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eSocial Networking and eSports

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On a physical level *Homo sapiens* (Latin: ‘wise man’) have changed little over the last 20,000 years. Nonetheless, there has been a tremendous evolution in our lifestyle (at least for the majority), and this has been the consequence of a multitude of significant discoveries, inventions and revelations that plaster the mosaic of human history.

The discovery of fire, the first printing press, and the exploitation of nuclear power are but several examples of noteworthy innovations that have transformed the way we experience our lives. For the moment we live in the digital age, an era of computers and electronics, of instantaneous data transmission and immense processing power. However, just as our discoveries unlock new ways of thinking and uncover novel existential challenges, so too do they bring unique dangers into our lives.

Fire, after all, can both burn and illuminate.

In this chapter, we explore some of the dangers that face us in today’s society; for while we may no longer need fear the ravenous *Smidodon populator* (sabre-tooth tiger) or the spread of *Variola vera* (smallpox), we face instead a set of new perils that have never before stalked the surface of this earth.

The internet

The internet and the various ways it can be used have become integral parts of our lives, particularly in developed countries like Australia. Yet what really is the internet, and how did it come about?

From the perspective of users, the internet is often seen as a vague collection of resources accessible with a computer; in addition to being a tool that facilitates communication between millions of people and devices around the world regardless of distance. From a more technical perspective the internet is an infrastructure consisting of interconnected computer networks all around the globe involved in the distribution of digital data.¹

A brief history

The development of the internet as we know it today began in the 1960s, and actually owes its inception to the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.² After the launch of Sputnik (the first artificial earth satellite) by the USSR, the United States established its Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which soon came up with the idea of a computer network that could assist the coordination and control of military resources.

The vast potential of an electronic information network began to be realised more extensively, and it was not long before American universities began looking at the internet not as a weapon, but rather as a tool for collating intellectual resources, an aspect which remains one of its primary functions today. In 1973, global networking became a reality with international connections between universities in the United States, England and Norway.³

By 1990, the power of the internet was widely recognised. The introduction of newsgroups, e-mail and publicly available electronic databases had firmly established the internet in

dozens of countries around the world, and the growing supply of personal computers gave the internet an immediate, easily realised power for the individual at home. It had taken the internet less than a generation to carve its way into the public domain.

The internet as a force of good

Our lives have changed immensely with the invention of the internet. In many ways, the world has become smaller, both locally and globally. No longer do we need to drive down to our local library to read a textbook, or go to the shopping centre to make a purchase. Of course, many of us still perform these activities, but at times it seems almost as if we do them as part of a superfluous routine (a side salad to a steak); no longer requirements for getting about our lives but rather actions we take because we are, at heart, creatures of habit.

The internet has made life easier. Online shopping sites like eBay and Amazon have become extremely popular, and with good reason. Not only do they often provide goods and/or services at relatively affordable prices, but they also supply such a wide variety of products that it has become considerably easier to obtain material or intellectual items that we desire. The world has opened in the sense that it is now easily possible to purchase anything from a cheap scarf to an independent film, even if they were made and distributed halfway across the planet.

Perhaps by making our world ‘smaller’, the internet in some ways serves as a vehicle that promotes understanding between the many different cultures and peoples around the globe. Certainly, in concert with the globalisation of affordable travel, the internet facilitates a more familiar interaction between people of diverse cultures; it remains to be seen, however, whether this increasing familiarity will breed acceptance and appreciation or instead the escalation of an intransigent intolerance.

As an information tool, the internet has developed into a convenient and largely truthful source of knowledge. It's so easy to search and learn about some abstract concept, or research some obscure piece of history about a faraway land. The internet can also provide up-to-date, relevant local information such as weather forecasts or sporting results, such that for the 21st century Australian teenager the printed newspaper is almost a redundancy.

What does this mean in terms of education and intelligence? Are we as a general population becoming smarter in the vaunted presence of the internet? Or is the converse true?

