

Research paper on violent video games: can they influence behavior

[Entertainment](#), [Video Games](#)



In the wake of gun-related massacres like Sandy Hook and the Aurora theater shootings, the relationship between violence in the media and violence in real life becomes more of a pertinent issue than ever. Many argue that the increasing level of violence in films, television shows and video games is contributing to increased aggression in teenagers. Some studies have suggested that media violence has the capability to increase the likelihood of individuals, especially teenagers, to engage in real violence (Anderson et al., 2003). This is seen to vary depending on the individual, of course, as various teenagers have different degrees of empathy for others; however, the trend exists. Violence in video games, in particular, are seen as a bad influence for young children, as they instill values of aggression, jingoism and xenophobic behavior in formative minds who play them. However, when it comes down to an ultimate correlation between violent video games and influencing behavior, a true causation cannot be found. Media literacy and the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality still permits people to act on their own recognizance, meaning that violent video games do not cause violence in and of themselves; it is instead caused by other intrinsic motivators like existing family violence and psychological disorders.

Children and other youth spend a larger amount of time consuming violent television, films and video games than ever before, and the implication has been made that aggression and violence is reduced when exposure to violent media is reduced (Sparks, Sparks and Sparks, 2008). This influence is based on the concept of desensitization, where teenagers (already searching for large cultural and societal influences) are dulled to the pain and suffering

of others when violent acts are normalized through repetition. Watching violent media repeats these violent acts, and so they become less affecting. Currently, studies show that the influence of violent media on aggressive acts decreases given the severity of the act; the more severe the act, the less it is directly influenced by violent media. However, minor aggressiveness is shown to be linked to violent media (Ferguson). With these things in mind, a correlation is often made between violent media and teenage aggression; the question remains to what extent it has this influence.

Typically, video games feature a large amount of violence and sex, and as many video games are played by the younger generation, the content of those games is said to have a big influence on their behavior. While many children and adults who play video games can understand that violent behavior like that is not acceptable in the real world, there are dangerous exceptions that lead to disasters such as the Columbine shootings. Grand Theft Auto is, undoubtedly, one of the most influential examples of violent video games that reach incredible popularity and are known throughout mainstream culture. It offers incredibly lifelike portrayals of gang violence and sex, and is often purported to be a bad influence on children. By depicting worlds of wanton hedonism, and allowing this kind of wish fulfillment for young children whose minds are not yet fully formed, it can introduce them to the notion that these horrible acts have no consequences. The desensitization of video game players to violence is said by some to have incredibly dramatic effects on their empathy in real life situations. In military video games, which is one of the most popular genres of violent

video games, players enter a nightmarish world where the sole objective is to kill as many of your enemy as possible, often in gritty environments full of dust and grim. All of this has the effect of making modern warfare seem less 'real,' more akin to people playing with their toy trucks and planes than engaging in deadly combat. To that end, spectators are less given to being fully engaged with the ramifications of what they are seeing, in addition to having less empathy for those involved in the conflict. For example, seeing a soldier killed in combat right in front of you could be intensely traumatic, but this empathy might be greatly diminished if one were to see a soldier bombed remotely, from a distance, a night-vision camera turning them into a neon-green silhouette. The mechanization of modern warfare is said to contribute to this distancing of oneself from the consequences of violence, and therefore demanding less empathy for those who are fighting, on either side (Swalwell, 2007). This then is translated to violence in general, as video games train young kids to be desensitized to real acts of aggression.

Despite these claims, however, and the evidence that has been provided toward that end, there is significant logical evidence to support the notion that violent video games do not intrinsically lead to violent behavior. First, the number of people who play violent video games is enormous compared to the small number of people within that group who display violent behavior. Furthermore, there are other studies that show no correlation between playing violent video games and major violent crimes, being associated most closely with bullying and other mild violence instead (Kutner and Olson, 2008). Because of the high-profile nature of school shootings and other adolescent violence, there has been a great deal of media attention

drawn to it, leading to the sensationalizing of new stories for the sake of ratings. In essence, the concern over violent video games stems from a fear of the new and unfamiliar, the increased exposure and profiling of school shootings makes it appear that violent video games are more of a problem than they are. According to statistics, crime rates are actually decreasing while violent video game sales are increasing; this provides an almost negative correlation between violent games and violent behavior (Radford, 2005). To that end, there must be other factors that contribute to what violence is still occurring, as the proliferation of violent video games is not having an equivalent effect on increases of actual violence - just increases in media profiling of major adolescent violence (Radford, 2005).

