

# VIDEO GAMES: CAN SOME CAUSE VIOLENCE?


## Introduction

### Focus

This *News in Review* story examines the potential link between violent video games and aggressive behaviour. Drawing on a tragic story out of Tennessee, where two boys shot and killed a man and blamed a video game for their actions, this feature re-ignites the debate that asks the question: Can some games lead to violent action?

### Did you know . . .

The Simon Wiesenthal Center ([www.wiesenthal.com](http://www.wiesenthal.com)) is named for a man who survived the Holocaust and later became the foremost Nazi hunter of his day? The site focuses on human rights and tolerance as well as protecting Jewish people around the world.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

### The Game Made Me Do It

William and Joshua Buckner were playing a game of *Grand Theft Auto* on June 25, 2004. In the game, the two meandered through city streets, randomly shooting and killing anyone they saw. At some point, the lines between the game violence and reality became blurred as the two made the decision to take two 24-calibre rifles from their home near Newport, Tennessee, and head down to Interstate 40 to play first-person shooter on passing traffic. They crouched behind some bushes and opened fire, hitting several cars, wounding one person and killing another. Kimberly Bede, 19, was traveling with her boyfriend when a bullet burst through the car door, hitting her in the pelvis. She still has bullet fragments in her body. Aaron Hamel, traveling with his cousin Denise Deneau, was shot in the head and died shortly after being hit. When the police eventually tracked down the 14- and 16-year-old brothers they claimed that the video game made them do it. At trial, the boys pleaded guilty to reckless homicide, aggravated assault and endangerment.

### The Great Debate

Parents and scholars have long suspected that violent video games can lead to real-world violence. Notable cases have been used to support this theory. The most notorious example comes from the Columbine High School shooting in April of 1999. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two social outcasts who were often ridiculed by classmates, brought a cache of weapons to school and opened fire in the library and cafeteria. When the dust had

settled, 12 students and one teacher were dead. Harris and Klebold then turned the weapons on themselves, bringing the body count to 15. In the aftermath of the shooting, investigators made a number of chilling discoveries, one of which involved the video game *Doom*. Classified as a “first-person shooter” game, *Doom* called on players to ascend a number of levels by killing their way to the top. The game proved so successful at testing player reflexes and accuracy that the United States military used the game to train soldiers. *Doom* also attracted its fair share of gamers, including Eric Harris. He put a modified version of the game on his personal Web site prior to the Columbine attack. Harris’s version of *Doom* included two shooters, extra weapons and unlimited ammunition—a scenario eerily similar to the crime he and Klebold perpetrated. According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which was tracking hate crimes on the Internet in 1999 (and stored a copy of Harris’s game in their archives), the two boys were “playing out their game in God mode” (Anderson and Dill, *Journal of Personality and Psychology*; [www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp784772](http://www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp784772)).

### The Other Side of the Issue

Proponents of violent video games argue that, for every William and Joshua Buckner or Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, there are countless others who play violent video games and never do harm to anyone. In fact, the video game industry argues that games involving aggression and violence are cathartic in nature. In other words, players get to burn off some of

that pent-up aggression in a gaming environment instead of the real world. The Buckners and the Columbine killers are the exception rather than the rule. The facts speak for themselves: the vast majority of gamers play for the challenge and the enjoyment, and they never transfer their play into reality.

### **The Controversy of the Moment**

Video game advocates also point out that certain games tend to cause controversy when they are released. In 1993, *Mortal Kombat* was the target of intense criticism for its brutality and gore. Players had the ability to beat their opponents to death amid a shower of blood. They could also rip out a competitor's heart and spinal cord. Defenders of *Mortal Kombat* pointed out that players had to put in a "blood on" code to activate these features, but the controversy continued to grow. When it looked like governments were going to step in and regulate video games through legislation, the industry established its own rating system. They hoped that the self-regulatory move would quell the criticism, but every four or five years fresh outcries emerge with the release of yet another violent game. In 1999 it was *Doom*, in 2002 it was *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, and in 2004 it was *Manhunt*, a game so violent that it was banned by the government of New Zealand and rated "R" (restricted) by the Ontario government.

### **Regardless of the Rating**

Even though games are rated by the manufacturers, stores seem to pay little

attention to the ratings. Games considered "M" for mature are finding their way into the hands of children. In fact, the video-game industry has been accused of openly marketing to kids. Violent video games currently make up 12 per cent of the \$7-billion-a-year video-game industry. To prevent children from having access to violent games, the government of British Columbia has passed legislation that puts video-game retailers on par with movie theatres. There are strict penalties in place to prosecute retailers who sell games to underage persons. Governments in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, and Ontario are either studying or pursuing similar legislation.

### **Do Violent Video Games Create Killers?**

Scholars continue to debate whether or not violent video games lead to violent action. Some studies provide evidence that players experience physiological changes related to breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate while playing games. Other studies suggest that people do exhibit aggressive thoughts, emotions, and behaviours after playing video games. However, scholars also note that violence is a central theme in movies, television, and sports. No one is calling for a ban on hockey, a sport that openly endorses aggression in the form of body checking and fighting. Video game manufacturers are asking that the same standards that society is placing on other forms of media and entertainment also be applied to them.