The free encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, is the sixth most commonly visited website, with over 20 million articles and an estimated 365 million readers worldwide.⁴ Using it as an information source has, however, often been disparaged, particularly by academics who cite the fact that anyone is allowed to modify or write articles. Indeed, a recent study estimated that 7% of Wikipedia edits are vandalism, defined as 'modifications made in bad faith, introducing spam and other inappropriate content'.⁵

Despite this statistic, however, Wikipedia is a towering symbol of civilisation, altruism, and a human willingness to contribute without material gain. The fact that all its 20 million articles have been written voluntarily and without financial compensation is not only an unprecedented display of solidarity, but also a powerful demonstration of how the internet can be used as a force of good.

While the internet can undeniably serve as a powerful educational tool, it also facilitates a very wide range of non-academic (and arguably detrimental) activities. Two of the most fashionable and perhaps concerning of these are eSports and social networking, and both will be discussed in greater depth a little later.

The internet as a force of evil

Definitively labelling something as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ is a childish and somewhat ambiguous endeavour that can lead to potentially dangerous behaviour. Indeed, trying to apply definitions to what these two broad categories really mean is surprisingly difficult, and it can effectively be argued that morality itself merely refers to a set of culture-specific social norms.

Therefore, to preface this section of the chapter, we shall acknowledge that there exists a continuum between what is good and what is evil, and delineating this dichotomy is simply a way of structuring an argumentative essay.

How then has the internet exerted a negative influence on our lives?

We discussed previously how the internet has made life much more convenient and that it is now much easier to obtain material and/or intellectual items that we desire. However, convenience that is not tempered by moderation has obvious unhealthy implications. Increasing numbers of people are living sedentary lifestyles, and many spend hours each day on the internet. The internet can provide everything we need, from buying clothing to ‘meeting’ others socially, and all without having to venture out into the dangerous sunshine.

This increasingly sedentary lifestyle has been a major contributor to the exponential rise in rates of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease in Australia.⁶ The internet might now be a necessity, but it has only become so through our own actions, actions which reflect a lifestyle that sacrifices effort on the altar of convenience in a temple of consumerism. How necessary is it for us to use the internet to buy some exclusive international product, or ‘surf the net’ for pearls of information? While it could be argued that the internet has allowed us to celebrate and embrace cultural diversity by bringing together people from all over the world, by doing so it has in many ways *diminished* our own individuality and diversity. We are all using

the same internet, having access to the same electronic resources and using the same technology; are we ourselves then all becoming similar?

While the internet has been hailed as a convenient source of knowledge, this can cut both ways. It is easy to imagine how information can be a double-edged blade, capable of many forms of enlightenment, some of them undesirable. Just as the written word can spread knowledge and understanding, so too can it disseminate lies, mistruth and propaganda.

Verdict

While the internet has undoubtedly changed our lives, it is hard to say whether it has done so in predominantly positive or negative ways. Like many tools, it can be put to a variety of uses, and whether this eventually proves beneficial or detrimental is largely dependant on the individual using it. The distinction between use and abuse is a small one (only two letters), and given the pervasiveness of the internet in our daily lives, most of us will probably cross this imaginary line on several occasions. Ultimately, such debate is academic. The internet is here to stay.

eSports

One of the most exciting innovations in recent years has been the development of electronic ('e') sports. The title is perhaps a misnomer, as the term 'sport' strongly implies a measure of physical exertion; nonetheless the title is surprisingly apt, serving not only to avoid using the stigmatised label of 'video gaming', but also in capturing the essence of an activity that involves competing over an electronic network. After all, the spirit of sport lies more in healthy competition, passion and displays of skill than in mere physical activity.

What are eSports?

eSports are games or activities played on a computer or console, often involving an internet connection. Early eSports

included arcade games such as Pong and Space Invaders, which became popular in the 1970s. Since then, advances in technology have ironically seen a fall in the number and success of arcade games, which have been replaced by games that can be more conveniently played from a home computer.

Since their inception, video/computer games have been an effective, easily available means of escapism, offering a means to immerse the player in a virtual world far removed from the rigors of a rigid realism. Moreover, the wide range of eSports available allows individuals to experience many different experiences — from governing an empire or racing a sports-car to stalking through enemy lines with cigar in mouth, damsel in hand and firearm in paw.

