

Andrey Tydneyuk, from “How do video games affect my mind?”

What do you think of when you hear the words “video gamer?” For most people, the answer is almost exactly the same. They think of a pale teenage boy, sitting up at 2 o’clock at night glued to the TV. There are bags under his eyes, and his skin seems like it has never been touched by the sun. He stares blankly at the screen and furiously moves his thumbs. Otherwise, he is as still as a statue. As scary as this sounds, there are actually plenty of people that are like this.

Believe it or not, I was one of those people once. There was a point when I was so interested in video games that I rarely even ate. I remember thinking, “Let me beat this level, and then I’ll eat,” and after I beat it, I thought the same thing again. That time was around six years ago, when I first found out about video games. I had just moved to a new house, and I was trying to make friends with the kids that lived in my neighborhood. The first person that I met was the one that introduced me to this new world. His name was Roman, and he invited me to his house to play N64. I was curious about what kind of thing this N-something was, so I came over. He explained how to play, and what to do, and soon I was hooked. It really did happen *that* fast. This was a new world that I had discovered.

I spent the next two years getting used to video games. I did not have a system of my own, so I went to Roman’s house and we played almost every day. I tried almost every type of game imaginable. There were shooting, racing, fighting, role-playing, and countless other games. There are more video game genres than there are book genres. My favorite was, and still is, fighting games. I loved that I could beat my friend at them. It was probably the main reason that I liked them. It grew on me, and I started playing fighting games more and more.

When I got my own system, I played a lot, so naturally my parents did not just sit back and let me. I got the “it rots your mind” speech every day for the next couple of years. Another thing that they got into the habit of doing, was telling me if there was anything videogame related in the news. Every time there was a story saying that video games will “eventually kill you,” I heard about it. Just recently, I stopped playing that much, because the Stuy workload is so big. This gave me time to think about why I play.

I never really listened to my parents, but the evidence against video games is overwhelming. It turns out that every time there is a shooting in a school, the perpetrator is an avid video game fan. There are many video games out there that are not suitable for children, but are the games really responsible for putting the ideas in the heads of kids? If kids shoot a gun in a game, would they be dumb enough to shoot one in real life? The main question that I have is: How do video games affect my mind? I have wanted to research this topic for a while, and now is my chance.

Doron Shapiro, from “What is the Future of Banjo Playing?”

Part of the freshman orientation day at Stuyvesant High School involved auditions for the school band. While waiting on line in front of the band director’s office, a friend of mine from elementary school looked at my instrument’s case and asked me,

“Is that a banjo?”

It was, I told him.

“Wow.” There was a pause.

“Could I see it? I’ve never seen one before.” I took it out and played a few notes. This whole scene wasn’t too strange for me, even if it was for my friend. By then, I was used to my friends being unfamiliar with my instrument. After all, there aren’t too many teenagers out there in New York City who play banjo.

So what am I doing here playing banjo? Way back when I was ten, I found one in my grandparent’s closet. My mom wasn’t quite sure where it came from, but she remembered it being there when she was a kid. She thought it had something to do with paying off a debt to my great-grandfather during the great depression, but my mom wasn’t sure. Well, for fun, I pretended to play it. It was sort of strange looking: four strings, a short neck, and this funny little drawing on the flat part on top, right next to these tuning pegs and the word “Stella”. On the back were a few circles with a little keyhole in the center, whose purpose I could never guess. My grandmother, as usual, thought I sounded like I had extraordinary talent and said I should get lessons. My mom, who wanted me to play some sort of instrument at the time, asked me if I wanted banjo lessons and I, not thinking that there was any reason not to, agreed. Then came the hard part. Who teaches banjo? After a few years and false starts, we found Cynthia Sayer, a jazz banjoist. So, for the past few years, I have been learning early jazz on a tenor banjo. At this point, I have been playing the instrument for enough years to have learned a little about its very early history in the United States (it was brought here by African slaves and then gained popularity with minstrel shows). What I’m really curious about, however, isn’t history. At this point, it seems like outside of the banjo-playing world and especially among my friends, I am lucky to meet someone who has even seen a banjo. There is no major pop music that I know of with a banjo part, and I had a little difficulty trying to explain my musical experience to the director of the band at my high school (they don’t have a banjo section). While we both agreed that the banjo was something really cool, there just aren’t banjo parts written for the songs the band plays.

So when my banjo teacher told me that the banjo is having a revival, I start getting curious. Is this true? How are banjo players trying to popularize what could be called a dying instrument? Maybe more importantly, who is playing it now? I still have not met another banjo player anywhere near my age. Am I going to be the last one?

Ok, maybe not. But seriously, what is the future of banjo playing?