

Do Video Games Lead to Violence?

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There is a world where “points” become synonymous with “kills”, where these points are ones sole source of veneration, and existence atrophies into an unremitting cycle of kill, be killed, and repeat. This world is the virtual reality of violent videogames (VVGs). Thus begs the question: are videogames simply innocuous child games, or are they enactors of desensitization and creators of criminals? Gentile and Anderson (2003) in their article “Violent Video Games: The Newest Media Violence Hazard,” allege that videogames promote violence. They attest that VVGs are inherently comprised of learning mechanisms that ingrain violent tendencies, including acting out complete behavioral sequences, active participation, repetition, reward systems, pervasive violent themes, and first person identification with a violent character. Specifically, they enumerate results such as decreasing prosocial behavior, and increasing blood pressure, aggressive thoughts, hostility, anxiety, frustration, and aggressive behavior. Olson(2004), in contrast, claims in her article “Media Violence Research and Youth

Violence Data: Why Do They Conflict?” that videogames are benign.

She exposes serious flaws in VVG research tests, such as inadequate sample quality, the inaccuracy of artificial tests, inappropriate combination of tests in meta-analyses, and varying measurements of the abstract concepts of “aggression” and “violence.” She states that without testing for violent people “selecting into” playing violent videogames, the studies results are not proven to be of significance.

With all the uproar about the negative effects of violence in the media, more researchers and policy makers should turn their focus to videogames, a growing industry whose revenue has now surpassed that of music and movies. As current research has shown, violent videogame content, design, and addictive qualities predispose gamers to subsequent violent behavior. As videogame usage rises, researchers should elucidate the detrimental effects that videogames could pose to our society, so that measures to offset the potential consequences can be taken.

Naturally, an observer forms violent

thoughts when exposed to violent images [1]. A person who has just heard violent discourse or observed violent behavior is more apt to speak or act aggressively because the response is more accessible in his or her mind. Therefore, the content of VVGs has the potential to produce negative effects. Various cross sectional studies [3], longitudinal studies [2], and meta-analyses[1] indicate that VVG content augments aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, physiological arousal, aggressive emotions, and/or desensitization. This augmentation exacerbates subsequent violent behaviors. Despite conservative statistical procedures [1], critics snub these studies by selectively examining evidence, restricting their focus to negligible flaws, and overlooking cognitive learning theory [9]. For example, they harp on the debate of “selection” versus “causation” [12] but forget that selection and causation are not mutually exclusive [14]. A longitudinal study controlling for initial violence still found that exposure to videogames with violent content predicted later aggression [2]. Cross-cultural studies [1][2][7] further show that effects are causal in nature. For example, in Gentile’s (2009) study, the United States, Japan, and Singapore all demonstrated similar effects from VVG exposure, even though the Eastern countries have a less crime-ridden culture.

These studies are pertinent because today 90% of American children play videogames at home [1], and 99% of boys and 96% of girls say they play videogames. Even people living at a low SES are exposed to VVGs [7]. The poor are already especially prone to developing mental illness. Since VVG content affects diverse groups, it can accumulate as yet another risk factor for already disadvantaged groups [11].

Although the short-term consequences of VVG exposure (such as physiological arousal and aggressive script priming) are well-known [1], critics assert that there will be only negligible long-term consequences, but consequences nonetheless [12]. On the contrary, VVG design enhances a pejorative learning process, deeply embedding violence into ones personality. Well-studied and widely-accepted mechanisms of learning that are present in videogames include active participation, repetition, and reward systems. Since VVGs are inherently interactive, a player is both a witness and an enactor of violence [2]. Frequently, VVG design necessitates that the gamer indefatigably decide to engage in harmful behavior to earn a reward, perpetuating a cycle of learning and reinforcement [7]. Moreover, “problems” encountered frequently offer only one solution: to act violently. This further reinforces the formation of a violent personality. Once

these learning systems are in place, long-term changes in personality will presumably ensue. Longitudinal studies illustrate this by controlling for a person's initial aggressive personality levels. Test subjects who habitually play VVGs, regardless of their initial violent personality levels, experience intensified subsequent violent behavior [2].

Since videogames are highly interactive and take place from a first-person perspective, the gamer is inclined to become attached to his or her characters role in the virtual world [2]. Symbolic interaction theory hypothesizes that a person develops personal meaning by engaging in social interaction. This may span into situations of virtual interaction as well. Videogames can become a sort of virtual social world to the gamer. Since identities held by an individual influence one another because of the individuals network embeddedness, behavior learned in a virtual social context will bleed into real world social identities. If a gamer becomes deeply committed to his or her role as a violent videogame character, his or her violent identity will permeate his or her non-virtual perceptions and reactions [16].

While many studies have real-life measurements of violent or prosocial augmentation, such as willingness to assist a harassed woman [8], critics purport that ambiguous definitions of "aggression", "violence", and "prosocial"

undermine the findings of such studies [12]. Regardless, if a person is labeled as "violent" they will still be pushed into further deviance [10]. Moreover, videogames prevent social ties from being formed when played in excess, thereby removing salubrious social support systems [13]. On average, American boys play 16-18 hours of videogames a week [2]. In addition to content and construct, time allotted to playing videogames can have detrimental effects on personality formation by detracting from time spent engaging in more prosocial activities. Addiction to videogames detracts from interaction with others, thereby impeding the formation and development of one's social identity. Addiction becomes a form of isolation from social circles, decreasing the amount of role sets formed. The less role sets formed, the more likely a person is to have a psychological disturbance, such as aggressive personality [1][16]. Furthermore, labeling a person as "aggressive" will have negative repercussions for his or her social networking and self-esteem, according to modified labeling theory. These consequences predispose the individual to further deviation from societal norms, thus enhancing violent behavior. The deviance becomes internalized [10]. Correlation has already been demonstrated between time spent playing videogames and poor school performance and social skills [2]. Since pro-

ductivity is more socially esteemed than stigmatized videogames, a person lacking these socially venerated skills may fall further into the cracks of social deviance [4][16].

VVGs have negative consequences for social behavior through their content, design, and addictive qualities. Psychological research on VVGs benefits from utilizing sociological concepts to further elucidate how, when, and why VVGs impact the gamer, specifically by analyzing social interaction and labeling theories, social support systems, and the discrepant impacts across differentially vulnerable groups of people. For example, by studying VVGs differential affects on at risk populations (such as children and the poor), researchers may better be able to explain the magnitude of their results and incite institutional change [1][8]. To further gain public support, research should eliminate common experimental design flaws by lengthening the time period of longitudinal studies [2][1][3], using larger sample sizes

[2][1], and construing a common definition for “violence” to make separate studies more comparable [1].

Once someone’s deviance (eg. violent behavior) is affirmed through another’s reaction, the deviance can cascade into a self-fulfilling prophecy because of stigmatizations consequences, such as losing social ties [5]. Lack of social support is an integral factor in the pathway to violence, and is especially potent when there are other stress factors in operation, such as low SES [15]. The effects VVGs have on individuals could be reduced by reducing the stigma that comes with struggling with social skills, playing “nerdy” videogames, and perhaps acting violently [17]. Although remedying stigma is difficult since it is so deeply embedded in society, public information campaigns could increase community understanding of the reasons for the consequences of VVGs, and thereby diminish social support loss for the gamer [18].

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