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Violent Video Games and Young People:

Does exposure to video game violence cause aggressive behavior?

Remember Space Invaders? Fighting an army of blocky aliens slowly marching down the screen in its mission to destroy the Earth. Perhaps you have fond memories of Mario jumping over barrels as he battled Donkey Kong to reach his girlfriend. Or maybe your first experience with video games doesn't go back quite that far. Perhaps you travelled the outskirts of Raccoon City searching for clues while battling bloodthirsty zombies or maybe you and Solid Snake stayed up late at night looking for Metal Gear. Or maybe your introduction to video games came even later in the form of Counterstrike, Call of Duty, Halo or World of Warcraft. Regardless, you were born to undertake mystical quests and heroic adventures, and you do it better than most...

Like many people born sometime between the 80s and today, I grew up playing video games. I was just a few years old when my dad bought me a Nintendo Entertainment System, also known as NES, which, when I got older turned into a Super Nintendo, Nintendo 64, XBOX 360 and finally a PlayStation 3. As technology has improved over the years, so have the games, and as a result, the graphics have become more realistic. This has lead to some great controversies as politicians, sociologists and psychologists

have argued the various effects that video game violence has on young people. Most of us have heard the argument that violent video games makes us violent, and some people even want to link school shootings and other violent crimes directly to video games. The teens responsible for the Columbine High School massacre were both allegedly obsessed with the video game Doom, and the stealing of a vehicle and following murder of two policemen and a dispatcher in 2003 was claimed to be inspired by the video game Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Kutner & Olson). Also, initial reports on the Virginia Tech massacre that took 32 lives in 2007 claimed that the killer Seung-Hui Cho was an avid Counter-Strike player (Benedetti), and these are just three violent incidents speculated to be related to video games.



The controversial mission "No Russian" from the game Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (released -09) where the player, who is trying to infiltrate a terrorist group, goes on a terrorist rampage, helping to massacre innocent and unarmed civilians in a fictitious Russian airport

As an avid video game player myself I have neither committed nor felt the urge to commit any sort of violent crime. The same goes for people I know who play video games. I decided it was finally time to investigate the legitimacy of this argument by looking into the research that has been done over the years to find out if there is a significant association between exposure to video game violence and aggressive behavior, and if we can say that video games are directly causing aggressive behavior in young people.

Even though the first video games were introduced in the 1970s, the current debate about violence and video games did not really start until the early 90s with the development of a new type of game, the first person shooter (Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley). These games feature a realistic first person point of view which the player sees the action through the eyes of the protagonist. The player can move around, explore a three-dimensional environment and shoot various game characters, which could be either NPC's (non-player characters, characters generally controlled by a program, not a human) or PC's (player characters, characters who are controlled by a human player). The goal with the first person shooter game is to make the player feel as though he or she is in the game and is the one fighting, killing, and being killed. Since its invention the genre has quickly become the most popular among gamers, and as a result, the release of first person shooter games has skyrocketed. Some of the most popular and influencing video games to date in the genre are Wolfenstein 3D (1992), Doom (1993), Duke Nukem (1996), Postal (1997), Grand Theft Auto (1997), Counter-Strike (1999), Halo (2001), America's Army (2002), Killzone (2004), Gears of War (2006), Call of Duty (2007) and Left 4 Dead (2008). Many of these games have spawned one or several sequels, with the biggest change in the games over the years

has been the level of realism, which has been possible through advances in technology. Electronic game images are composed of polygons, making polygons per second (pg/s) a good measure of graphic quality. In 1995, the Sony PlayStation could process 360,000 pg/s. Today, 16 years later, its successor, the PlayStation 3, can process between 500-700 million pg/s, which is an incredible improvement of about 1500 times (JLSNet Home).



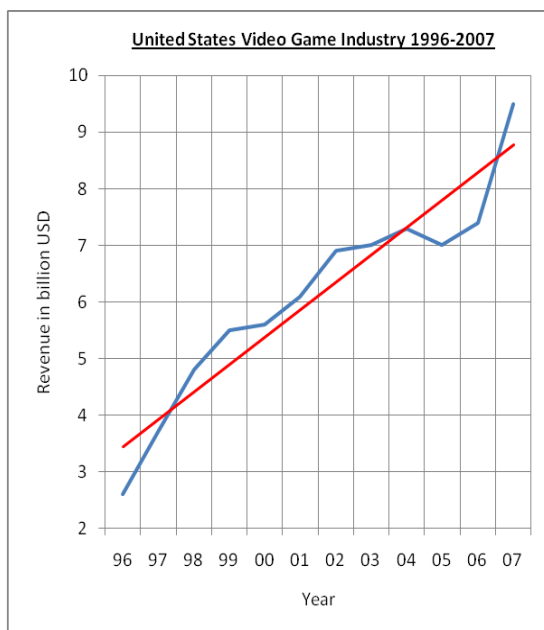
A comparison in computer graphics and realism between the games Doom, released in 1993 (top) and Killzone 2, released in 2009 (bottom)

