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Video Games and Aggression

Do violent video games increase aggression in the people who play them? If so then video games could be responsible for much of the bad news we hear on television. Are video games responsible for school shootings? Do producers of video games need to tone down the violence? What will happen if video games become more and more violent and realistic? On the other hand, are video games to blame at all for the increase of violence in kids? When violence in video games started to increase, people started noticing an increase in the aggression of their children as well. This brought about the assumption that the violence in video games has a large impact on the way children behave.

There is no correlation between violence in video games and aggression in the ones who play them. Many people have conducted studies to find a link in violence in video games and violence in the players. These studies started when video games first became popular. All of the studies I have read about were either inconclusive or inaccurate, or they showed positive effects that could even outweigh the negative possibilities.

A major issue people see when discussing this topic is that children who play video games often warp their sense of reality. The kids think that if they shoot a person in a game and nothing really happens then nothing will really happen if they shoot a person in real life. When video games first became popular, people may not have seen this as much of a problem because games were not very realistic. With the advancement of technology, however, video games are becoming more and more realistic. If video games

become more realistic, children will forget what is real and what is simulated; a child seeing somebody violently murder another human being in a video game will have the same effects as seeing somebody murder another human being in real life. Witnessing these brutal acts of violence either will traumatize or desensitize them to violence.

However, this is contradictory to the “Play is labile” theory (Schroeder 4), which will be discussed, in further detail.

Randy Schroeder cites from Johan Huizinga’s book Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture four characteristics of video game play. These four characteristics are “1. Play is for itself. It serves no external goal. 2. Play exists outside the scope of ordinary life. 3. Play operates within fixed boundaries of time and space, with its own set of rules. 4. Play is labile. Though it can completely absorb the player, ‘ordinary life’ can re-assert itself at any time” (3-4).

Huizinga’s first three theories are used to define video games. Standing alone, they offer no evidence contrary to or in compliance with the theory that violence in video games increase aggression. However, with the fourth theory, which I call the “Play is labile” theory, all of these theories demonstrate that there is no correlation between violence in video games and aggression in people who play them. The “Play is labile” theory, in terms that are more basic, describes the process by which a child resumes real life after a game is finished. When a child plays video games, the game can totally immerse them to the point where the game is real to them. Even if a video game becomes reality to a child while playing, when the game is over actual reality replaces this newly found simulated reality, and everything is back to normal again. To illustrate this point, let us compare a child playing a video game to a team playing a competitive sport.

During the game, lots of aggression is used and often necessary to win. After the game, the players' aggression dissipates and they shake hands and tell each other, "Good game." If the child's aggression is increased by the violence in these games, then his or her aggression will then be brought back down to normal levels after the video game is over.

This theory is only one of many different theories. Schroeder reports that research reflects four main theories that concern effects of video games on children. The "Play is Labile" theory goes hand in hand with Schroeder's theory that video games neither benefit children nor cause significant problems. One theory is that video games are responsible for aggression and even physical problems such as tendonitis. Another theory is that video games can be good or bad, depending on how people program and use them. The last theory is that video games are beneficial; parents and teachers can use them to teach and players can play them for physical as well as mental benefits (2).

There are possibilities for physical problems and other negative consequences with video games. Susan Villiani lists five possible negative effects of video games on children. They are cardiovascular implications, seizures, "Nintendinitis," preoccupation, and aggression (399). She gives information and examples for each one of these effects.

Steve Dorman, whose article Villiani cited to get the previous list of negative effects, looks at these effects in more detail. To illustrate what he means by cardiovascular implications, he looks into the fact that, "children adopt sedentary lifestyles at earlier ages," and "Video games and television viewing may contribute to a sedentary lifestyle by displacing involvement in sport and other physical activity" (1).

Dorman then compares the very different activities of playing video games and watching television. In an experiment, thirty-five people were tested to see the effect of video game playing on their cardiovascular performance. While playing video games, their blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen consumption increased, as it would during mild exercise (1). While doctors are not going to suggest patients to substitute Nintendo for regular exercise, playing video games does not have the cardiovascular implications that people fear. Strange as it may seem, people can play video games as a form of physical therapy. In high school, my brother broke his arm above the wrist in football. After his arm started to heal, his physician told him to strengthen his weakened muscles by playing video games using a joystick.

