Video Games Have Become a Scapegoat for Violent Behavior

Christopher J. Ferguson is an assistant professor of behavioral sciences and criminal justice at Texas A&M University. In the following viewpoint, he argues that it has become all too common to blame video games for inciting individuals to act out in a violent manner. Ferguson maintains that research has not shown a direct correlation between playing violent video games and perpetrating violence. However, he asserts that despite this lack of correlation, the media, politicians, and social scientists are willing to insist that a connection exists between video game violence and real-world violence to further their own agendas and avoid discussing sensitive issues, such as family violence, that may actually contribute to a more violent society.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What flaws did Ferguson find in his meta-analysis of twenty-five violent-game studies?
2. In the author's view, why does the "video-game hypothesis" remain so active despite contradictory evidence?
3. According to Ferguson, what is the video game Re-Mission, and how is it being used?

In the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, it was distressing to see the paroxysms of neurotic finger-pointing and "expert witnessing" that inevitably followed. Beyond noting simply that a bad (evil, some would say) man chose one day to make the lives of other individuals as hellish as he felt his own to be, I don't think we'll ever come up with much more of a scientific explanation for what leads people, mostly men, to become mass murderers. Let me put that another way: Beyond individuals who actually threaten in advance to carry out school shootings (which a recent Secret Service report concluded was the only really useful indicator), no other behavior is particularly predictive of such acts of senseless violence.

That's not very satisfying, is it? Perhaps for that reason, it seems to me that increasingly, as a culture, we have shied away from holding people responsible for their behaviors, and instead prefer to seek out easy or even abstract entities to blame. Events like school shootings tend to make people nervous. Nervous people like reassurance. We would like to think that such events can be explained, predicted, and prevented. We like scientists and politicians who stand up and claim to have the answers so that we can fix the problem.

The New Media Violence Scapegoat

The difficulty is that this often leads to a witch hunt or moral panic, wherein explanations rely on weak social
science or what is politically expedient. In past centuries, a variety of art forms have taken the blame for society's problems. From literature to religious texts, to jazz, rock 'n' roll, and rap, to television, movies, and comic books, people have viewed various media as being responsible for personal failings, as if such media were like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, leading us astray from our natural goodness. Increasingly, in the past two decades, video games have been the scapegoat du jour. The video-game platform is the newest kid on the media block and, as such, is subject to a particularly high dose of suspicion and scrutiny. I think that this is wrong and, indeed, dangerous.

It seemed that the Virginia Tech rampage was barely over before a few pundits began speculating on the role of video games. The lawyer and activist Jack Thompson asserted that violent games such as Counter-Strike may have been responsible for the shooter's actions. Although I have heard little to indicate conclusively that the perpetrator was an avid gamer, the prevalence of game playing among young men makes it likely that he would have crossed paths with a violent game at some point ("He played Spy Versus Spy once when he was 12, that's the culprit!"). For instance, a 1996 study found that 98.7 percent of children of either gender played some video games, with violent games, like Streetfighter II, particularly popular among young men (93 percent of whom had played that one game alone). Since most young men today play violent video games, it is usually not hard to "link" a violent crime with video-game playing if you are so inclined. This is the classic error of using a high-base-rate (very common) behavior to explain a low-base-rate (rare) behavior. Using video-game-playing habits to predict school shootings is about as useful as noting that most or all school shooters were in the habit of wearing sneakers and concluding that sneakers must be responsible for such violence.

The Lack of Evidence Relating Video Games and Violent Behavior

I actually do research on violent video games. I certainly don't speak for others in the field, some of whom I know will disagree with my perspective, but I do speak from a familiarity with the research and the literature. One meta-analysis of video-game studies, conducted this year by John Sherry, of Michigan State University, found little support for the belief that playing violent games causes aggression. Recently I completed my own meta-analytic review (published in the journal Aggression and Violent Behavior) of 25 violent-game studies and found that publication bias and the use of poor and unstandardized measures of aggression were significant problems for this area of research.