Arguments against eSports

There have been many arguments levelled against eSports, and while these have not really affected eSport popularity, they do raise the question of whether gaming may be having a negative effect, particularly in children who are more impressionable and more easily drawn into a harmful addiction.

In a general sense, eSports are condemned as being unproductive, addictive and unhealthy. Certainly there are many who spend hours each day playing eSports, and with the rise of eSport tournaments featuring thousands of dollars of prize money, so-called ‘professional’ gamers devote most of their days (and nights) in front of a computer screen. Yet what effect, if any, does this really have on social functioning?

There are some notorious horror stories involving an obsession with eSports, such as a case in Ohio in 2007, when a 16-year-old boy shot both his parents after they banned him from playing the video game Halo 3, and a case in South Korea in 2005, when a 28-year-old gamer died after playing the computer game Starcraft for 50 straight hours.⁷

Obsession is one of those curious qualities that can help someone achieve their dreams, yet can conversely present a

harmful personality trait. Many successful individuals, ranging from elite athletes to industrious professionals, spend hours each day perfecting skills, refining techniques or increasing their understanding of what they enjoy. While we may equate 'success' to financial stability, happiness or moral action, it is undeniably a concept that differs for us all. A skilful eSport athlete may consider himself successful, but what would the greater public think of him or her? More importantly, does it even *matter* how others view us so long as we are content with our own sense of personal identity?

Many of the most successful eSports involve violence, and it has long been argued that these types of games exert a negative influence on the people who play them. However, despite numerous studies and meta-analyses conducted on the subject, there is little conclusive evidence either supporting or refuting this claim.

As mentioned previously, the past 20 years have seen a plethora of well-publicised horror stories, and these have established a correlation (if not causation) between violent video games and antisocial or aggressive behaviour, at least in the public eye. To put these cases into perspective, however, there are millions of people around the world who play video/computer games, and thus this number is relatively small. Starcraft 2 alone has 1,000,000 people online at any point of the day, and other games like The Sims and Grand Theft Auto have each sold over 100 million copies worldwide.

Perhaps the popularity of violent video games stems from an unconscious, primal instinct within humans, a veiled lust for death that lies deeply buried within our psyche. Or perhaps eSports are a form of sublimation, a mature defence mechanism individuals use to channel socially unacceptable drives and impulses into a reasonable action such as playing video games.

The entertainment we receive from playing these games has a multifactorial aetiology, stemming not only from a need

to escape, but also from a desire for new experiences. In many cases, they bring a measure of excitement to our lives, lives we have often convinced ourselves have become predictable and boring.

The glorification of justifiable violence and the portrayal of heroic, unpunished protagonists are classic characteristics of violent video games and further contribute to their seductive appeal.⁸

Even if eSports are eventually proven to be harmful, it might be too late to impede their ferocious rampage through today's society. After all, the negative impact of smoking has been incredibly well documented over the past 20 years, yet smoking remains a common sight and activity. The nature of addiction lies in the pursuance of an activity regardless of its effects, and this is somewhat tied to the existential cliché of whether it is better to live a short full life or a long incomplete one. It's a question that can't be answered without a gamble. But when was life ever anything else?

A living is not the same as a life, but neither can you live *unless* you're alive.

Arguments supporting eSports

As detailed in the previous section, it has been argued that eSports provide a virtual environment where gamers can engage in socially unacceptable behaviours (such as theft, harassing elderly citizens and shooting people) and that this may serve to promote objectionable traits or activities within society. However, eSports also involve and in many cases require other desirable skills, such as teamwork, problem-solving and quick decision-making. To believe that eSports influences conduct, one must also accept that they can provide a medium which fosters both bad *and* good behaviour.

The term 'eSports' often conjures a picture of an unhygienic, overweight, pasty-faced boy sitting in the dark in front of a computer screen. However, this stereotype is often far

from the truth, and eSports have evolved into a highly social, highly publicised activity. Global contests such as the ‘Major League Gaming’ series in the United States feature thousands of people coming together from all over the world to socialise, observe and play professional games.

