

Is There a Reasonable Approach to Handling Violence in Videogames?

Don't like digging through research papers? We do. Take a minute and read this brief article. It brings up some important points about the effects of violence in videogames.

by Ellen Wolock, Ed.D.

It's a bit unnerving to hear your seven-year old daughter shout "Kill him! Kill him!", even if she's only hollering at the PlayStation 2. That's what happened last week at the CSR offices when Erin and her 10-year-old brother, Austin, dropped by to test a new sword-fighting game called Pirates. Erin's parents, browsing in the software library in the next room, were upset by their daughter's bloodthirsty outbursts. Yet another debate over videogame violence begins.

Historically, parents, educators and society at large have long been interested in the effects of children's exposure to violence, and many studies have been conducted on the topic, especially regarding children's television viewing habits. With computer use and videogame playing on the rise over the last five to ten years, the focus of research has switched from TV to more interactive media. Study conclusions, as you might guess, are all over the map, as this is not an easy phenomenon to investigate. Defining variables and separating them out from other related factors are no simple task. Yet, people are concerned, and asking for answers. Should we let our kids play violent games? Will they make our children become more aggressive or immune to real violence?

Defining Violence

The fact that violence is defined in many ways doesn't help us draw conclusions. What's considered violent to one person may seem innocuous to another. Even the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board), the organization who rates videogames according to their content, has been questioned about their definitions of violence. According to a report in the August, 2001 Journal of the American Medical Association (Thompson & Haninger), approximately 64% of E-rated games contain what the



Game consoles can deliver new levels of graphic violence. Here's a screen from the PlayStation 2 version of EA's *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (coming this fall).

study authors maintain is intentional violence. Action/adventure games (e.g. Super Mario, Zelda, Sonic Adventure) serve up much of the E-rated violent content, with their largely "Saturday morning cartoon"-like depictions of bopping, smashing, shooting, flying into and rolling over objects and characters. On the other hand, racing and sports games were characterized as containing minimal violence, although one might argue that hockey brawls and car crashing are violent in nature. Determining how researchers have defined and measured violence is the first step to interpreting study findings.

Recent Key Findings

To better understand what we know and don't know about the effects of violent videogames on kids, we scoured the recent studies and literature reviews. The measures used to determine if a child is more aggressive after playing a violent videogame include children's toy choices (choosing aggressive versus neutral toys), teacher reports, self-reports, projective tests of aggression, and reactions when provoked. Study results vary tremendously, but do seem to show some increase in aggressive behavior directly after playing. (Not surprisingly, these same find-

ings have been shown when looking at the potential influence of cartoon violence.) Here are quick summaries of the key findings of studies conducted in the last 10 years.

Negative Effects

- ✓ College students at Iowa State University who reported spending greater time with videogames (both violent and non-violent) during junior high and high school engaged in more self-reported aggressive behavior as adults. (Anderson & Dill, Journal of the American Psychological Association, 2000)
- ✓ Second-grade boys displayed more aggressive behavior right after playing a violent videogame than boys who played a "nonaggressive" game. (Irwin & Gross, Journal of Family Violence, 1995, Volume 10)
- ✓ Male college students who played a more violent version of Mortal Kombat scored higher on hostility measures and had higher blood pressure than those who played a less violent version (Ballard & Wiest, Society for Research in Child Development, Spring, 1995)
- ✓ Children who played Mortal Kombat responded more negatively to six provocative story questions than those who played a non-violent videogame. (Kirsh, ERIC, 1998)
- ✓ The level of aggression of 153 middle and high school students (as measured by teachers) was positively correlated with the amount of students' self-reported videogame play. (Fling, Smith, Rodriguez, Thornton, Atkins & Nixon, Southwest Texas State University, 1992)

Human Nature Plays a Role

Throughout time, humans have been fascinated by violence. Grimm's fairy tales, centuries old, are some of the most violent materials ever written for children. Kids have forever latched on to hero/aggressors like Zorro, Batman, Power Rangers and Pokemon. We can't escape it—preschools with no-gun policies find that their students make guns out of fingers. As a society, we are obsessed with extremely aggressive sports like hockey and football. Many of us regularly watch "edgy" television programs like ER and Third Watch. It has been argued that children (boys in particular) even go through stages of aggression during development that reach their peak when in adolescence (James Twitchell, Preposterous Violence). Violence is a part of existence—we can limit its gratuitous display, but we can't eliminate it.