My meta-analysis concluded that there was no evidence to support either a causal or correlational relationship between video games and aggressive behavior. My impression is that social science made up its mind that video games cause aggression before many data were available, and has subsequently attempted to fit square pieces of evidence into round theoretical holes. The threshold for what appears to constitute "evidence" is remarkably low. Admittedly, publication bias (the tendency to publish articles that support a hypothesis and not publish those that don't) is very likely a widespread problem in the social sciences and is not unique to video-game studies. Perhaps this is really a reflection on human nature. I may sound hopelessly postmodern here, but sometimes we forget that scientists are mere humans, and that the process of science, as a human enterprise, may always have difficulty rising above a collective and dogmatic pat on the back rather than a meaningful search for truth.

Creating Studies to Support Policy Decisions

Unfortunately, I think it is a worrisome reflection on social science in general that social scientists may be too prone to make big and frightening pronouncements from weak results. That violent crime rates in the United
States have gone down significantly since 1994 (despite some small recent increases) while video games have gotten more popular and more violent should, in and of itself, be sufficient to reject the video-game-violence hypothesis (and the rest of the media-violence hypothesis with it). Some media researchers attempt to defuse this argument by suggesting that "other factors" are at play, but no theory should be allowed to survive such a retreat to an unfalsifiable position—that it never need actually fit with real-world data. Could you imagine how far the debate on global warming would have gotten if the earth's atmospheric temperatures were decreasing while pollutants were being released?

In my opinion, the video-game hypothesis remains because it fits well with the dogma of social science (which has yet to escape from an obsession with deterministic learning models that view humans as passive programmed machines rather than active in determining their own behavior), and it is politically expedient. Politicians can use "media violence" to enact popular (but unconstitutional) legislation censoring or otherwise limiting access to violent media, legislation that can appeal to both political conservatives and political liberals. (Religious conservatives might be bemused to know that some media-violence researchers recently published an article suggesting that reading passages from the Bible with violent content increases "aggression" in much the same way that video games supposedly do. So if video games have to be restricted from children, apparently so do at least some portions of the Bible.) By stating that such legislation is based on "concern for children," politicians can cast their opponents as being unconcerned with children while stripping parents of their rights to decide what media are appropriate for their children. In such a political environment, the video-game-violence hypothesis has persisted long after it should have been laid to rest.

Blaming Video Games, Ignoring Human Nature

All this is no idle concern. Media issues serve to distract us from more-sensitive topics that may be real contributors to violent behavior, notably violence in families—although in fairness, not all abused people become violent offenders. I also posit that many of us prefer to blame others, particularly an abstract entity such as the media, for our problems rather than accept personal responsibility when we or our children behave badly. That's the crux of it, I think. Video games, like the rest of the media, form a faceless specter that we have called into being with our own internal desires for sex and violence, yet can turn against when we need a straw man to blame for our own recklessness.

What's lost in the discussion is that there have been several publications suggesting that violent games may be related to increased performance in some areas of cognition, particularly visuospatial cognition. This is a new research area, and I certainly don't wish to reverse the error of overstating the link between video games and aggression by producing my own overstatement. But I do think that, instead of fueling up the bonfires and throwing in the game consoles, we need to have a serious discussion of both sets of potential effects. Given the allure of violent video games, it may be advisable to consider how some games with violent content may be used to further educational purposes. For instance, a first-person-shooter game (though certainly a mild one compared with some) called Re-Mission is being studied in relation to young adults with cancer. One group of youths who played this game demonstrated better cancer-treatment adherence, better self-efficacy and quality of life, and more cancer-related knowledge than did those in a control group who did not play the game. Of course, once the dust settles, it may really be that video games, like most other forms of entertainment, are simply that: entertainment, neither helpful nor harmful.

I don't know how it came to be that we, as a culture, ceased holding people responsible for their actions. How did we come to feel that we are programmed like machines? How did we come to embrace the Brave New World not as a dystopia to be feared but as a panacea for all of our human guilt? When a man or woman picks up a weapon and premeditates the end of another human life, it is not because he or she was programmed by a video
game but because that individual made a conscious choice—not to play a game, but to kill. This darkness lurks not within our computers, televisions, books, or music, but rather within our species and, sometimes, ourselves.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


Lis Else and Mike Holderness "Are the Kids Alright After All?" *New Scientist*, July 2, 2005.


