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### Violent Video Games: An Ethical Perspective

The debate of the ethics of violent video games, henceforth referred to as VVGs, is nearly as old as the video game industry itself. Pundits often cite violence in video games as the cause of aggressive behavior in younger generations, while others state that there is no relationship between the two. Commonly, it is said that a VVG desensitizes players to violence, therefore making it seem more acceptable and thus establishing a causal link. The lack of consensus amongst experts makes it difficult to objectively discern whether or not there is a causal relation between VVGs and similar behavior in youth, furthermore complicating the ethicality of producing and marketing such video games. While there is certainly a cause for polarization between the two sides of the debate, an attempt will be made to find a common ground and to recommend a solution for balancing the ethics of such games with the perceived enjoyment of them by many consumers.

#### 1. A Brief History of the Video Game Industry and Controversies

While the history of video games is yet in its infancy, it is littered with controversy. The early 1970s saw the emergence of both arcade and home video games. In 1976, “Death Race,” the first recorded controversial video game, was removed from store shelves due to public outcry (NCAC 2018). The objective of the game was to earn points by running over gremlins—which then emitted a cry of pain and had their sprite replaced with that of a gravestone. Several other games in the following decades were subjected to much scrutiny, the most notable of which was 1993’s “Mortal Kombat,” the first video game to feature “lifelike, realistic violence” (NCAC 2018). “Mortal Kombat,” along with several other VVGs, found itself under the scrutiny of the

United States Congress—causing a joint Senate Judiciary and Government Affairs Committee to convene a hearing regarding violence in video games.

As a result of this hearing, and in an attempt to deflect government intervention, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or the ESRB, was created by members of the video game industry in 1994 (NCAC 2018). The ESRB is a self-regulatory organization whose “ratings provide concise and objective information about the content in video games...so consumers...can make informed choices” (ESRB 2018). While this service is strictly voluntary, major manufacturers will not license video games for their consoles without an ESRB rating (NCAC 2018). The ESRB rates video games in five rating categories— E for “Everyone”, E10+ for “Everyone 10+”, T for “Teen”, M for “Mature”, and AO for “Adults Only”—using around two-dozen “content descriptors” to caveat each rating (ESRB 2018). While the ESRB is unable to enforce these ratings per se, they have partnered with “virtually all major retailers and countless independent retailers,” requiring age verification for the sale or rental of M and AO rated games (ESRB 2018).

In the years that followed, many VVGs such as “Doom” and “Grand Theft Auto” found themselves in the midst of controversy, though it was not until after the Columbine Massacre of 1999 that any real legislation began being enacted in order to limit the access of minors to VVGs. The scrutiny came after details that the two students who engaged in the senseless violence at Columbine were fans of VVGs reached the media (NCAC 2018). To critics of VVGs, the enjoyment of video games—such as “Doom”—by bona fide pathological killers readily implied a causal relationship between this relatively new and unstudied medium of expression and violent or aggressive behavior in youth. Several lawsuits, local ordinances, and proposed state and federal legislation condemned the sale of VVGs to minors as a result (NCAC 2018).

## 2. Teaching Children to Kill

This increased awareness of VVGs and the yet unsubstantiated media portrayal of them—which indicated that they had a causal relationship with aggressive and antisocial behavior—led to much debate and research on the subject. The topic of VVGs became polarizing in nature and essentially split pundits into two camps: one that believed VVGs cause aggressive behavior in children and one that did not. Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, American author and founder of the Killology Research Group, firmly belongs to the former. In his second book, *On Combat*, Grossman argues that VVGs are powerful marksmanship trainers and “mass murder simulators” (33). Grossman argues that these video games improve the hand-eye coordination of children to levels which far exceed even the best trained professional warfighters while simultaneously desensitizing them to violence and gore and encouraging them to take as many lives as possible (86, 84, 91). To substantiate this claim, Grossman cites several studies, as well what he calls the “Game Over” effect in which many reported mass shooters ceased their behavior by simply being “told to stop” (89-90), alluding to his anecdotal claim that children are conditioned to stop playing a video game at the behest of an adult.