Neutral/Positive Effects

- ✓ University students show similar performance on hostility and personality measures after playing with games containing different levels of violence (Strathclyde University, 1995)
- ✓ Recent survey figures (for the Interactive Digital Software Association) suggest that videogames encourage socialization with family and friends. More specifically, out of 1500 individuals and families surveyed, 42% reported that they enjoy playing games because they can be shared with friends and family (2002). (Note: this study did not separate out violent from non-violent videogames, but looked at gameplay as a whole.)
- ✓ A literature review of 59 studies conducted by the Washington State Dept of Health concludes that current research evidence is not supportive of a major concern that violent games lead to real life violence. (Bensley and Van Eenwyk, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol 29, 2001)
- ✓ Time spent playing with videogames was not correlated with aggression for middle school kids (144 females, 134 males), although boys with a preference for aggressive games were perceived as more aggressive by peers. (Wiegman & van Shie, *Social Psychology*, 1998)
- ✓ No differences in measures of aggressive thought were found for 52 3rd and 4th graders who played *Mortal Kombat* versus a basketball sim. (Kirsh, *Childhood- a Global Journal of Child Research*, 5, Volume 2, 1998)

Interpreting the Research

So what does this all mean? As any good researcher can tell you, before conclusions can be drawn, you must examine studies' weaknesses and inconsistencies. We've already discussed the differing definitions of violence. Here are some other issues.

Research Inconsistencies

1. Many of the studies examine only short-term consequences in the form of behavior immediately following exposure to videogame violence, as opposed to examining any long-term effects.
2. Each study uses different types of videogames (e.g. sports, shooters, action/adventure) with different types and "levels" of violence. Some studies don't report the type or names of videogames used in the investigation. These factors make comparisons and conclusions difficult to ascertain.
3. Much of the research is correlational only. Relationships may be shown, but they may be coincidental or caused by other individual, family and social factors.
4. Games have become more realistic in graphics and sounds, in essence a different animal than those used in much of the research. Many studies were conducted using older platforms and games, making them less easily generalized or comparable to more recent games.

Discussing the Findings

So, taking all the above into account, can we definitively say that kids who play violent video games will become more aggressive? No. The issue has simply not been studied adequately, especially in a longitudinal way. There is some evidence that children who play violent games are more aggressive

Might there be actually be positive effects?

If you bring the subject of videogame violence up with a group of parents, you'll often hear the viewpoint that playing violent games may actually help children channel or reduce their aggression. Playing sports has long been seen as a means of channeling energy and aggressive tendencies— could it be possible that playing violent videogames can have similar positive benefits? It's all conjecture at this point— **we need more and better research.**

sive for a few moments immediately following the gameplay. But even that finding is questionable, when you look at the ways in which "aggressivity" is measured— increase in heart rate and blood pressure, negative responses on questionnaires, toy choice, etc. If children failed to show empathy in real situations, or tried to hurt another child following violent gameplay, THEN we'd have a problem. Even more so if such aggressive acts and feelings were exhibited over time. It is important not to underestimate the degree to which children are able to separate fantasy from reality, which is a root issue in this debate. According to seven-year-old

Erin's parents, she has no problem separating her gaming experience from her real life. In addition to loving action-packed videogames, she continues to carefully close her bedroom door each night when she goes to bed to make sure that her cat doesn't scare her new baby gerbils. She is also rule-governed in her approach to most activities, and is concerned when family members hurt themselves. In no way, shape or form, does Erin act out her videogame experiences in other aspects of her life.

