The Ethics of Violent Video Games

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Introduction

This paper discusses the ethics of violence in video games and how this media might be restricted. Video games are an entertainment medium becoming increasingly popular around the world. As violence in video games also becomes more popular, more research is devoted to understanding the impact of violent video games on the general population. It is often noted violent video games will induce aggression in their player. Aggression is a display of intention to harm another individual who is motivated to avoid that harm. Violence is a an extreme form of aggression that demonstrates this harm on another individual (Anderson 2001). All violence is aggression, but not all aggression can be categorized as violence. Clenching one's fist and frowning at another individual are aggressive acts, but they are not violent acts. However, these other forms of aggression which are not violence directly influence and precipitate future acts of violence.

Research is conflicting, but a good deal of experimental and correlational studies suggest violent video games induce real world aggression which will in turn induce real world violence. The interactive component of video games requires players to inflict violence on virtual characters. This simulation of violent acts induces physiological changes in the players that resembles the physiological changes occurring when the player demonstrates aggression in real life (Anderson 2001). This research also concludes repeated exposure to violent stimuli normalizes the experience and makes it more likely an individual will commit violent acts

because these acts are a more frequent part of his or her life. The exposure also desensitizes the player to the real world consequences of violence because these violent acts in video games bear no real world consequences, increasing the likelihood this player would commit violent acts in the real world (Funk 2004). Further research conducted through experimental and correlational studies indicate violent video games do not increase aggression and violence in the real world.

The video game industry faces different regulations around the world. In the United States violence in video games has been protected under the free speech clauses of the first amendment to the Constitution, although this freedom has been challenged by lawmakers before. In democratic countries, the industry is self-regulated by ratings boards that suggest an appropriate age. The enforcement of these recommendations is left to retailers and the parents of children. In more autocratic countries, the government tends to restrict the violent content in video games and will often ban video games they deem inappropriate for their general population. As the video game industry has only arisen in the past fifty years, the landscape surrounding it has changed quite a bit.

History

Video games were manifested after the invention of the computer. Early video games were created in the 1950's, but these games tended to stay on a single large computer using vacuum tubes. The first widely distributed video game was *Spacewar!*, created in 1962 at MIT (Postigo 2003). However, violence in video games was not of public concern until the arcade game Death Race was released in 1976. Although it used primitive pixel graphics, the objective

of Death Race was to run over as many gremlins, fictional animals, as possible with a vehicle. Levels of violence in video games have increased over time to create Grand Theft Auto V, developed in 2013 with realistic three-dimensional graphics (Kocurek 2012). The objective of this game is to shoot and steal in order earn as much money as possible and ascend to the top of a game world that can all be experienced from a first-person point of view. An example of the change in graphical quality of games over a period of forty-seven years is displayed in the graphic below.

Death Race attracted lots of media attention. The New York Times published an article condemning the game, citing a researcher in the National Safety Council who argued the interactive nature of video games makes them more influential than television on the general population. Exidy, the publisher of Death Race, officially responded that the game's violence is more fantasy than reality because of it targets gremlins rather than humans (Kocurek 2012). Interestingly, the controversy surrounding the arcade game afforded it new audiences and increased its sales.

The controversy surrounding the content of video games has increased throughout the years. The Supreme Court, the highest court of the United States government, ruled in the

2011 case of Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association that video games were entitled to freedom of speech under the first amendment to the Constitution (Kocurek 2012). These are the same privileges that have been granted to books, newspapers, movies, and the internet. The specific ruling concerned a recently approved California law restricting the sale of violent video games to minors. The law was ruled unconstitutional as an overreach of power by the state of California. As such, access to violent content was left as a choice of both parent and child (BROWN 2011). The officially published opinion of the court states, "These studies have been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason: They do not prove that violent video games *cause* minors to act aggressively."

Research

While a link to real world violence has not been shown in any study, a number of studies conclude that violent video games increase certain signs of aggression immediately after playing. A 2001 meta-analytic review by Craig Anderson analyzed thirty-five different research reports and drew five conclusions based on the available literature. 4,262 participants, forty-six percent of whom were minors under eighteen years old, were included across these thirty-five studies. The large number of participants combined with the large number of studies and their various methods makes these conclusions relatively generalizable in comparison to the conclusion generated by smaller studies. The first conclusion is an increase in aggressive behavior documented in thirty-three of the studies and 3,033 participants. The second conclusion is an overall decrease in prosocial behavior across eight studies and 676 participants. The third conclusion is an increase in aggressive cognition across twenty studies and 1,495

participants. The fourth conclusion is an increase in aggressive affect across seventeen studies and 1,151 participants. The fifth and final conclusion of the meta-analytic review is an increase in physiological arousal across seven studies and 395 participants (Anderson 2001). Physiological arousal, aggressive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are very conducive to physical violence as their very presence signifies the intent of physical intervention in a situation. Prosocial behavior encourages interaction and cooperation among autonomous entities, and a lack thereof is conducive to violence among these autonomous entities. Each of these conclusions supports the hypothesis that video game violence can increase real world violence.

