Violent Videogames and their Effect on Children

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Videogames, this pastime activity hasn't been in existence for even fifty years, but it has become a huge part of our current society. Popular videogames now gross as much, sometimes more, than popular films. What used to be an activity for kids with too much time on their hands is now an activity enjoyed by whole families and large age groups. This is plainly seen by the function that new motion-sensitive systems are being put to in retirement homes. Yes, video games are an enjoyable and satisfying pass time and for most children they have become a large part of their life, but is this a good thing or not? As video games have advanced some games have become progressively more graphic and violent. Not only has the content become more violent but the way it is portrayed has become more much more detailed as well. There is a great difference between eating pixelated ghosts in an 8-bit arcade game and shooting your enemies with realistic guns and environments on a high definition game system. Has this increase in violence effected society on a whole? More specifically has it effected younger children in a negative way? As our society has become more technology literate, children have begun playing videogames at younger ages. This might not be a problem if they were just playing racing games or games designed for younger audiences, but many are delving into games where the only way to advance in the gameplay is to engage your opponents in violent combat. Has this had an effect on young children, is this graphic trend in videogames and the younger ages of gamers creating a violent and aggressive behavior in youth? This paper will show that there is a correlation between playing violent videogames and aggressive behavior in youth.

So, why is this an issue? Why is it being researched and tested? Because, people have voiced their concerns. Beginning with parents, who are concerned about their child's behavior. Pediatricians have also voiced their opinions on the effects of violent games on children and researchers have conducted studies on these concerns (Bushman, et al, 2015, 203). So what are the concerns?

People are concerned that violent games will lend themselves to aggressive behavior in children's relationships with their peers. Bullying is an intense problem in today's society and violent games could feed the thoughts of aggression in those youth who are doing the bullying. People are concerned not only for the child who plays of these games, but for the children who simply observe the content as well. Another concern is the mental processes that are being developed by these games. In many games intended for an older audience the only way to progress in the game is by attacking enemies. These methods can be anything from hand-to-hand combat, gunfights, vehicle combat, to some even more violent forms of combat. What is the message that these games are sending? Put simply it is this: Aggressive behavior will solve problems and advance you in life. Those who are faster, stronger, and quicker to pull the trigger win and those who are not lose. Children are being taught, not only that their problems can be solved by violence but, that violence is an acceptable solution to life problems.

There are two significant times of the year that this issue comes to light within the public eye. One of these times is November and this is due to the fact that many video games, whether they are violent or not, are released just before the Christmas season by developers in order to maximize sales. Thus the media

responds by questioning the wisdom of allowing children to play these games because they are inundated with advertisements. The other spike in public concern occurs in April, why is this? In April of 1999 the tragedy of the Columbine shooting occurred. The media has remembered this fear of violence and pays homage to it every year. This incites people to question what violent other violent factors are in their children's lives and video games fit that bill (McCandless, 2015). This fear of videogames, leading to violence greater than merely bullying and antisocial behavior, leads into our next concern.

Weapon carrying in youth, is another fear for people who are concerned about violent game's effects on children. Children carrying weapons into school is an unfortunate problem in today's society and many people believe that violent games lend themselves to this trend. In many games the lead character, and thus the player by extension, must be proficient in weapons such as sword/knife play and firearms. Does this make carrying a weapon more comfortable to a game-playing youth, could it even make the idea attractive?

These are only a few concerns that people have voiced about their concerns about children who play violent games. As previously stated there are many concerns, but is there ground for this concern? What does science have to say about these gaming trends and the children who play them? Is there really a cause for concern about the effects of these games on children and if there is an effect how strong and how consistent is it within the population?

First we will look at the concern that violent games cause bullying in children who play videogames. In a resent study, conducted by the Developmental

Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Utrecht University, aggressive behavior

toward peers (bullying) was defined using a number of categories. These categories

included behaviors such as physically hitting someone your own age, threatening to

hurt someone else, engaging in group fighting, not allowing certain people to join

your niche because of spite, and starting a false rumor about a peer. The study

allowed different children to play different games with varying levels of aggression.