Barbara Righton "It's a Scene from 24—No, It's a Car Ad," *Maclean's*, December 18, 2006.


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Video Games Foster Violent Behavior

Media Violence, 2009


"Scientific research has repeatedly demonstrated that children learn what video games teach, and often that lesson is doing violence."

In the following viewpoint, David S. Bickham, staff scientist at the Center on Media and Child Health and Children's Hospital in Boston, contends that violent video games can lead to violent behaviors in children. According to Bickham, violent video games typically reward aggression and teach players that violence is an acceptable form of problem solving. After long-term exposure to violent games, this message is ingrained in players and can lead to lasting negative effects, Bickham maintains.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Bickham, what specific characteristics of video games make them especially effective at instilling beliefs and behaviors in children?
2. Why, in Bickham's assessment, did early video game research show minimal differences between exposure to violent and nonviolent video games?
3. What are the bystander effect and the appetite effect produced by violent media, according to Bickham?

Video games are a relatively new form of entertainment media. While the body of evidence on video game violence is growing, we must consider it within the broader field of research exploring portrayals of violence in television, film, and other forms of visual media. There are five decades of media violence research based on a sound theoretical and empirical understanding of learning, aggression, and social cognition. A core ongoing project of the Center on Media and Child Health is the consolidation of all existing research on media effects into one publicly available database. After 3 years of work, the database includes over 1,200 research reports published in peer-reviewed scientific journals investigating the effects of media violence. These studies show consensus in the state of the science that a strong and consistent relationship exists between viewing violent media and increased levels of anxiety, desensitization and aggressive thoughts and behaviors among young people. This body of research derives from a broad spectrum of academic fields, including psychology, communications, public health, and criminal justice, and it draws added strength from the vast array of methodologies utilized by the different disciplines.

The Undeniable Draw of Video Games

Taken alone, no study is perfect. Even the best study design can be criticized for the limitations of its method. Taken together, however, each study about media violence provides a piece of a single puzzle that all interlock to reveal one picture. In this case, that picture is clear—using violent media contributes to children's violent behavior. A variety of complementary methodologies that have resulted in similar findings have been used to generate this overall conclusion. Scientists have exposed children to violent media in laboratories and found that they behave more aggressively than children who saw non-violent television or played non-violent games. Using
survey studies, scientists have found that even after controlling for dozens of complex environmental and individual characteristics linked to aggression, watching violent television and playing violent video games still increases the likelihood that a child will be violent. Researchers have followed children over their entire lives and found that viewing violent television as a child is one of the best predictors of criminal violent behaviors as an adult.

While the large body of research on violent television and film provides a solid foundation for our understanding of the effects of violent video games, there are reasons to believe that the influences of violent video games are stronger than those of other forms of screen violence. All media teach—whether by design or by default. Video games are exceptional teaching tools, incorporating many techniques that promote learning. First, video games are interactive, allowing the player to be closely involved with the main character and to control that character’s actions. Second, video games directly reward the child's success in performing the actions, with visual effects, points, and opportunities to take on new challenges. Third, video games typically require almost complete attention, necessitating constant eyes-on-screen and hand-eye coordination to succeed in the game. Finally, video games are designed to be incredibly engaging and "fun," often leading children to slip deeply into a "flow state" in which they may be at increased susceptibility to the messages of the game. Scientific research has repeatedly demonstrated that children learn what video games teach, and often that lesson is doing violence.

**With More Sophisticated Technologies Comes Increasingly Violent Reactions**

Because the technology and media form are newer, investigating the effects of violent video games is a younger field than television violence research. Early video game research was inconsistent. Studies performed in the 1980s were limited by electronic gaming technology; at the time violent and non-violent games were often very similar. One study, for example, compared the effects of playing *Missile Command* (considered the violent game) to *Pac-Man* (considered the non-violent game). Both games feature abstract geometric icons interacting with one another; both have the player's icons destroying or devouring other icons. As video games have become more graphically sophisticated and capable of depicting violence in a much more graphic and realistic way, the differences between violent and non-violent video games have dramatically increased. Not surprisingly, research exploring the effects of these newer games is much more clear and consistent than previous research. The newest research has definitively and repeatedly converged on the conclusion that playing violent video games is linked to children's aggression.