Secondly, there is the fundamental aspect of humanity that they are able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and that just playing violent video games does not cause real violence. Despite the aforementioned studies showing a correlation between violent video games and violent behavior, correlation does not imply causation; in short, video games do not make people behave violently. There is no current research to suggest that video game violence has a causal relationship to real life violence and aggressive tendencies beyond a small measure (Williams, 2007). When human beings make decisions, it is based on a largely objective set of values, and being able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality helps to determine that. People permit themselves to shoot people in violent video games because the intrinsic social cost is not there (people do not really die, you do not hurt another person, you are not hurt in return or face retaliation by the law, etc.); to that end, the decision to kill in a video game is not the same as

the decision to kill in real life.

Often, video games provide an outlet for aggressive tendencies, and the roleplaying aspect of video games, in which you play a character who is not yourself, permits you to distance yourself from the actual decision of killing someone. Because the circumstances are so radically different, and the cognitive processes you have to go through are equally dissimilar, it is disingenuous to connect the act of killing in a video game to killing in real life. The stakes and desires are so far removed from each other that one does not translate into the other. Furthermore, the citing of violent video games as a contributor to violent behavior presupposed a special kind of influence that other violent media is not claimed to have; for example, violent films and television shows went through their own stage of blame for violent behavior, but have since been debunked as a cause for violent behavior. There is no reason to believe that violent video games are any different.

One of the most important factors in teenagers and adolescents not being unduly influenced by video games is the presence of media literacy - the ability to read modern media, such as video games, in a critical light and from an ironic distance. In the time before media literacy, media was taken at face value. People thought of information " as something fed to [them] from above." (Rushkoff 242) There was no questioning of something that was said, or why it was being said - we just took it as gospel and moved on with that information. There was no evaluative measure for newspapers, advertisements, television programs - the viewer simply assumed they knew what they were doing. This was why incidents like the sinking of the Maine in

1898 caused the Spanish-American War; the news depicted it as an attack by Spain, despite it not being clear who was responsible. Though it is a drastic example, it is an effective instance of news being inaccurate, and yet still trusted enough to take action on without doing proper fact checking. The landscape has now changed - with a more media-savvy younger generation, they are much more likely to recognize and lampoon the various methods and strategies of advertisement that are used by media executives. These tricks include drawing a person into the story of the television show or commercial, only to solve their tension-inducing problem with the right ideology or product. Today's generation sees right through the manipulation and recognizes that they are being pandered to. They are no longer as connected with programming as the earlier generation, since it is so much easier to tune out of it and change the channel. There is even less respect for the image itself, as video games allow people to control that image (Rushkoff 244).

If video game violence does not cause aggression and violent behavior, there must be other causes. Ferguson et al. (2008) conducted a study in which male and female groups were exposed to video games and tested for aggression; exposure to violent video games, either before the test or during, was not seen to show any differences in aggression. However, other factors such as family violence, or other intrinsic motivators for violence had a bigger contributing factor to the initiation of aggression than video games. In essence, those studied were found to have a much stronger sense of aggression if they had a history of violence in their family, or committed violence toward another end (such as revenge or gaining material goods, i.

e. robbery) (Ferguson et al., 2008). Because of this, it is clear that innate violence motivators are the cause of violence, not violent video games as an institution. However, these kinds of steps are not intrinsically necessary to reduce violence, as violent behavior is not caused by violent video games. In conclusion, it can be said that violent video games do not contribute to violent behavior. Any number of other personal and socioeconomic factors can play into violence, from poverty to psychological disorders; however, there is insufficient evidence to link violent video games as a cause of violent behavior. The concept of free will, and the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality through media literacy, means that video game violence is easily compartmentalized by healthy individuals, making it irrelevant as a cause of real world violence. In today's deconstructive age, it is relatively easy for teenagers to tell what is acceptable and not acceptable to do in real life as opposed to in media; to that end, it can be safely said that violent video games do not cause aggression in those who play them.

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