

The Relationship Between Violent Video Games and Youth Violence

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Written Argument

November 7, 2005

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Video games are a radical media form that allows users to interact with their entertainment. The passivity of television, radio, and movies is absent in video games, and control is placed in the users' hands granting them the freedom to make any decisions they want and to direct their entertainment and fun. The inclusion of violence in video games is a topic that has sparked controversy both in the past and the present since users are exposed to violence and can control the degree of it in video games. Playing violent video games has been alleged to be the cause of youth violence; however, there is no reason to believe such causation exists nor is there enough evidence to suggest a correlation.

Video games are a revolutionary form of entertainment. They are the first medium to combine user interaction with visual activity. Their active nature makes them unique among passive media outlets such as books, television, and movies. They are not something that can be compared to passive entertainment. In fact, video games are part of a different cultural system. Steven Johnson states that "the problem with judging new cultural systems on their own terms is that...the past inevitably colors your vision of the emerging form" (18). When video games are compared to other forms of entertainment, their flaws and imperfections become highlighted in people's judgment because they do not know how to evaluate games on the games' own terms. The people who are judging video games in negative way are often separated from the youth by a generation gap because they are comparing something new against their own past.

The generation gap is also widened by fear especially by those who do not want to understand or play games. People take games at face value and see images that frighten them. Gerard Jones suggests that, because of seeing frightening images in games, "we become frightened of the people who love them, which makes us shove those people further from us and

induces them to play the games more often and in greater isolation” (180). Fear of games stems from their ability to immerse the player to a great degree. Playing a game for “just a few minutes” can easily turn into hours. Games have an attracting power, and that power scares people. Before games are determined to be bad because they are attractive, what makes them attractive must be considered (Greenfield 99). Discussions of games cannot be meaningful if only the surface content is analyzed rather than asking why the game is attractive or what the player thinks or feels while playing.

The appeal of games lies within the brain and has many effects on the cognitive processes. No other popular culture form forces people to make decisions the way games do. Books and music may invoke emotional responses and activate our imagination, but games involve analyzing situations, weighing evidence, and considering long-term goals. These ideas are fundamental to learning. At a quick glance, the primary activity may appear to only be nothing more than increasing the manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination of a player. Looking beyond the surface, into the mind of the gamer, reveals that all the button-mashing and quick reflexes are just part of the decision making and strategy in playing a game. What one learns from a game (whether good or bad) is quite different from how one goes about thinking and learning.

Mastering a game, i.e. learning how to function in its virtual world, is largely based on deciphering the rules, much like exploring the real world. Many of these rules do not become apparent until the world within the game has been explored and probed. These rules define the techniques available to reach a goal. James Paul Gee describes a four-step process a player must engage: probing the world, forming a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis, and accepting or rethinking the hypothesis (90). These four steps are the basis of learning, but whatever thought

processes are occurring are not apparent to someone else who only has a secondhand account by passively watching someone play video games. Gee does not find it surprising that many politicians and policymakers do not like video games because they say video games are violent. He says, “But, in reality, video games do violence to these people’s notions of what makes learning powerful...” (205). The experience of video games is overlooked and not even considered when the content of the game is controversial and questionable.

Video games have raised flags over what is appropriate or suitable for a person specifically children. Research has been conducted stating that there is a correlation between violence and video games. However, youth violence specialist Helen Smith’s practice and survey reveal that “extremely angry and violent kids often show interest in violence music, Web sites, and movies, but rarely in video games” (Jones 168). Video games that featured a first-person point of view shooter style first arose in 1991 with many games following the same fashion in the next few years before the fad became a regular genre. Jones contends that “we’ve now had time for those millions of game players to reach adulthood, and the generation of ‘killer kids’ predicted by the games’ critics never materialized” (167). If the research is suggesting that there is a correlation, then there is fault in how the research is being done.

There is research that claims negative effects of video games yet methodology must be considered before the study can be deemed valid. The general trend of negative effects include higher display of aggression and hostility after playing a video game. However, there are numerous inconsistencies in the studies. Some of these studies analyze behavior immediately following exposure to a violent video game and only account for the short-term consequences. Other studies neglect to report the range of games used, with varying levels of violence, which creates difficulty in believing conclusions and comparisons. Wolock argues even further that the

way aggression is measured is questionable. Rather than focus on metrics like heart rate, blood pressure, or negative questionnaire responses, she states, “If children failed to show empathy in real situations, or tried to hurt another child following violent gameplay, THEN we’d have a problem. Even more so if such aggressive acts and feelings were exhibited over time.” Though a correlation may be possible, other social factors must be considered before declaring video games the source of violence.

Ignoring other factors like social life or individual personality makes video games an easy target for blame. When the shooting at Columbine High School occurred, people wanted an explanation of why it happened. Though Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were said to be obsessed with video games, it cannot be considered the sole reason for their actions. Yet the repercussions have sparked political debate and activism for banning certain games in order to prevent more killings from happening. The tragic event led to hearings in 1999 which referred back to Columbine many times creating the impressions that video games are the problem. If video games were truly the sole source of violence, many other people would be committing violent acts. Social trends should not be determined just by looking at a small number of isolated incidents. Trends are defined by broad patterns in society.