Grossman goes on to illustrate methods in which military, law enforcement, and even enemy combatants use video games to enhance proficiency with firearms in order to prepare for combat environments (83-85). These training methods began as early as the mid-1990s, using a modified version of Nintendo’s “Duck Hunt” that incorporated plastic M-16s. Today, the United States Marine Corps uses the Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Trainer, or the ISMT, as a supplemental resource for firearms training. The third generation of the ISMT boasts high-end, three-dimensional graphics, enhanced training modes covering a variety of scenarios, and

immersive, realistic environments, as well as haptic feedback, which registers recoil on military-weapons-cum-video-game-controllers (U.S. Marines 2018).

### 3. Criticisms

While Grossman provides a compelling case and demonstrates the capability of video games to be used to enhance firearm skills, as well as having a desensitizing effect toward violence on players, his reliance on anecdotal evidence falls short of proving a causal relationship<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, a Swedish Media Council review<sup>2</sup> of more than 100 unique empirical studies linking VVGs to violent, aggressive, and antisocial behavior relied upon research containing “serious methodological deficiencies” (Swedish Media Council 3)—an obvious no-no within the scientific community. The apparent lack of evidence supporting the claim of a causal relationship between VVGs and violent and antisocial behavior in children led to the aforementioned ordinances not being enacted, lawsuits to be dismissed, and state and federal legislation which attempted to ban video games to be struck down (NCAC 2018).

In 2001, the Surgeon General of the United States, David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., led a comprehensive study which summarized “an extensive body of research” and sought “to clarify seemingly contradictory trends” (NCAC 2018). This comprehensive examination of youth violence reported that, due to a lack of extensive studies on the matter “the impact of video games on violent behavior remains to be determined” (Office of the Surgeon General 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> Much of Lt. Col. Grossman’s work relies on valid scientific methodology. The segment on VVGs is not reflective of the majority of other subjects covered by his writings.

<sup>2</sup> The journal reports that eight similar research overviews have been published by State institutions or non-profit organizations, seven of which reached the same conclusions.

In the years to followed, many studies of VVGs were conducted and analyzed. Two reports<sup>3</sup> in particular gained notoriety in the “pro-video game” camp: that of Guy Cumberbatch, Ph.D. and another by Stetson professor of psychiatry, Christopher Ferguson, Ph.D. In the former, Cumberbatch is openly critical of anti-violent media pundits, concluding that:

The evident weakness in the individual studies and the general pattern of inconsistent findings would not normally lead us to expect researchers to make any strong claims about video games. However, this is far from the case. As with other research on media violence, some of the strongest claims are made on the most flimsy [sic] of evidence...The real puzzle is that anyone looking at the research evidence in this field could draw any conclusions about the pattern, let alone argue with such confidence and even passion that it demonstrates the harm of violence on television, in film and in video games. (Cumberbatch 34)

Here, Cumberbatch clearly summarized what essentially corroborated the statements made by the Secretary General in 2001. The latter report by Ferguson in 2010 concluded that “little evidence supported a significant predictive relationship between violent video game exposure and serious user aggression” (12). Ferguson went on to say that the findings of his study are not out of line with that of previously conducted studies—what does change, however, is the “language used in interpreting these effects” (12). Interestingly, and in stark contrast to the pre-existing beliefs that VVGs cause aggressive behavior and antisocial tendencies, Ferguson’s study found that, “for children with low antisocial traits, media violence exposure was associated with less criminal behavior” and that for “only the most antisocial children” was media violence

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<sup>3</sup> Both of the studies mentioned a series of reports by “Anderson et al.”—or Anderson and Dill—which suggested in 2000 that VVGs were probably a factor in the massacre at Columbine. In fact, Ferguson encourages scholars researching this subject to be *more conservative* in their future interpretations due to his findings.

exposure associated with violent crimes (Ferguson 12-13). It is conceded that, for children with high antisocial traits, VVGs may exacerbate these traits, though more data is necessary in order to conclude this theory decisively (Ferguson 13).

#### 4. Video Games as Free Speech

Perhaps coincidentally, the Supreme Court of the United States resolved in 2010 to decide the constitutionality of the video game statute in California. This statute dictated that VVGs could be barred from sale or rental due to the argument that violence, like hate speech or obscene material, may not be protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. The Supreme Court, however, disagreed. In 2011, it was ruled that this California state law violated the First Amendment (Baase and Henry 150), effectively setting a precedent for the protection of video games, even violent ones, as “free speech”—which kept in line with the earlier decision stating that software is protected under the First Amendment (Baase and Henry 145).