During the years between 1996 and 2007, statistics shows, much thanks to the popularity of the first person shooter genre, that revenue from sales of video and computer games in the United States increased by 365%. From 2.6 billion dollar in sales in 1996 to 9.5 billion dollars in sales in 2007 (Lowell). This equals to an average increase in sales by 13% per year. This year, if the trend continues, estimated game revenues should be in the neighborhood of 15.5 billion dollars which is about half of the estimated spending of the Department of Energy, according to the 2011 Budget of the U.S Government (GPO Access).

So Americans are clearly buying more and more video games, with a majority of them being violent first person shooter games, but how many young people actually play video games? Recent studies have shown that 98.7% of children of either gender play some form of video game, with violent video games being particularly popular among young men (Ferguson, Video Games). This makes it very easy to "link" violent crime with video game playing if you are inclined to, as almost every young man plays them. This is a classic error of using high-base-rate (very common) behavior to explain a low-base-rate (rare) behavior. Using video game habits to predict school shootings is like concluding that sneakers are responsible for school shootings as most of, if not all of the school shooters were in the habit of wearing sneakers. Put another way, we can't use an almost universal behavior to predict a rare behavior.

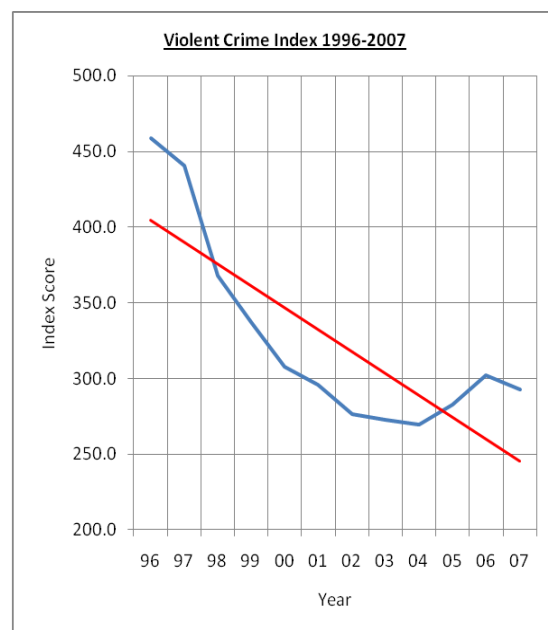
So if we can't use video games to predict school shootings, how about more common violent crimes, like aggravated assault, manslaughter and robbery? If as good as every child is playing video games, the sales have more than tripled since 1996 and the most popular genre are violent first person shooter games, should we not be able to see some kind of change in violence in our society, if video games makes us more violent?

According to the U.S Department of Justice there has been a significant change in violence, but not the change video game opponents like to convey, as evidence show that arrest rates for juveniles, persons age 10-17, for violent crimes actually have decrease since 1996 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention). If violent video games cause violence in children, then I'm positive that the rate of violent crimes committed by children would not be at an all-time low, as the statistics clearly show.



Blue line represents video game sales in billion USD

Red line represents the trend since 1996



Blue line represents violent crime index score for persons

age 10-17. The score includes murder, nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. **Red line** represents the trend since 1996

So how come there are studies that show that there is a link between video game violence and aggressive behavior? While there is a substantive body of experimental research suggesting a link between game play and aggressive attitudes and behaviors, the underlying logic in much of this research has been grounded in assumptions derived

from fifty years of research on the relationship between television and aggression. Simple multiple groups comparisons, producing conclusions such as “more violent games elicit more aggressive responses,” may be incomplete explanations without consideration of game player attributes, experienced presence, and subsequent fluctuations in game content (Lachlan & Maloney).