Particularly in Korea, eSports have been enormously successful, and an online gaming culture has developed over the past 20 years. Dedicated TV channels, epic stadium-style competitions and devoted gaming clans are but several of the latest innovations, and whether the success of eSports in Korea is a unique phenomenon or a precursor for worldwide changes remains to be seen.

(Anti-) Social Networking

What is social networking? Why Anti-?

Social networking is a ubiquitous term, but in the context of this essay will be applied to the use of social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace that allow users to meet, interact and learn about others in a virtual environment. For those unfamiliar with the practice, this involves the creation of a free account profile which can be accessed by other users on the website. Information such as relationship status, hobbies and photos can then be uploaded online and viewed by friends to whom access has been granted.

There has been considerable concern raised over the enormous and ever-rising popularity of these social networking sites. One of the fears is that people are spending more time networking over the internet rather than engaging in traditional face-to-face social interaction, and it is from this that the term ‘anti-social’ networking has been employed in some circles to describe the use of these online sites.

Why is social networking so popular?

There are many reasons why social networking online has become so popular. The endemic nature of the internet —

accessible from almost every computer, tablet PC or mobile phone — has provided an ideal medium for the growth of social networking. At heart, most human beings are social creatures, and our civilisation owes much of its success to the capacity to work as a team and the ability to pool our resources or ideas together.

The desire to socialise and form relationships is coded into our genes, and as such the ability to ‘meet’ new people online and engage in social contact with thousands of others is a gift few would knowingly pass by.

Having a large number of online friends is as much a personal asset as a social symbol, and is a way of convincing both ourselves and others that we are not alone or unliked. In the callous, often judgmental environment of the schoolyard, a popular virtual identity can easily translate into real-life acceptance and admiration. Unfortunately, this can work both ways, and those with lacklustre online profiles or a limited number of online friends may find themselves unfairly ostracised by their peers.

From a more prosaic perspective, these sites allow convenient communication between relatively large groups of individuals, and thereby help friends to organise events, send messages, and share experiences with each other without having to endure the traditional hassles or fees involved with making a phone call or posting a letter.

Another force driving the popularity of social networking sites is peer pressure. If friends in a social group or workplace start using something and complimenting it, there is some degree of incentive to use that same thing, if only to remain part of a particular clique. The ‘friend search’ function of most of these sites allows users to seek out friends or colleagues they have met who also have an account, and as such, creating a profile becomes not so much an optional activity (though in reality it is), but rather a necessary action to remain within a social group.

Furthermore, with thousands of accounts on these sites and millions of groups which one can join, social networking allows people with similar interests, hobbies and tastes to interact with each other.

Despite the personal details with which most users fill their accounts, there remains a certain degree of anonymity to social networking online. There's a protection to not being face-to-face with others, a protection from feeling too embarrassed, or having to think quickly to come up with a question or answer. In the relative safety of one's own home or boudoir, it's easy to think of carefully considered written messages that can be electronically sent to others over the internet. In short, although it may be less spontaneous and more time-consuming, it is far easier to socialise or network online than it is in person. Only time will tell whether this is a harmful development.

Issues in social networking

The changing paradigm of interpersonal relationships

As technology has become both more advanced and more widespread there has been an inevitable change in the way we interact with others. As discussed with eSports, concern has been raised that more time is spent conversing online rather than in person, and that this may lead to poorly developed social skills.⁹ Social networking sites can also create insincere friendships, as many users are more concerned with establishing a hefty 'friend' number rather than creating meaningful relationships with others. The concept of friendship is often reduced to a list of names or an electronic number rather than a thoughtful understanding between two individuals.

Addiction and/or distraction

While eSports require a computer with an installed game, social networking sites can be accessed from any device (e.g. computer, iPad or mobile phone) with an internet connection. Therefore, the potential to indulge in an addictive activity or to

be distracted is much greater with social networking than other electronic activities like eSports.