#### 5. Discussion

Despite the evidence refuting a causal link between VVGs and aggressive behavior in adolescents and teenagers, the debate and criticism of video games in Western culture has continued amidst a background of mass shootings pervasive in recent years. In this regard, VVGs have become a scapegoat while modern science and further research geared toward discovering and mitigating the true underlying causes of these violent and aggressive behaviors are outright neglected by anti-video game pundits. It is worth noting that, in spite of the message of the mainstream media and its focus upon juvenile violence, portraying it as an epidemic is factually misleading. In reality, more than 30 years after the development of video games, the rate of juvenile violent crime was at a 30-year low (Jenkins 2005). In fact, Harvard University

psychologist Steven Pinker argues that “today we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on earth” (2007), considering both warfare and violent crime in his estimation. Pinker cites global statistics regarding violence in his discussion of the decline of global violence.

In this writing, many aspects of the debate about VVGs have been dissected and the context of declining violence both in the United States and in the rest of the world has been established. From these pieces, several conclusions may be drawn. First, a causal relationship between VVGs and aggressive behavior has not been established as a result of any properly-conducted scientific study. Secondly, and as a result of the lack of conclusion drawn between VVGs and aggressive behavior, the Supreme Court of the United States of America has set the precedent that video games are protected under the First Amendment, rendering laws which bar the sale or rental of this medium fundamentally unconstitutional. Lastly, in spite of media sensationalism surrounding the problem of youth violence in America, violent crime perpetrated by juveniles is at an all time low, keeping with the fact that global violence as a whole exhibit a tendency to decrease across time.

There seems little merit in the supposition that VVGs, or even just video games in general, are causing a decline in ethical behavior of American youth. While video games may improve hand-eye coordination, they do not push children to utilize these abilities for the purpose of committing violent crime. By design, video games may be structured in such a way as to provide valuable training for law enforcement officers and military personal. Granted, these same tools may be used by terrorists to prepare for an attack. That being said, insofar as a pianist must have a transitional period between a non-weighted, electronic keyboard and a grand piano, a gunman must also transition from the artificial weapons to a live weapon in order to have a

reasonable expectation of receiving any benefit from the simulation. Simply becoming a crack-shot on an arcade will not have a one-to-one translation to a real-world range, as numerous other factors of reality come into play.

Furthermore, private sector controls exist to inform and manage the expectations of consumers prior to their decision to purchase a video game. In the United States, the ESRB's guidelines are universally embraced by major video game manufacturers and retailers. Young patrons can expect to be required to show a valid form of government identification when seeking to purchase a video game rated "M" or higher—much the same way as they would if they were ordering an alcoholic beverage from a restaurant. Consumers, especially parents or others who may be purchasing a video game for a child, should inspect the labels in order to make sure that they find the content suitable for their children prior to exposing them. As the Supreme Court ruling makes it unlikely that VVGs or video games containing other sexual or explicit content will be outlawed in the future—barring any damning scientific evidence providing causal linkage between VVGs and aggressive behavior. It therefore falls upon the consumer to make informed decisions about what they will or will not allow into their household.

Even with all of this information, it is likely that many anti-video game activists will remain firmly within their camp, as is their right. That being the case, a more appropriate argument *against* video games might be one that focuses on the other health-related concerns of playing video games. For example, and purely out of speculation, the risks inculcated by the sedentary nature of the past-time, a tendency to perhaps enjoy high-caloric food or beverages while playing video games, or maybe even a habit of shirking responsibility and engaging in procrastination while playing video games. These areas of focus seem much more reasonable



than the negligent scapegoating of juvenile or adult antisocial behavior and violence on an enjoyment of VVGs, given the present climate of scientific evidence at the time of this writing.

Finally, while VVGs do not have a causal link to violent behavior, it that the ethical imperative of modern society is to explore the many other possible causes for antisocial and aggressive behavior in youth. Just because VVGs do not *cause* juvenile violence does not mean that there is not a problem *with* juvenile violence. To suppose otherwise would be wrong. It may be reasonable to continue to monitor VVGs and juvenile violence in the event that future data indicates a causal linkage. The majority of the scientific research, however, should be focused on the other indicators of antisocial and aggressive behavior, in order to mitigate and perhaps even someday eliminate them from society.

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