We all know that children are not automatons who mimic everything they see; their behavior is much more complicated than that. However, there is a widely held misconception that unless children immediately imitate the violence they experience in a video game, they are unaffected by it. Children who play *Grand Theft Auto* don't immediately begin stealing cars and shooting police officers. As a result, many would have you believe that this means that violent video games have no influence. We cannot assume that the absence of immediate and direct imitation means that there are no effects on children.

In rare situations violence from media may be directly imitated after a single exposure, but the most pervasive effects of violent media are not direct imitation and come from repeated viewings. With each exposure, the child's perception of the world is shifted to include violence as a common and acceptable occurrence. The child's behaviors evolve to correspond with this perception and can follow "behavioral scripts" established through experiencing violent media.
Positive Reinforcement for Violent Behavior

Four primary effects of violent media that have been consistently documented in the scientific literature: the aggressor, victim, bystander, and appetite effects. The aggressor effect is the most well known—using violent media increases the likelihood that a child will think and behave aggressively toward others. The victim effect is the tendency for users of violent media to see the world as a scary and violent place promoting anxiety and protective behaviors. The bystander effect describes how violent media desensitizes its users to the real-life violence making them generally less caring and sympathetic to victims of violence and less likely to intervene when they witness violence. Finally, the appetite effect demonstrates that using violent media often increases children's desire to see more violence.

While each of these effects can have substantial influence on children's behaviors, the aggressor effect is perhaps the most troublesome because it puts children at immediate risk of committing violence. It is, therefore, critical to understand how exposure to violent video games translates into aggressive behavior. This process is grounded in our understanding of how children learn, how aggression in general is cultivated, and how video game violence affects its users.

Violent video games present a world in which violence is justified, rewarded, and often the only option for success. Exposure to this world primes children for hostile thoughts and behaviors immediately after playing a game. When children play violent video games, they become both physically and mentally aroused. Their heart rates increase and their blood pressure rises. They begin to think aggressively and to solve problems with violence. In this heightened and primed state, children are more likely to perceive other people's behaviors as aggressive and they are more likely to respond aggressively. In laboratory studies designed to test this effect, participants who played violent video games were more likely to punish competitors than participants who played non-violent games.

Over time, repeated exposure to violent media can have long-term effects. A person's pattern of behavior can become more aggressive through the adoption of aggressive skills, beliefs, and attitudes, desensitization to violence, and an aggressive approach to interactions with other people. Scientific findings have repeatedly provided solid evidence for this process—using violent media as a child predicts aggressive behavior in adulthood.

A Varying but Always Violent Response

Violent video games often have subtle effects but may lead to dramatic consequences for some children. Certain characteristics make some children more susceptible to media effects, while other children are more resilient. However, no known factor or set of factors has yet been identified that completely safeguards children from the influences of violent media.

Children's susceptibility to the effects of media violence varies with their age. Children younger than eight years are more vulnerable to media violence effects because they have not yet developed the ability to discriminate fully between fantasy and reality in media content. Research has consistently shown that young children often behave more aggressively than older children do after playing violent video games.

Children who identify with the perpetrator of media violence are also at increased risk of becoming aggressive. Violent video games, particularly the aptly named "first-person shooter" games, place the player in the role of the
violent perpetrator. This level of involvement is likely to increase the player's identification with the violence and its subsequent cognitive and behavioral effects.

Cognitive and emotional maturity tends to increase children's resistance to the effects of violent media. It is important to remember, however, that neither these nor any other set of characteristics fully protects a child from all of the subtle and pervasive effects of violent media.

Further Readings

Books


- Hillel Nossek, Annabelle Sreberny, and Prasun Sonwalker, eds. *Media and Political Violence*. Cresskill, NJ:


**Periodicals**

- Lis Else and Mike Holderness "Are the Kids Alright After All?" *New Scientist*, July 2, 2005.
- Barbara Righton "It's a Scene from 24—No, It's a Car Ad," *Maclean's*, December 18, 2006.

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