



194 Hal's Reading Diary

Article Author:

[Roger Mills](#) [1]

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Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

Roger Mills on 11-year-old Hal's engagement with reading.

>Rather than read for pleasure 11-year-old Hal goes to console games for entertainment. Hal's father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.

I have often moaned in these diaries that Hal isn't fond of reading. We are now at a point where Hal's reading is more or less completely fluent, and yet he obviously regards it as a chore. He will read for need if he is trying to find out about something he is interested in getting in an Argos catalogue, or online on Amazon. He will read the instructions to a remote control car he's been given for his birthday. But he will almost never, in fact I would say never, pick up a book and start reading on his own for pleasure.

Where Hal goes for entertainment rather than reading is, above all, the PS3. He and his mates will spend long hours in a little den he has in our home playing games (mostly ones involving shooting) and it made me start thinking about what a diet of console games, rather than one of words on a page, might impact on the development of mental and behavioural skills.

My first, rather facile, thought on this was that playing games makes you essentially passive. Whereas reading (or at least reading fiction) involves a process of re-creation in your mind, games just give it all to you because they are visual, like TV. But a minute or two watching Hal playing a game made me see that the process isn't really anything like TV watching. He isn't just sitting back letting a visual/auditory experience wash over him. There is something much more active going on.

Playing a console game, for a start, involves a fairly deft use of motor skills. You are always controlling something, directing it around a screen, and in a simulated 3D environment. My own pathetic attempts at 'controlling' a soldier in one of Hal's games usually result in me shooting at my feet or at the ceiling so I can vouch for this being something that takes a certain degree of skill and practice.

Another aspect of the games is that they always seem to involve spotting clues and finding solutions. Often you have to find a route out of some kind of threatening environment where getting it wrong means you get killed and having to restart. Keeping your eyes peeled and your mind open to different possibilities is a key attribute in this kind of game. And being tenacious enough to go back and try again when you fail is another quality that the console world demands.

One other aspect of the games that's important is that they are also social in a kind of way. Hal regularly plays with his mates (mercifully at this pre-pubescent stage the den isn't as pungent it is probably destined to be a few years down the track) and though it isn't exactly debating current affairs, it is an interaction that is a good way beyond the phoney togetherness of supine TV watching.

So, perhaps console games aren't so bad after all. When I embarked on this piece I thought the argument was going to be games are brain corroding, while reading stimulates and enriches. But while I don't think you learn much by way of

information from games, I've had to conclude that playing them clearly nurtures a set of skills. And they aren't contemptible skills either ? motor control, problem solving and tenacity are all things I would want Hal to be developing and the social side isn't bad either. Even if I don't share it, I'm going to have to start being rather less snotty about his fondness for the PS3 I think.

Where Hal goes for his sedentary pleasures (there is mercifully quite a lot of outdoors stuff that he is into), is the predictable diet of TV and computer games and he is capable of sitting at these for hours on end. In this, I am fairly sure he is no different from the vast majority of 11 year old boys but it makes you wonder what going to these sources of entertainment, rather than books will do in terms of how the mind develops.

All this raises, for me, a very fascinating question. How does it affect your mental development if you are not reading, but getting your fun from TV and console games? And that leads on to other questions. For example

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