In further support of the results of this meta-analytic review, a 2004 study by Jeanne Funk further studied the effects of violent media on children. This study recruited one hundred fifty students from private, Catholic elementary schools with an average age of 9.99. The study is representative of children from families of a higher education and a religious background, so it is would stretch the truth to say this sample represents adults or children from a poor economic background. This was a correlational study in which four questionnaires were used to determine how exposure to different real life events and media, including violent video games, affected the children's attitudes toward violence. Exposure to violence in the real world, television, movies, the internet, and video games was measured. Exposure to both movie violence and video game violence was linked to stronger pro-violence attitudes (Funk 2004). Funk concluded only exposure to violent video games led to lower empathy in the children. The fact that only exposure to violent video games decreased measures of empathy is likely linked to the interactive nature of video games, which differs from the other types of

violence experienced by the children in the sample. A lower level of empathy for fellow humans or animals increases the risk of violence toward those entities; if one does not understand how violence negative impacts others, one is more likely to inflict this violence on others.

A different study showed that introducing a cooperative player in a violent video game will change the levels of aggression. In this study, an experiment was performed with 126 college students as the participants. Participants were randomly paired and played the 2010 violent video game Halo Reach cooperatively, competitively, or alone. A participant's aggression level was measured using a competitive reaction time task involving pressing a button faster than the participant's partner and delivering a noise blast which could be as loud as a fire alarm to the losing partner. It was found that introducing a cooperative partner in the violent video game reduced levels of aggressive behavior to those of a control group who did not play a violent video game (Velez 2014). Further experimentation was done with eighty-eight college students playing the 2002 violent video game Time Splitters 2 with a paired partner. In this experiment, the players were then paired with a new partner and tested for levels of aggression using a similar noise blast punishment experiment. Through the use of a new partner for aggression measurement, this second experiment concluded that the reduction in levels of aggressive behavior not only applied to the player's partner but was also generalizable to new social interactions.

A more recent study published in 2018 found that violent video games do not increase aggression (Kühn 2018). The experiment had ninety participants play the games Grand Theft Auto V, The Sims 3, or no video games as a control. Two hundred eight different tests for

aggression were given before the experiment and again after two months of playtime. Standardized questionnaires such as the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire, State Hostility Scale, and Moral Disengagement Scale were given. In addition, behavioral tests such as a word completion task were given. Only three out of two hundred eight tests for aggression demonstrated a positive correlation. This directly contradicts the findings of the meta-analytic study published by Anderson in 2001 and suggests violent video games do not increase real world aggression. Interestingly, this study was published seventeen years after the meta-analytic study and utilized games with much more realistic graphics. This suggests the realistic nature of the experience contributes less to aggression than the interactive nature of the experience. With the advent of virtual reality technology, a new experiment using this technology could offer good conclusions concerning the effects of realistic gameplay environments on aggression.

A 2015 correlational study conducted by three university professors used four different measures to analyze the potential impact of violent video games on violence in the real world. The first analysis measured the correlation between the annual changes in video game sales and changes in violent crime rates between 1978 and 2011. While video game sales increased dramatically, the overall levels of violent crime actually decreased over this period of time (Markey 2015). The second analysis measured the correlation between monthly video game sales and monthly levels of violent crime between January 2007 and December 2011. It was found that violent crime actually decreased in the winter months while video game sales showed a stark increase. In the third analysis, it was found that internet searches for violent video game walkthroughs and guides increased while rates of violent crime decreased. The

fourth and final analysis measured the correlation between violent crime and the release of the top selling violent video games Grand Theft Auto San Andreas, Call of Duty Black Ops, and Grand Theft Auto IV. It was found that violent crime decreased at the same time these violent video games were released. Correlational studies are often found to have weaker validity than experimental studies due to factors that cannot be controlled outside of a laboratory setting. These correlations do not show that violent video games *caused* violent crime rates to decrease. However, these correlations do in fact show that violent video games did not cause violent crime rates to *increase*.