Drawing the Line

Although we have serious doubts about the long-term impact of videogame playing on kids' aggression, we are NOT saying that all videogames, regardless of content are okay for children of all ages. As with other media, some kids may be frightened by certain games. The *Jak & Daxter* game (a favorite of our testers), for instance, has some very scary biting fish scenarios that could result in a bad dream or two. And remember the trampled father scene in the *Lion King* film? (We're still getting over that one!) Like children's movies, E-rated games aren't automatically for everyone. As with most aspects of raising kids, it comes down to parent supervision and involvement. We see common sense in choosing videogames without excessive violence and without gender and ethnic stereotypes. There are hundreds of excellent choices available. Help guide your child to games that you are comfortable with. If you abhor all suggestions of violence, provide alternatives such as racing games or games of logic like *Tetris* and *Super Monkey Ball*. Keep in mind that banning all videogames may heighten the attraction, and remember to play them yourself once in a while, to better understand the experience. Talk about the issue with your kids and share your values. Giving children an awareness of the debate and helping them become savvy media consumers is important, regardless of whether or not they play the games. ⚡



What is the Videogame Industry's Position?

The Videogame Industry's Position— an Interview with IDSA's Doug Lowenstein

We were interested in seeing how the videogame industry perceives the issue of violence in videogames, so we interviewed the president of the Interactive Digital Software Association, Doug Lowenstein. Here are some highlights.

EW: The ESRB's EVERYONE rating has been under lots of scrutiny lately. What does the IDSA think of the criticism that EVERYONE ratings contain violence?

DL: First of all, ratings are subjective. It's impossible to have ratings that everyone would agree with. One of the studies from Harvard's School of Public Health used a very strict definition of violence, that included themes found in Road Runner, Frogger, etc. These are things that the vast majority of people don't find objectionable. ESRB ratings are done by people independent of the industry. We think that, in fact, the labels are fairly conservative. They also have violence descriptors. We're trying to be thorough in our provision of these descriptors. We periodically need to re-evaluate the rating system and consider whether there's a need for change. Content is changing, the consoles are allowing for more realism, so the evaluation system has to be dynamic. At this point, I don't think the ESRB is off base.

EW: What issues or questions should videogame research address?

DL: I've been frustrated with the fact that the violence issue gets so much attention and covers up the positive uses of videogames. There's a study in Britain that looks at how games off the shelf can be used in schools. We're struggling to get people to see games that way. Good stuff like that gets ignored. I was talking to a teacher who uses racing games to teach physics. There are games that are incredibly powerful— letting you do what you couldn't normally do— like SimCity, Age of Empires and Medal of Honor. They give you an interactive sense of what it was like when forces landed on the beach at Normandy or when soldiers stormed the German troops.

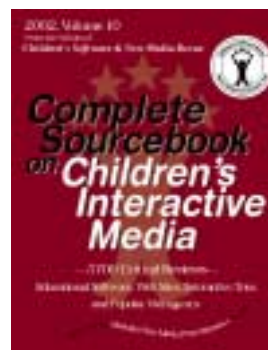
EW: Most of the negative effects we've seen in the research are short term, as measured by behavior right after playing more aggressive games. How would you interpret these findings?

DL: One of things that I've been struck by in talking to "experts" in the field is the difference between fantasy aggression and the real thing. That's an important distinction. There isn't a single study that's found that after playing an aggressive game, kids engage in real-life violence. A short-term aggressive impact (as indicated in the research) doesn't translate to a real act. People make huge leaps from aggressive indicators to actual aggression. A fairly significant flaw in all the studies is that they don't control for predisposition and personality going in.

EW: What advice would you give to parents?

DL: The message I give is that at the end of the day is that parents should pay close attention to how children are processing the games they play with. There's a tendency to pay close attention to other forms of media like television and movies. When it comes to videogames parents are less vigilant. Parents should pay close attention irrespective of whether games are good, bad or indifferent. Parents should carefully monitor what kids are playing regardless of research findings. Pay attention to games children play, how long they play and how they're handling them. ☺

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