Some of the children played milder games that depicted merely fantasy violence

whereas some played games containing violent behavior that was closer to real-life

situations. A few children who were not subjected to the videogames were allowed

into the study. These children would interact with the others, that day during a free

play session a t school, and relate their interactions with them back to the

researchers. The researchers then assessed how the videogames had effected the

children by seeing if they engaged in more aggressive behavior. In the end the

finding showed a strong correlation between violent behavior and those boys who

played the more violent videogames (Polman, et al, 2008, 260).

Another element that was tested in this study was the concern, that not only

are children who play violent games effected by its content but, that the behavior of

children who merely observe violent games are effected as well. The study showed

that there was a much stronger correlation between the children who played the

games than there was for those who only watched them. Does this mean that the

violent content in video games doesn't have as much effect as people think?

Actually, it indicates that violent games actually induce more violence than other

sources of media. Our culture is full of violent content on television, in literature,

films and many more. However, the difference between these sources of media and videogames is that the media previously stated is interacted with in a passive way. This is comparable to the way the children who observed the video games interacted with their assigned media. This study shows that there is an element in the interactive nature of violent games that incites aggression in a much stronger way than other forms of media (Polman, et al, 2008, 261).

Another concern for people is that the weapon-heavy content of many popular games will cause a rise in weapon carrying in youth. A recent study by the Center for Innovative Public Health Research and the University of Michigan looked into this issue. The study determined the odds of a student (ages 9 to 18) carrying a weapon to school estimated as a function of exposure during the previous year to violent video game content and other factors. Students were interviewed and asked about their daily habits and tendencies. This interview showed that 1.4% of those interviewed reported carrying a weapon into school. The interviews also showed that 69% of those interviewed reported playing videogames that contained at least some violent content.

The researchers were gathering data on another hypothesis during this study. The hypothesis is based on the idea that, certain schemas within the brain are activated if certain situations are seen playing out in front of the individual. The hypothesis states that seeing violent actions played out in front of an individual, like those in a videogame, and observing the aggressor receiving a reward for their actions will activate certain aggressive schemas in the brain. Many videogames require the player to carry out violent actions in order to advance through the game.

The researchers are concerned that upon seeing the protagonist of the game advance through aggression will cause children to react with aggression in social situations and expect their action to advance them in life. (Ybarra et al, 2014, 346)

The study backs up both of these claims. Upon reviewing the data and adjusting for other influential characteristics the researchers came to a conclusion. The study showed that not only was there a correlation between violent videogame content and carrying a weapon to school, but that the influence of the game contributed to a fourfold increase in these odds. In the end, the concern that weapon carrying in youth was encouraged by graphic gaming content turned out to be well founded.

With all of this violent content and fear one might ask is there no way to sort the violent games from the non-violent ones? There is, and it is ESRB: the Entertainment Software Rating Board. This should put the minds of parents at ease when looking for an appropriate game for their child. However, a study by the Marketing and Interdisciplinary Business College of New Jersey, and Quinnipiac University suggest that this might not be the case.

The study reveals that this system may have become inaccurate for rating games. This is due to the effects of "desensitizing" in children and perceptual-bias on the part of the adult. The study also shows that the rating system strengthens these perceptual-biases. This leads to an inaccurate system that cannot stop inappropriate content from reaching the hands of younger children. Furthermore, this study showed that while most parents believe that children's videogames

should be monitored few were willing to actually take on this duty themselves (Becker-Olson et al, 2010, 87).

      While videogames can be an enjoyable and enriching pastime in moderation, violent games clearly have strong effects on children and this effect is not restricted to aggression. Recent psychological studies indicate that violent gamming has a solid correlation with depression in youth as well (Tortolero et al, 2014, 612). All of this evidence drives one point into our minds again and again: violent video games have negative effects on children's behavior.

      Chadd Powell puts it well in his review of the book "Violent video game effects on children and adolescents: Theory, research, and policy." Powell states that the debate about whether violent games cause aggression in children is over and energies should not continue to be poured into answering this question. Resources, instead, should be pooled into creating policies to protect and guide children to avoid the destructive effects that violent videogames will continue to cause if nothing is done to help (Powell, 2007, 1).

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