Violence and controversy are nothing new in video game history. What is going on today is no different than ten years ago or even thirty years ago. In 1976, a game called *Death Race* was released in which players drove a car and ran over stick figures which were supposed to be skeletons. However, people perceived the stick figures to be people, and controversy was raised (Kent 91). There were protests against the game and coverage on CBS’s *60 Minutes*. In 1993, *Mortal Kombat*, a fighting game featuring bloody moves and gory fatalities, became an instant hit in arcades and on home consoles. The controversy concerning this game led to hearings about

violence against digitized human images. The hearings eventually led to the creation of an organization known as the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) which assigns ratings to games based on their content (Kent 480). Politicians praised the ESRB's ratings system when it was presented since it provides a solution for parents to understand what their children are playing.

Even with the ratings system in place, that has not stopped people from lobbying against video games. Today's current games feature impressive graphics, orchestrated soundtracks, voiced dialogues, and open-ended gameplay. Games like the *Hitman* and *Grand Theft Auto* series both feature violence and yet gameplay is still overlooked. *Hitman* involves a certain amount of strategic planning in order to carry out an assassination. Its nature is more puzzle-like than violent. Violence can be used, but often times it results in a failed mission. *Grand Theft Auto* focuses more on story, exploration, and freedom in its gameplay – all of which have made the series extremely popular. Violence is only a secondary part of these games. The player has a choice to resort to violence in such games, but the mere presence of realistic violence is all that is necessary for politicians to target games.

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill in October 2005 prohibiting the sale or rental of violent video games to minors. There are a few states that have a similar bill in place and others that are planning and drafting similar legislation. The language of the bill that Schwarzenegger has signed is written strictly for the violence in video games instead of the actual content. Nothing is ever mentioned about the entertainment value of the game. Violence that is “depraved” refers to the player relishing a kill. Clive Thompson responds to such a definition stating, “I ‘relish’ each kill – but mostly because my life is constantly in danger and

I'm exuberant when I escape, rather like a running back escaping a huge tackle." Thompson's response is only natural due to the immersive nature of the game.

To take the battle even further, Floridian attorney Jack Thompson wants to prosecute video game companies for producing violent games. In an interview with ChatterBox Video Game Radio, Jack Thompson believes that going after video game companies is the solution to keeping violent video games out of the hands of children who may have other social problems. What Jack Thompson is suggesting leads to a slippery slope that software companies become accountable for what users do with their products (Orland, par. 8). To him, the platform for his argument is that "some crimes would not occur but for the violent entertainment. For the families of the deceased, that is the only statistic that matters" (Vitka, par. 3). In effect, he is punishing the majority of good gamers who are not doing anything while trying to prevent others from committing crimes though he has mentioned that he has no idea how many violent crimes are linked to violent games.

The timeline of crime reveals that crime has been decreasing overall since 1993. In the case of youth violence, offending rates for youths aged 14-24 increased rapidly in the 1980's, but have been steadily decreasing since 1993. Statistics are available from the United States Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics website. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has also noted in their 2004 annual crime report that "a comparison of 2004 data with those of 2003 indicated that the number of juveniles arrested for violent crimes declined 0.8 percent, 5.5 percent compared with 2000 data, and 30.9 percent compared with 1995 figures" (FBI 26). A comparison of the timeline of crime and realistic violent video games shows that the technology that can render realistic depictions of violence and games containing such realistic

violence were released much later than 1993 (Ferris, par. 7). If crime overall has been decreasing since 1993, there is not much reason to believe that video games are causing violence.

When a crime does occur, it is easy to point the finger at video games. Devin Moore, who obsessively played video games, was arrested for crimes in 2003 which involved the murder of three policemen. When brought into the police station on the suspicion of stealing a car, Moore murdered three men and fled in a police car. Though he had no criminal history, his sudden outburst was blamed on *Grand Theft Auto* (Bradley, par. 7). Moore's defense rested on evidence against video game companies but was determined inadmissible. Moore asks, "If I couldn't use it as a defense while facing capital punishment, my life, how can any lawyer do so for victims of the family for money?" (DeWitt, par. 2) in a letter to Jack Thompson shortly before the *Strickland v. Sony* case in which the murdered victims' family members will be opposing various video game companies and retailers.

Amidst all the debate and controversy, asking gamers what they feel and think when they play a game is probably the most important point since the whole debate revolves around the relationship between them and their games. When Gerard Jones queried a few teenagers about their emotional state in violent games, they talked about tension, excitement, and suspense but never mentioned anger at all (174). Barbara St. Hilaire, a veteran gamer, began playing video games in the 1970's and has continued to this very day. She points out that games are like reading a great book. "When you really get into a story, you are curious about what happens next, you want to see the end, and it all depends on your skills as a gamer." Gaming lets her take out her frustrations without hurting anyone and also keeps her mind sharp unlike playing cards or bingo. It is an adventurous form of entertainment that gives her something common to talk about with people.

The issue of youth violence basically comes down to a few incidents and some limited research. There is not enough good evidence to suggest a correlation (or causation) of violent video games and youth violence. Players need to understand violence on their own, to make a distinction between reality and fantasy. It is not the responsibility of politicians or video game companies to parent and police the world. People should understand what makes games attractive and why gamers are playing them. It does not make sense to use a small number of incidents to generalize the harm games have on the entire gaming population especially when all the other social factors are ignored. The gamers are more important to consider rather than the games themselves. The decisions they make and the actions they take, in games and in life, are their responsibilities.

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