Social networking sites are real-time, and as such the temptation to keep up to date with the latest gossip among friends, to check if any new messages have been received, and to search for friends online is pervasive and ever-present. Additionally, with millions of groups and people available to join or interact with, social networking is an activity capable of providing an unlimited amount of entertainment.

Consequently, there have been many concerns that social networking is a significant source of distraction in the workplace and that productivity may decline as employees are engaged in the use of these sites rather than concentrating wholly on their work. Some companies have placed bans on these sites, but as they can be accessed on mobile phones, PDAs and other portable devices, this ban is easily and in some cases resentfully circumvented.

Interestingly, recent surveys have suggested that placing these bans is often counter-productive, as employees are more impatient to return home, aggrieved by a perceived infringement on personal rights and therefore less engaged with workplace activities.¹⁰

Among the younger age groups, social networking can present a distraction at school or university, and there are concerns that this may have a negative impact on student education.

Cyber bullying

Bullying is a huge and often unapproachable problem, not only in the schoolyard, but also in the community at large. While bullying may be the product of idle whimsy, more often it is part of another greater problem such as professional jealousy and sabotage, sexual prejudice or racism.

Cyber bullying is a form of bullying carried out through an internet service, mobile phone or electronic device. We

discussed earlier that people can be judged by the number of friends they have on social networking sites, and that this can lead to issues with social status and a misunderstanding about the nature of true friendship.

However, this is but one facet of the problem. Electronic messages can be sent to someone at any time of the day, and therefore social networking sites have created the potential for constant, unrelenting harassment. Continued bullying can have significant effects on both physical and emotional health, in addition to serious implications for self esteem and future success. Indeed, there have been several cases of suicide following cyber-bullying, and this reflects how grim and mismanaged this problem has become in today's society.¹¹

Most social networking sites involve placing information such as photographs, personal interests and group affiliations online. This not only provides ammunition for malicious discrimination but also opens the opportunity for dangerous or humiliating violations of privacy.

Privacy and security

Privacy is a major issue with social networking sites, and it is often hard to find the correct balance between sharing information with friends and maintaining a degree of personal reserve. With individuals being able to add hundreds of friends online, setting individual privacy settings for each 'friend' is time consuming and therefore usually ignored.

More worryingly, users have little control over what others upload online, and consequently videos or photographs taken of someone can be uploaded for viewing by thousands of people online.

Regardless of privacy settings, placing information online is putting it in the hands of large corporations who may not only have inadequate safeguards in place to protect individual privacy, but who also have a primary responsibility to company shareholders rather than users of the site. Certainly there are

concerns that sites like Facebook have shared personal information to third party advertisers, and while these have not been proven, the potential for misuse is definitely there.¹²

A recent (November 2011) breach of Facebook's security that caused violent and pornographic images to be posted on some users' profile pages is but the first of many potentially serious problems that might arise in the future.¹³ With gigabytes of personal information (including photos and videos) stored on Facebook servers, the possibility of a more serious security breach that places this data into the hands of unscrupulous individuals must be entertained.

Conclusion

The appropriate use of social networking, eSports and the internet is a topical issue that faces us in today's society. Undoubtedly, tradition is an important part of our culture, and learning from the past is one of the foundations of human civilisation. However, progress is inevitable, and adhering to traditional values or perceptions without compelling reason is both imprudent and illogical.

With the advent of new and exciting innovation in the realms of science of technology comes also the potential for great danger. Unfortunately, this issue cannot be broken into terms of Good or Evil; these absolutes merely reflect culture-specific social norms. Finding the balance between progress and habit is important, both on a personal and a societal level, and sometimes the only way to learn about danger is to encounter it first hand.

Rather than shirk from danger, we need to embrace it as a part of the thrilling inventions and discoveries that we are part of, and moreover recognise that these unique dangers can themselves teach us important lessons. Whether we as a species can rise up to the challenges that face us, or whether we will be consumed by our own reckless thirst for knowledge and convenience remains not only to be seen, but also to be experienced.

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