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References

Donkey Kong Goes to Harvard. (1983). *Time*, *121*(23), 81.

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Donkey Kong Goes to Harvard

Researchers consider home and arcade games to be teaching tools

Mothers and fathers of River City! I say watch for the telltale signs of your child's deg-re-day. Does he look like a glassy-eyed zombie? Are her little fingers forever twitching? Are those lunch-money quarters disappearing into the black hole of pleasure? Does he tell you he's going to zap you right into hyperspace? If so, friends, ya got trouble, right here in River City. Trouble with a capital T, and that rhymes with V, and that stands for video games!

Ever since the first pong was pinged, video games have been accused of increasing crime and school absenteeism, decreasing learning and concentration, and causing a mysterious ailment called video wrist. But according to a conference sponsored last week by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the mothers and fathers of River City may breathe easier. Researchers and scientists suggested that video games may turn out to be one of the most powerful teaching tools ever devised. "Many view video games with alarm," observed David Perkins, a research director at the school, "but in the eye of some educators gleams the hope and vision of what might be called educational heaven."

Underwritten in part with a $40,000 grant from Atari, "Video Games and Human Development: A Research Agenda for the '80s" represented one of the first attempts to organize the nascent and often flimsy research done on the subject so far. Typical of the early studies are interviews with nearly 1,000 young people in Los Angeles video arcades, undertaken by David Brooks, an

instructor at the University of Southern California. Brooks told the Harvard meeting that most of the youngsters were average or above average students and that they rarely played hooky from school.

Far from being corrupting dens of iniquity, the arcades, Brooks concluded, were places for young people to meet and talk. Said he: "They're like a bunch of golfers talking about what happened at the ninth hole." Fears that drugs and liquor are commonplace were off target, Brooks reported. One cannot play well when drunk or high, he noted, and where video games are concerned, playing well is the adolescent's best revenge.

Seeking to explain the captivating appeal of the games, Jerry Chaffin, professor of special education at the University of Kansas, noted that they involve extraordinarily high response rates, some requiring upwards of 100 a minute. This makes them intrinsically motivating, according to Chaffin, and allows the player to react, learn and improve.

There was general agreement that most of today's games were pervaded by violent themes. Yet these games, typically complex, with many things happening simultaneously, foster inductive reasoning, argued Patricia Greenfield, a professor of psychology at U.C.L.A. She maintained that a child who can manipulate an array of buttons to gauge the pull of gravity and the thrust of a spaceship, all the while evading invaders and firing off missiles, is using complex cognitive skills. This is what she called "parallel processing," the ability to evaluate many variables simultaneously. "Video games are like life," she said. "You must learn by observation, make judgments and rapid decisions."

The "research agenda for the '80s," said the conference's guiding spirit, Inabeth Miller, director of the Gutman Library at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, was to harness the dynamic stimulation of the games to foster learning without drudgery. Sylvia Weir, a research associate at M.I.T., showed a film of an educational video game in which the user experiences the principles of Newtonian physics. One scientist indicated that the games are already serving those hardest to educate. Stephen Leff, of the Harvard Medical School, reported preliminary findings that video games' "massive capacity for eliciting attention" helped stimulate the chronically mentally ill.

Alan Kay, chief scientist of Atari, closed the conference with a vision of the video-game joy stick as a magic wand capable of creating new worlds. The video game, he said, aligned with the computer, was "a new kind of kinetic art," a medium that will allow the user to explore his own imagination. "Games are the most important thing ever invented," he noted, "because they allow us to control and amplify our fantasies."