One of Villiani's sources of information documented fifty cases of seizures caused by video games worldwide (399). Many of these children had problems with epilepsy before they played video games, so the games cannot be named the cause for these seizures. Any video games released within the last few years have warnings about epileptic seizures printed in the games' instruction manuals.

Nindentinitis, as defined by Dorman, is an injury caused by repeated pushing of the controller buttons with the thumb. Rapidly moving the thumb up and down puts strain on the extensor tendon of the thumb (2). As with any exercise, knowing how to pace oneself is the key to preventing injury. If the one person diagnosed with Nintendinitis had started small and played only a little to begin with, he would have conditioned his tendons in his thumb and he would not have strained his thumb to that extent. As discussed earlier, playing video games can actually be the treatment of certain physical problems as a form of physical therapy.

Another negative effect of video games is what Dorman calls “pathological preoccupation with video games.” Some children will play video games so much that they actually become addicted. In one case, a preadolescent had been having some serious family problems. He would play video games to get away from these social problems brought about by his parents. The people that reported this case said that eventually it led to him stealing and forging checks and ditching school to play his video games (Dorman). I do not see how his video games could have led to him stealing and forging checks. The problems he faced at home led to all of these problems. He was using video games as a haven to get away from these problems. If his parents had been more aware that their actions were affecting their son, and if they had done something about it, nothing would have led to these actions. Video games were not the cause of his aggressive behavior.

The final negative effect explored in Dorman’s article is that of aggression. There are several different theories that promote the idea that video games increase aggression. The first theory researched by Dorman is the general arousal theory. This is the theory that if someone is physically aroused in any way, he or she acts more aggressively. This just shows that a child playing anything will make him or her more aggressive, whether it be playing tag with other children or playing Mortal Kombat with a friend in Vietnam. This does not only apply to video games. It is known widely by psychologists that when somebody is physically or mentally active, his or her emotions are more intense.

Another theory is the social learning theory. This theory explains that when video games reward players for aggressive behavior during the video game, he or she will continue to show aggressive behavior after the game is ended (Dorman). This is the

theory that people try to prove when trying to show that video games increase aggression. After all, if someone gets to enter his or her initials for the high score when he or she kills the most people, this means that he or she did good, right? The Catharsis theory, however, contradicts the social learning theory. The Catharsis theory states that playing video games releases aggression and gets it out of the system of the player. More generally, “experiencing a specific emotional drive reduces the likelihood of behavior related to that emotional drive” (Dorman).

Since there are so many theories, the best way to find the correlation, or lack thereof, between violence in video games and aggression in those who play them is to look at the findings of experts who have conducted studies on this matter. To find the correlation, some experts used questionnaires while others did actual experiments. All of these experiments were either inconclusive or inconsistent in their findings. In his article, Derek Scott, cites references to many different experiments. One questionnaire cited showed “a significant relationship between video game playing and aggressive delinquency in adolescents,” while another questionnaire reported that “aggressive games had a calming effect” (1).

Scott later shows that certain studies conducted to find the correlation between video game violence and player aggression were also inaccurate because of some major glitches in the ways people were conducting them (2). One of his sources was quick to claim that the study conducted was flawed when the results showed beneficial effects for children. The same group of people conducted a second study using many different approaches to find the correlation found that there were no differences in the level of aggression when children played violent video games and when they played nonviolent

video games (Scott 2). This further illustrates the fact that no matter the activity one participates in, aggression is increased by activity. In other words, video games do not increase aggression in children any more than doing push-ups or playing tag.

Another problem that past experimenters had is that when video games first became popular, there was not much of a difference between violent video games and nonviolent video games. In one study, experimenters tested children for their aggression after they played video games that were violent and after they played nonviolent video games. One game they considered violent was Missile Command (Scott 2). This is hardly a violent video game. The object of this game is to shoot down missiles before they destroy cities. The concept behind the game is violent, but the graphics and gameplay are not realistic so by today's standards the game has a very low level of violence. The nonviolent games included Pac-Man and Frogs n' Flies (Scott 2). The object of Pac-Man is to eat all of the pills before ghosts catch and kill Pac-Man. This is almost as violent, if not more violent, than Missile Command.

