

VIDEO GAMES: CAN SOME CAUSE VIOLENCE?

What Does the Research Say?

Researchers continue to debate the impact of violent video games on players. Until recently, scholars conceded that no conclusive evidence demonstrated that games have a detrimental effect on players. In other words, despite stories of random violence, researchers could not find a clear-cut link between violent behaviour and video-game playing.

Early Research

Research in the 1980s indicated that the teenage love affair with shooting and fighting games showed qualities of addiction and led to isolation of the player from family and friends. Further, researchers noted that 85 per cent of games involved violence, including simulated destruction, killing, or assault. By the mid 1990s, research began to build on the previous decade's conclusions. Studies found that grade seven and eight students were playing 4.2 hours of video games per week, with almost half preferring violent video games. Researchers started measuring physiological reactions while playing video games. They concluded that players experience an increase in heart rate, a change in blood pressure, and a higher consumption of oxygen while playing. Further research indicated a "pathological preoccupation with video games." In other words, kids were becoming addicted to games (Derek Scott, *Journal of Psychology*, March 1, 1995).

Meanwhile, researchers were still unable to find a definitive link between aggressive behaviour and violent games. In fact, some scholars used the catharsis theory to defend video games.

This theory claims that the experience of an emotional drive reduces the likelihood of a person's need to satisfy that drive. Therefore, games could be used as an outlet for adolescents seeking to act out their aggressive impulses within the safety of the gaming environment. Research in the 1990s also suggested that, as a result of playing, players showed improved spatial and visualization skills.

Current Research

More recent studies have made more definitive claims about the effects of violent video games on players. In one study, researchers found:

- realistic violent video-game play was related to aggressive behaviour and delinquency outside of the game
- a correlation between the amount of time spent playing violent video games and academic achievement (the more time spent playing, the lower the grades at school)
- repeated exposure to graphic, realistic, violent images increased the likelihood of aggressive thoughts and behaviours

(Source: Anderson and Dill, *Journal of Personality and Psychology*; www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp784772)

The same study cites three unique dangers associated with violent video games: identification with the aggressive main character in first-person games, active participation in violent action within the game, and the addictive quality of violent video games. The researchers concluded that there is greater likelihood of players assuming "aggressive behavioural scripts" as a

Definition

Sociopaths are people with severe personality disorders that usually are revealed through serious anti-social attitudes and behaviour that is often violent. Sociopaths do not show any real sense of moral responsibility or social conscience.

result of repeated exposure to the “problem-solving-through-violence” model provided by games (Anderson and Dill, www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp784772).

The study mentioned above established Craig Anderson as a leading researcher on the effects of video games on players. In 2003, he provided a synopsis of the violent video game debate in an article for the Psychological Science Agenda. In the article, Anderson systematically addressed the myths and facts about research into violent video games. He concluded that excessive violent video-game play leads to:

- an increase in aggressive behaviour, thoughts, and emotions
- an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen intake
- a decrease in pro-social or helping behaviour

(Source: Craig Anderson, www.apa.org/science/spa/sb-anderson)

Anderson cautions his readers that violent video games are not necessarily creating sociopaths; however, it is naïve to think that violent video-game play does not have some negative side effects. He encourages parents to keep an eye on what their kids are playing and follow the rating system put out by the manufacturer.

From an educational standpoint, it has become important for teachers, parents, and children to engage in a dialogue regarding potential negative effects associated with games. Discussions need not focus exclusively on video games. There is ample evidence of violence on television, in movies, and in some sports. Clearly, society does not benefit if people choose aggression over co-operation. It would be unfortunate if society blindly ignores the warning put forward by scholars and does not discuss emerging problems and work on possible remedies.

Activity

1. Using information from the article above, list five research discoveries that suggest an adverse effect on players and society.

2. Discuss those problems with a partner. How can society address the problems suggested by the research? (For example: problem: aggressive behaviour; solution: put limits on game playing **or** enforce ratings when stores sell games **or** ban video games.) Be prepared to share your ideas and defend your position.