggest creative writing tasks in which children have to picture themselves inside the story and then adapt or write a plot for the game. Videogames can also be used as examples. Therefore, the more challenging the game is, the better it is, as keeping it simple is not always the most productive option for schools.



Verónica, 11 years old



Mafalda, 10 years old

## Suggestions for families

Even when parents feel that their childhoods were different from those of their children, learning more about young people's imagery and universe is definitely a rewarding challenge. Every child is different, and in that sense, it is up to the family to decide what is best for the child in terms of game experiences.

**1. Supervising the purchase of videogames.** By doing this, parents become familiar with what they are buying as far as the age of the child is concerned. Age rating of videogame packages is obligatory and extremely helpful.

**2. Suggesting different types of games** to diversify the types of game experiences.

**3. Combining different types of games and different ways of playing** by suggesting games in which there is interaction with other elements, highlighting the social potential of the activity, encouraging communication, and sharing experiences.

**4. Playing in common rooms of the house.** TV sets should be placed in rooms shared by the whole family, instead of in children's rooms. This advice is obviously hard to follow when it comes to portable devices.

**5. Playing together with the children.** This can be an excellent opportunity to spend time with them, by talking about the game while having fun and positively reinforcing the child's success in the game.

**6. Defining the duration.** As previously stated, it is not possible to indicate an "ideal" time limit of the use of videogames. Nevertheless, excessive use is easy to identify. In such cases, it is important to define what, for how long, and when children can play. Try to establish some rules together with the children so that they feel engaged in respecting and following them. It is easier to say "yes" than "no". However, it is critical that parents fully explain their decisions when the answer is "no".

**7. Beware of online games.** When videogames take place in online communities, young people frequently interact with strangers. It is vital to warn children not to reveal personal information. Moreover, parents should empower their children so that they recognise and denounce inadequate behaviours.

People of all ages and social status play videogames as one of their favourite free time activities. For that reason, the European Commission has published information on this matter:
- "Protection of consumers, in particular young people, through the labelling of certain video games and computer games according to age group", Council Resolution of 1 March 2002 (2002/C 65/02).
- "Protection of consumers, in particular minors, in respect of the use of video games", communication of the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, 2008.