Because of the inconclusiveness of the last study, another study was conducted later. This study was more specific in that it split how it would measure aggression into seven different subtypes of aggression. These subtypes are assault, indirect hostility, irritability, negativism, resentment, suspicion, and verbal hostility (Scott 3). In addition, this study was conducted later, after games had become more realistic and some became more violent. There were three games played by the subjects in the experiments. These games were Tetris as the nonviolent game, Overkill as the semi-violent game, and Fatal Fury as the violent game (Scott 4). These games do fit the categories that they were put into. Tetris is a Tetris-type game where the object is to stack blocks. Overkill is a space

shoot-em-up game much like space invaders but mildly more violent. Fatal Fury is a beat-em-up game where the player is to kill or be killed. The actual results were omitted in the online version of Scott's article, but according to Scott, the results showed no "linear trend" that represents the correlation between violence in video games and aggression in video game players.

More studies cited by Villiani also found no correlation between violence in video games and aggression in the ones who play them. In fact, the only effects found in these studies were positive, such as superior social skills and learning spatial performance (399). This leads back to Baudrillard's theory that video games have positive effects on people that play them. I owe much of my childhood learning on computer and video games. I learned how to read before I was in preschool by using the computer. To use video games back then, it was required to type in commands to load a game into memory and run it. I also played games that used academic skills such as reading, spelling, typing, and doing math. Some examples include The Algebra Dragons, Typing Teacher, Number Munchers, and Word Munchers. In The Algebra Dragons and Number Munchers, math skills are needed to win the game. In Typing Teacher and Word Munchers, spelling and literacy are practiced and are needed to complete the games.

Some people may not agree with my point of view because the games I illustrated were computer games, not video games. However, video games and computer games are a lot alike. For example, many games made for video game consoles are also made for computers. Some games that are made for computers are then later made for consoles, as well. There are also educational games made specifically for video game consoles. One game that comes to mind in this category is Math Grand Prix. This is a game where the

players race either against each other or against the computer-controlled car. To move the car forward, the player has to solve a math problem. Thanks to these games, I excelled in my math skills and English skills even before Kindergarten. I even read the instructions on preschool assignments.

These games are not the only ones that I played when I was a child. I also played violent games. When Mortal Kombat was first popular, it was my favorite game. The object in this game is to defeat the opponent before he or she does so to the player. Extra points are awarded if the player kills the opponent. I also played many first person's perspective shoot-em-up games, such as Doom, Wolfenstein 3-D, and Duke-Nukem 3-D. The object of these games is to kill enemies before they kill the player. Most of the time, bonus points are awarded for killing everything. These games did not cause me to be more aggressive. I surely never went to school with thoughts of killing my classmates or come home with thoughts of killing my family or my classmates. They never made me want to hurt my friends, either.

Many of the kids known for their participation in school shootings were studied for the habitual playing of violent video games. For example, the kids who shot up Columbine High School were known for playing Doom (Shlafley). Violence in video games cannot be the cause for these actions. If it was, then many more school shootings would occur around the world. There are millions of kids in the world that play intensely violent video games. If playing these games was the cause of these acts of terrible violence, then there would be many more school shootings than there are.

As all of the studies have shown, aggression in children is not increased by violence in the video games that they play. The only effects video games have that

studies confirm are positive effects. The only negative effects confirmed by studies are that video games are addicting and that they can cause kids to sit around instead of play outside. Watching television also causes these effects, and they do not have effects on aggression. Instead of investigating the nonexistent correlation between violence in video games and the children who play them, people need to find the real causes for these aggressive behaviors and find ways to stop them. Pointing the finger at video games is not going to help anything. Video games are not going to be taken off the shelves, and even if they were going to be, nothing would change. The real causes of aggressive behavior, such as alcoholism, drugs, and other problems at home, would still be there and maybe after that people would see that aggression would be on the rise without video games.

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