At the end of the day, scientist, including those behind the criticized report from the Federal Communications Commission released in 2007 that suggests that Congress can step in to protect kids from harm by regulating media violence without violating the first amendment (freedom of speech and press), still aren't sure if playing violent video games leads to real-life violence at all. “The research doesn't support the notion that playing violent video games leads to aggression,” says Dr. Jonathan Freedman, a psychologist from the University of Toronto. “It doesn't even deal with the question of whether it leads to criminal violent behavior or real violence (Kushner).” While the general public equates aggression with violent behavior, actual violent behavior has never been measured, for obvious reasons. “We can't have people assault, rape, or murder someone in the lab,” says Dr. Brad Bushman, a University of Michigan psychologist who studies the effects of media violence. Instead, researchers are left to measure harmless examples of so-called aggressive behavior, which doesn't remotely resemble criminally violent behavior. This has ranged from having subjects punch an inflatable Bozo doll to, more commonly, blast opponents with a loud noise, which according to Dr. Jonathan Freedman, “is pretty remote from real aggression (Lachlan & Maloney).”

Other researchers have concluded, like Christopher J. Ferguson, the man behind the study “Evidence for publication bias in video game violence effects literature: A meta-

analytic review,” that while violent games may increase aggressive thoughts, which one study showed lasts for less than four minutes (Richard Harris), these thoughts do not appear to lead to aggressive behaviors (Ferguson, Evidence). Another study where only dependent variables that involve actual aggressive behavior were included, to avoid the confusion of what was being measured, came to the conclusion, after analyzing 17 published studies that comprised 21 independent observations with a total sample size of 3,602 subjects, that there is no evidence to support a relationship between violent video game playing and aggressive behavior (Ferguson, The Good).

Despite of this information, sale or rental of “violent video games” — defined as ones that depict “killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being” — to minors under the age of 18 have been prohibited in the states of Illinois, Michigan and California (Supreme Court) (Thorsen). This is especially ironic in California, the last state to join the ranks of video game opponents, as the law, California bill AB1179, was signed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. He is currently featured in over 20 violent action movies. Several have been adapted into video games.

So why is the federal government, with the Federal Communications Commission leading the way, and these three states so against video games? The truth is they aren’t. While the government wants to limit our freedom when it comes to spending money on video games it has no problem using our tax money to create and distributed violent video games to youths themselves. The game America’s Army, the official U.S Army game, is a governmentally funded game and is one of the ten most popular PC action games played online. It provides players with the most authentic military experience available, from exploring the development of soldiers in individual and collective training to their deployment in simulated missions (America's Army Official

Website). The game is available for free download on the Internet and since its release in 2002 it has (until 2007) been downloaded over 40 million times, and has more than 8.5 million registered users. The game has been very successful in attracting new soldiers to the ranks, as studies has shown that 20-40 percent of recruited soldiers have played the game prior to joining the army. The game website also gets more hits per day than the official Army website, GoArmy.com (Jean).



Screenshot from the game America's Army: True Soldiers. (2007)

The game created great controversy when the U.S Army closed five recruitment areas in the Philadelphia area in 2008 and replace it with the Army Experience Center. Here, kids 13 and up can play the game America's Army on any of the dozens of Xboxes and PC gaming stations, for free. U.S Army recruiters are not allowed to recruit kids under 17 but are encouraged to chat with them and answer their questions. Angry adults, mainly parents, protested outside the center, accusing the Army for blurring the lines between games and reality and for using video games to recruit young people. In their defense, U.S Army representatives said that they believe that most kids are smart

enough to understand the difference between a computer game and real warfare (Digital Nation).

So with assumptions derived from years of research on the relationship between television and aggression, with a decrease in violent crimes done by children while violent video games sales are increasing, and study after study showing that there is no evidence to support a relationship between playing violent video games and aggressive behavior, there are strong reasons to believe that the claim that video game violence causes aggression is false. Even if it was true that video game violence caused us to be more aggressive and made us go out and commit violent crimes, most people would consider war, which is defined as an "armed hostile conflict between states or nations" to be the highest form of violence. Still our own government, the biggest supporter of the claim that video game violence makes us more violent and therefore should be regulated, uses video games to recruit people to join the army. There the newly recruited soldiers will be trained in how to kill, before they are sent into battle where he or she might kill, or be killed. It is hard to believe the argument that kids are smart enough to see the difference between a computer game and real violence only when it comes to government-issued violence. People should question this, but more importantly, they should keep playing video games. Because as long as you play video games, from the safety of your own home, there is no risk that you end up in the military, where you actually can be killed, as there is no extra lives, continues, replays or reset buttons in real life.

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