The discrepancies in research suggest that the effects of violent video games are very questionable as reflected in the Supreme Court decision. A myriad of studies purports a link between violent video games and real world aggression, but still more studies conclude there is no link. The laboratory experiments lack absolute validity because an individual's behavior can be changed by the known intention to observe that individual. Correlational studies are lacking in absolute validity because they rely on self-reports documented by questionnaires wherein an individual can misreport the true measurements. Also, a documented increase in aggression in response to a video game may not translate into aggression toward another individual as evidenced by the 2014 cooperative gameplay study by Velez. As not all aggression can be classified as violence, by probabilistic rules there is an even lower possibility this aggression would translate into more severe forms such as physical violence. There are many confounding variables affecting the validity of studies as each individual in the world has a unique set of genes, behaviors, and cognition.

Current Restrictions

Now, it is well documented that adolescent's brains are constantly developing, and that they are more impressionable than adults (White 2009). The same applies to people with certain psychological disorders as they are also not quite as developed as the typical adult. The documented increases in aggression will affect adolescents and the mentally ill to the point that it may encourage and normalize real world violence. Hence, the video game industry is regulated around the world. There are different ratings boards around the world like the Entertainment Software Rating Board for North America and the Pan European Game Information in Europe. These ratings boards recommend an appropriate age based on the levels of violence and other graphic content in games such as sexually charged material and profanity.

Indicative of the changing landscape surrounding the regulation of video games, the Entertainment Software Rating Board was not formed until 1994, eighteen years after the controversy surrounding Death Race. The Entertainment Software Rating Board has six different ratings which it will grant each game: E for all ages, E10 for ages ten and over, T for ages thirteen and over, M for ages seventeen and over, and AO for ages eighteen and over. There are differences among these ratings boards, and it has been found that the Entertainment Software Rating Board more strictly regulates violence for children twelve and under than the Pan European Game Information (Dogruel 2013). Parents will often disagree over the ratings based on the content of the game, especially regarding depictions of violence (Walsh 2001).

These ratings boards are a form of self-regulation by the industry rather than a mandate of law. The Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association decision still stands in the United States, and democratic countries tend to encourage the freedoms of expression of their citizens. As such, retailers such as GameStop will often require a valid identification card proving a purchaser is at least the recommended age. This prevents minors from purchasing violent video games, but parents or adults can still buy these games for minors. This is very similar to the movie industry. A ratings agency rates a movie with a suggested age, and individual theaters are left to enforce these suggestions. Parents and adults can still buy a movie ticket for minors below the suggested age. Most governments of democratic countries follow this hands-off approach to the regulation of the video game industry and other forms of consumable media.

Some other countries like China or Saudi Arabia have laws regulating the content that can be published in video games and other entertainment media. These countries will often outright ban video games for containing too much violence. In 2018, two adolescents from Saudi Arabia committed suicide after playing the Blue Whale game distributed throughout social media. In response, Saudi Arabia banned from sale in the country a list of forty-seven games including Grand Theft Auto V (Associated Press 2018). The Chinese government must approve each video game offered for sale within its country. Games which contain too much violence, specific types of violence or depictions of death, or criticisms of the communist ruling party are forbidden. In 2018, games were not reviewed for approval for over six months because the government was reorganizing the regulatory agency. In November, the newly formed Online Games Ethics Committee reviewed twenty games but only approved nine of

them for sale within China, a forty-five percent approval rating ("China forms…," 2018). This system of regulation is very different from the system employed in most North American and European countries.

Conclusion

In light of the conflicting research surrounding violent video games, it is too early to say whether there is a definite causality stemming from the fictional interactive violence and leading to real world violence. If such a link exists, the impression left by violent video games would certainly be more powerful on children, adolescents, and the mentally ill. In this case, it is justifiable to restrict the types of people that have access to violent video games. In any case, I believe the government should not impose restrictions on the types of media its populace consumes in a manner like its restrictions on the purchase of firearms. The system of societal and industry self-regulation employed by many democratic countries has sufficed thus far. Parents of young children and caretakers of the mentally ill can purchase violent video games if they deem it reasonable.

The responsible members of society should have the right to enjoy the content of these violent video games just as they would a violent book or film. Restricting the freedoms of citizens in this area is a suppression of these citizens right to speak their mind. It has been shown that cooperation in violent video games can yield social benefits without increasing the aggression of the individual players. It has not been proven that violent video games directly cause real world aggression, and real world aggression is not always in the form of violence.

Thus, I believe the creative and artistic merits of the violence contained within video games far outweigh the subtle negative effects garnered from the experience.

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