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Critical Analysis of the Effects of Violent Video Games on Behavior

Everyone knows that many children, and especially boys, are often attracted to violent video games. What is less clear, however, is the effect that these video games have on the behaviors of these children. The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius is to delve into this matter in greater depth and critically analyze the issue of the effects of violent video games on behavior. The essay will begin with a general overview of the issue. Then, it will proceed to consider the argument that violent video games inspire violent behavior; and after this, it will turn to the opposing perspective that suggests that there is no real relationship between violent video games on the one hand and violent behavior on the other. Finally, the essay will reach a considered conclusion in which it will be suggested that although some correlation between violent video games and violent behavior surely does exist, it would also be a mistake to place too much emphasis on this relationship and thereby treat violent video games as a scapegoat for a deeper and more complex social problem.

**Overview of the Issue**

The main idea of the issue under consideration here is that, as a result of playing violent video games, children will get conditioned into a generally more violent mentality; and that this may render them more likely to engage in actual violent behavior in real life. If this proposition were found to be true, then it would logically follow that violent video games are a menace to a peaceful society and must thus be controlled in an effective way. On the other hand, it is also possible that violent video games are not in fact related to actual violent behavior, in which case the whole discussion over the issue could only be called overblown.

Concern over this issue has been significantly heightened in the aftermath of school shootings within the United States. As Carey has written: "The young men who opened fire at Columbine High School, at the movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, and in other massacres had this in common: they were video gamers who seemed to be acting out some dark digital fantasy. It was as if all that exposure to computerized violence gave them the idea to go on a rampage—or at least fueled their urges" (paragraph 1). In other words, some fear that these young men simply began acting in real life in the way they had already been conditioned to think through violent video games. There are two main issues that are raised by this potential connection. The first consists of whether the contention is in fact true and the correlation does in fact exist. And the second is whether the correlation, if it exists, requires action to be taken at the policy level regarding the control and regulation of violent video games.

Conceptually, when considering this issue, it is generally necessary to make distinctions of severity, degree, or scale. That is, the question would seem to be not only "whether" violent video games influence behavior (as if the issue were a strictly binary one) but also the extent to which they may or may not influence behavior. To quote Carey again, regarding the extant research on this subject: "Playing the games can and does stir hostile urges and mildly aggressive behavior in the short term. . .. Yet it is not at all clear whether, over longer periods, such a habit increases the likelihood that a person will commit a violent crime, like murder, rape, or assault, much less a Newtown-like massacre" (paragraphs 2-3). In other words, even in the event that a relationship was detected between violent video games and violent behavior, it would be necessary to evaluate the strength or magnitude of this relationship, and then to determine on this basis the extent of action that is or is not required at the level of public and legal policy.

**Argument for the Connection**

One of the most obvious points that can be made regarding a connection between virtual actions and real actions (or a connection between violent video games and violent behaviors) consists of what could be called the phenomenology of the video game itself. This refers to the way that a person experiences a video game—and himself—when he is playing a video game. As Bushman has written: "video game play is active whereas watching TV is passive. People learn better when they are actively involved;" and "players of violent video games are more likely to identify with a violent character/ If the game is a first-person shooter, players have the same visual perspective as the killer" (paragraphs 4-5). That is, most video games are set up in such a way that they almost explicitly encourage the player to identify with the character that he is controlling. If this is the case, it makes a great deal of sense to suggest that a person who identifies with a violent character will begin thinking in more violent ways, and that these thoughts will eventually end up producing more violent actions.

Moreover, the best extant research on this subject does confirm that there is some relationship between playing violent video games on one hand and aggressive behaviors on the other. The American Psychological Association itself has reported the following: "The research demonstrates a consistent relation between violent video game use and increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions and aggressive affect, and decreases in prosocial behavior, empathy and sensitivity to aggression" (paragraph 2). The main mechanism here probably consists of, among other things, simple desensitization: when a person is consistently exposed to violent images and simulated violent experiences, those images and experiences come to be seen by him as ordinary or normal, and he fails to have the cognitive or emotional response that other, less desensitized people may have to the stimuli.

