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Video Games: Buyers Beware!

“Stay alive at all costs! Find the key! Kill the bad guys!” This is how one eighth-grader describes the principles of playing video games. Such games might seem like harmless fun, but what if the violence attracts and addicts young players, affecting their behavior and their view of reality?

Some say that violent video games have minimal impact on young teenagers, pointing out that most video-game players live completely normal lives. The weaknesses in that argument are almost too obvious: first, “most” is not “all.” More important, just because a player does not immediately imitate specific violent acts found in video games does not mean the games will have no long-term negative impact on that player’s views and behavior. Because of this possibility, parents should assume responsibility for evaluating video games and should prohibit young teenagers from purchasing those that are especially violent.

To begin with, a number of authorities claim that playing a violent video game does present a threat to the user’s psychological health. As early as 1983, Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus, in their book *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games*, warned about the dangers of violent video games: “Although we can never be sure in any individual case, a substantial body of evidence indicates that viewing excessive violence on the screen is associated with aggression and violent behavior among

children and teenagers” (98). More recently, studies have measured changes in behavior and emotional responses to video games, ranging from “assertiveness” (*Journal of Child Study*, qtd. in Boal, “Shooters”) and withdrawal (Jeanne Funk, qtd. in Boal, “One Step”) to “aggression, anger, and hostility” (A. Mehrabian and W. J. Wixen, qtd. in “Social Effects,” sec. 1). While *Mediascope*, the publication of a nonprofit research organization, concludes from its survey of research on video game playing that there are not sufficient studies, especially of current games, to make any definitive statements about the dangers of video-game use (“Social Effects”), parents should be concerned--maybe more so precisely because so few studies have been conducted.

In addition, playing violent video games adversely affects psychological health by actually addicting players. One of the most troubling influences video games have on players is the medium’s remarkable ability to fixate a player’s attention or, to borrow psychologist Sherry Turkle’s term, its “holding power” (30), a state well illustrated in Fig. 1. Addictive reactions in the body can be linked to some of the visual and aural signals found in video games--signals that cause the eyes, for example, to stop blinking for extended periods. This phenomenon triggers the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter thought by some to be the “master molecule of addiction” (Quittner). Is this chemical association the reason forty out of the forty-seven top-rated Nintendo games have violence as their theme (Cesarone)?

Admittedly, according to a report in the *New York Times*, the very best-selling games are nonviolent (Miller). But even without being top sellers, the violent games sell well. The National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) rates the



Fig. 1. Here is a young boy transfixed by a video game.

Source: Bill Varie, *Boy Playing a Video Game*; Corbis; Corbis Corporation, n.d.; Web; 12 Sept. 2004.

violent content of games and concludes that violence is indeed a theme in more than half of the games on the market. As reported by Cesarone, the NCTV rates 55.7 percent of games as unfit or highly violent.

Games that mimic military combat training not only encourage brutality but also totally ignore teaching players about restraint--one more reason violent games should be off-limits. One of the main proponents of this claim has been Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman, an expert witness in federal and state cases dealing with violence. He worries that video games expose young people to combat-style training without teaching them when to put nonviolent alternatives into play (316). As Grossman points out, the military

used Pavlovian methods of desensitization during World War II to train soldiers to kill other human beings against their natural tendencies. Repetitive conditioning such as “killing” cadences and unit songs as well as referring to people as “targets” helped to dehumanize the enemy in the soldier’s mind. Then there was the positive reinforcement of three-day passes for good marksmanship. It is not hard to see the similarities between military conditioning and desensitization and the conditioning

that could come from shooting and harming video-game targets. In fact, the military



Fig. 2. Soldier shown in simulation. Source: Photograph of combat simulator, *ABCNEWS.com*; ABC News Internet Ventures, 16 Nov. 2001; Web; 18 Sept. 2004.

now uses such games in training its soldiers, as seen in Fig. 2. Though video games may not transform players magically into virtual marines, Grossman's argument stresses that adolescents do learn from the games they play and thus violent games are cause for concern.

In fact, rather than teaching when and where to show restraint, the games and promotion for the games teach that violence can be fun. For instance, the game *Resident Evil* promotes violence as entertainment. The publishers of the game invite players to "face your fear" using "a vast selection of weapons."

The makers of *Carmageddon* and *Grand Theft Auto III* imply that preying on the defenseless is acceptable behavior: they market a game that involves killing helpless civilians. Even less violent games like *Klingon Honor Guard* appeal to the notion that violence carried out honorably is ennobling: ". . .you must fulfill your blood oath-- become the ultimate warrior and exact glorious revenge . . ." (*Klingon*).

Real killing may sometimes be an inevitable evil, but it certainly should not be considered fun or trivial. Parents should not accept violence as entertainment in games--and they should not think that such violence can't affect the way their children look at the world and at other human beings.

Protests--some coming from senators--against the sale of violent video games to minors have resulted in the formulation of the 21st Century Media Responsibility Act. This bill, if passed, would criminalize selling or lending violent media to children under seventeen years of age. In addition, it would require a common rating system among various media (music, video, TV) and a description of video-game contents. This required package labeling might force retailers to curtail sales to young teenagers.

The video-game industry, however, claims that it can censor itself with its own labels. Its goal, of course, is to prevent restrictive legislation that would cost it “hordes of young gamers” (Boal, “One Step”). The makers of *Kingpin*, a particularly violent game, have tried to protect the sale of their game by declaring that it was never intended for young audiences. But before the Littleton shootings heightened public awareness of video-game violence, this game could have been purchased easily by young teens like the one described by *Salon*'s Mark Boal: “Once inside [the store], Dave, who is 14 and has spiked hair, makes a beeline for the box with the large yellow [warning] sticker” (“One Step”). Clearly, by leaving enforcement of existing ratings up to retailers, the video-game industry hopes to avoid legislation and protect its own interests.

Video games are not the only contributing factor to society's tendencies toward violence, but they are having an influence. For this reason, we all must take responsibility for the way we use video games.

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