

## VIDEO GAMES: CAN SOME CAUSE VIOLENCE? A Soldier's Theory

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman is considered an expert on the psychology of killing. He draws on his military background to provide a fascinating analysis of violence in relation to video-game playing. According to Grossman, some games are "murder simulators which, over time, teach a person how to look another person in the eyes and snuff their life out" (*Insight on the News*, June 28, 1999).

Grossman hails from Jonesboro, Arkansas. Jonesboro gained notoriety in March 1998 when two boys, aged 11 and 13, gunned down four girls and a teacher at their school. Ten others were wounded in the attack. Shortly after the tragedy, Grossman visited the school where the shooting took place and tried to help the community make sense of the incident. Later, he was able to take both his military expertise and his experience at the school in Jonesboro and meld it into a theory of violence.

According to Grossman, the human brain is hardwired to avoid violence against other people. When we are angry or frightened the blood vessels of the brain narrow, cutting off most of the neuron activity leading to the forebrain. This process is called vasoconstriction. Since the frontal lobes are, in effect,

shut down, the individual is governed by the mid-brain, which has a natural resistance to killing its own kind.

Grossman cites the example of animals with antlers and horns head butting each other instead of gutting, goring or killing each other when they are in conflict. Humans have the same aversion to killing their own. To support this position, Grossman uses statistics from the American Civil War, where army regiments capable of killing 500 to 1 000 people per minute had an actual kill rate of one or two people per minute. Further, Grossman states that 90 per cent of the 27 000 muskets retrieved from the dead and injured at the Battle of Gettysburg were loaded. It appears that many of the soldiers fighting in the battle could not bring themselves to fire their weapons on their fellow human beings. (*Saturday Evening Post*, July 1, 1999).

Because of this innate resistance to killing other people, Grossman says that the military had to develop techniques that would train soldiers to kill. He also points out that these same techniques are reinforced in violent video games. Look at the following chart for an explanation and description of what Grossman means.

Training Technique	Military	Video Game
Brutalization and desensitization	Demean and humiliate soldiers in boot camp and then demonize the enemy so that soldiers will be willing to kill.	Desensitize gamers through repeated exposure to violent acts and images so that they can advance through the game.
Classical conditioning	Condition soldiers to associate pleasure with death.	Condition gamers to associate pleasure with killing within the game environment.
Operant conditioning	Teach soldiers reflexive, stimulus-response reactions to battle situations. In other words, condition the mid-brain so the soldier can kill on demand when involved in war.	Teach gamers reflexive stimulus response reactions to gaming situations. Train players to shoot to kill in order to advance through the game.

Grossman claims that these training techniques pose a unique danger when they are unintentionally transferred by young, impressionable players into the real world. Research has long held that repeated exposure to television violence leads to desensitization and that violent video games encourage players to exercise brutality. In terms of classical conditioning, violent games reward players based on their ability to kill. Thus, according to Grossman, the player is being conditioned to associate pleasure with killing. Finally, the stimulus-response model present in operant conditioning is used by Grossman to explain the actions of the boy from South Carolina. One day, the boy and a friend held up a convenience store. When the store clerk turned to face the accused, the boy shot him right between the eyes—a hit that Grossman calls pretty remarkable, considering the weapon (a .38 pistol) and the range (six feet). The boy played an excessive number of violent video games. As an expert defence witness at the boy's trial, Grossman told the court that the shooting was clearly not part of the boy's plans and that video games conditioned him to reflexively shoot to kill. All three techniques are present in video games and, according to Grossman, in certain situations people may give in to the violent impulses that have been conditioned into their brains. Overall,

Grossman believes that the techniques taught in video games are spawning a new breed of sociopath—one not only lacking remorse but also trained to kill (*Saturday Evening Post*, July 1, 1999).

Video-game defenders take great exception to Grossman's claims. Elliot Portnoy, a lawyer working for the video-game industry, worries that too many people are listening to Grossman's ideas. "This guy has a very persuasive theory," Portnoy says. "But it's just that, with nothing to back it up. We must expose him at every turn as a wild-eyed zealot with nothing to back it up" (*Amusement Business*, May 10, 2000). Video-game designer Greg Costikyan defends video-game players saying, "They're blowing up pixels. They're killing bitmaps. They're shooting software subroutines. They're not a threat to the public order. . . . What they're doing makes them less likely to be a threat to public order . . . they're satisfying their anti-social impulses in a completely harmless way" (*Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1, 1999). Both Portnoy and Costikyan have the fact that the overwhelming majority of people play games with no ill effects to back their position. However, video-game players worry that compelling theories, like the one put forward by Lt. Col. Grossman, will turn an industry built on play into the scapegoat for the violence that exists in our society.

## Analysis

1. According to Grossman, how are humans hardwired to not kill other human beings? What examples does he use to support his position?
2. What three techniques does the army use to train soldiers to kill? How are these same techniques used in video games?
3. Do you agree with Grossman's theory or do you think he is blowing things way out of proportion? Explain clearly.