Moreover, an analogy can be made between violent video games on one hand and other forms of violent media on another, such as television shows and films. As Narvaez has written: "In fact, violent videogames [sic] have an even more powerful influence than violent television and movies, whose detrimental effects have been documented for decades" (paragraph 6). The main idea here is that, when one is consistently exposed to violent stimuli of any kind, that stimuli tends to saturate one's perceptions of reality. The fear is that, one is not only more likely to not respond with sensitivity to violent events in actual life, but also more likely to respond or react in violent ways in real life. The problems with the other types of media only become even more serious when it comes to video games. Particularly, the inherently interactive nature of video games is the player is not asked to merely perceive something but to actively do something. This raises the stakes, as it were. The interactive component almost serves as a significant multiplier on the effects that violent video games can have on behavior, relative to the effects that violent forms of media can have on behavior.

**Argument against the Connection**

An argument could also be made against the existence of a connection between violent video games and violent behavior. A key point here would be that a game is often just a game, and it would be wrong to extrapolate actions in the virtual realm to actions in the real world (Searing). If anything, violent video games could even have a kind of cathartic effect, through which players release their violent impulses in fantasies, and thus become more peaceful and productive members of society within the real world. In short, the general relationship between the fantasy realm and the real world is anything but straightforward, and it would be problematic in and of itself to try and make this connection overly simple.

There is the fact, for example, that the shooter at the Sandy Hook massacre, while in possession of violent video games, was not especially captivated by those games. As Toppo has almost surreally written: "The title that so consumed the Sandy Hook shooter? ‘Dance Dance Revolution’—an arcade staple that has players dance on colored squares to the rhythm of Asian techno-pop" (paragraph 3). Dance Dance Revolution clearly does not qualify as a violent video game; but nevertheless, a young man who committed a horrific act of mass murder was apparently obsessed with Dance Dance Revolution. Details such as this one should cause one to seriously question one's certainties regarding the nature of cause and effect when it comes to the relationship between violent video games and violent behavior. Among other things, it is quite clear from the sheer popularity of violent video games that the vast majority of people who play violent video games will never go on to commit an actually criminally violent act in their lives. In short, the issue is more complex than one may want to make it seem.

Moreover, it is worth taking a closer look at the actual findings of the American Psychological Association itself. The organization did find a correlation between violent video games and aggressive behaviors; but, the very same study found that there was no real correlation found between violent video games and behavior that could be called actually criminally violent in nature. The primary finding thus says considerably less than one may imagine that it says. Among other things, within contemporary society, aggression in and of itself is not even seen as altogether bad thing: businessmen, marketers, and various other professionals often speak about how the right kind of aggression is actually quite important for achieving success within the world as it stands—and especially for men. If there is no relationship between violent video games and violent behavior, then, it may also be the case that there is quite simply no problem.

**Considered Conclusion**

Based on the above discussion, the conclusion can clearly be drawn here that although there is surely an effect that playing violent video games has on the mind of the player, this effect should not be overstated. Furthermore, it should surely not be associated in an overly simplistic way with the perpetration of actual violent acts. It is true that exposure to violent media of any kind can make a person more likely to accept violence as natural and normal; and it is also true that video games, due to the active as opposed to passive nature of one's engagement with them, exacerbate that effect. However, there is no real evidence that playing violent video games makes one more likely to commit criminally violent acts—and from the perspective of public policy, this is in fact the only really relevant question. One cannot regulate violent video games just because one morally disagrees with them; rather, one must have real evidence that such games incite players to criminal action. And it would seem clear that no evidence to this effect actually exists.

In this context, it is probably a good thing that the Supreme Court struck down a California law that would prohibit the sale of violent video games to minors. As Scalia (qtd. in Liptak) wrote in that court decision: "Like the protected books, plays, and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas—and even social messages—through many familiar literary devices . . . That suffices to confer First Amendment protection" (paragraph 4). In short, it would be immoral and even unconstitutional to regulate video games based on their violent content, except in the event that it were clearly demonstrated that such games directly provoke people into criminal actions. This is the standard that is applied to all other forms of media, and it is the same one that should be applied to video games as well. Nothing else would be appropriate as public policy within a free and democratic society.

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