

Video Game Violence

Do video games encourage young people to be violent? Opinion remains divided, but with new titles based on car theft, gangland shootings and prostitution hitting the shelves, the issue certainly isn't going to go away. Jason Gardner analyses both sides of the argument.

Teenage Kicks?

Like most thirty plus something males I can trace my history through the evolution of video games. From playing blocky bat and ball tennis on binatone to blasting naïve alien invaders on Atari to revelling in world war two wargames on the Gamecube, my childhood, and supposed adulthood, has been marked by many an hour spent huddled in front of video consoles evaporating enemies of one variety or another.

So who's to blame for my appetite for destruction? Science for providing violent video games or society for creating the demand? And have I become warped as a result? Many who know me would resound a hearty 'yes' to the last question but the answer to the first is a little more elusive...

Media is Murder.

Violence as entertainment of course has nearly always been an aspect of media. So an initial important point to make when considering the 'effect' of violent video games is that they are not the only purveyors of 'cool violence.' They can't be viewed in isolation and if we are to challenge the way they represent violence we also have to critique other aspects of media. For example many TV stations and Newspapers presented the war in Iraq as one long Hollywood film and on more than one occasion reports cited Soldiers comparing the conflict they experienced to scenes from Vietnam War films - 'Apocalypse Now' in particular.

A bizarre twist of perspective that means we have come to superimpose the fake over the real so it provides a lens through which we view and experience reality. Of course this is the heart of the debate about video games, to what extent, if at all, do they skew the life of the individual so that their view of the world outside of computer generated realities becomes affected? If a member of your youth group divulged to you that they entertained daydreams in which they picked up prostitutes, slept with them and then killed them in order to get their money back you might call the police, a psychiatrist or at least The Samaritans – the latter if not for their benefit then for yours! The debate has recently reached fever pitch because of games such as Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (the guilty scenario provider from above) increased ability to mimic reality and the perceived way that this will further 'blur' the boundaries between real and fake. What follows is a debate on whether or not video games do create such grey areas but also a general discussion on the possible 'negative' and 'positive' effects of a pastime that has fast become a formative influence on the lives of boys and men the world over.

Negative: Games promote aggression

Forbidden Fruit

'You do know that this game is rated 18 and includes graphic scenes of a violent and sexual nature?' The sales assistant directed this question at a bemused mother, her two sons both under sixteen needing no such education as the game in question was Grand Theft Auto: Vice City the biggest game of the last year. She shrugged her shoulders and to his merit the assistant repeated the warning but pester power ruled the day. I actually overheard this conversation whilst queuing to purchase a game of a more sedate nature I assure you, but it does highlight two problems with violent video games: One they

deliberately fan the flame of youthful ‘rebellion’ encouraging parental and societal discouragement and so heightening the games desirability Two: as a recent survey concluded parents are largely ignorant of the content of the games their children play and so the problem to a great extent has been swept beneath the carpet.

A report by Children Now in 2001 discovered that 79% of games aimed at children six plus had contained some form of violence and 48% all video games contained serious acts of violence and that a common feature that links these games is that there is no consequence for killing people. In fact recent games such as the assassin game Tenchu Wrath of Heaven and Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance are all about perfecting killing techniques, the latter, a beat em up game, involves learning secret ‘Fatality’ moves that allow you to kill your opponent in a variety of grisly ways once you’ve disabled them. As James Oppenheimer, a reviewer of games and toys for kids said ‘You see that you get extra points for shooting somebody in the head as opposed to shooting them in the body, you have to wonder exactly what are the values we’re teaching our children.’ The motives of the game companies are largely driven by profit and not the desire to educate or inform and so they fill the charts with exploitative games that serve to enforce violence as glamorous, as the easiest solution to any conflict situation and as an intrinsic and so ‘natural’ part of the male psyche.

The Science Bit

As debates after the Jamie Bulger case concluded, it cannot be proven directly that ‘violence’ in media produces violence in people. However many surveys conducted by scientists and psychiatrists report that though such a strong link cannot be established, the games influence and affect the environment of young people in a way that shapes their culture and identity and so in turn impacts behaviour. Here’s what the boffins have to say:

Stanford University in the US famed for its studies into psychology concluded that children who watched less TV and played less video games actually became less aggressive, a conclusion that a joint report conducted by high profile American medical associations also reached in reverse: they issued a statement saying that ‘Viewing entertainment violence can lead to aggressive attitudes, values and behaviour, particularly in children.’

Although the ‘can’ makes that summary seem non committal other surveys conducted are more certain that such violent scenarios provide patterns of behaviour that the young then emulate to a degree in real life. The society for Research in Child Development found that the more teens are exposed to video game violence then the more they see the world around them as hostile and aggressive and in turn they respond to it in a more hostile fashion. Again it seems that being immersed in such play provides an interpretive lens through which reality is then viewed. Psychologist Karen Dill believes that TV violence, (although children can view up to 12000 on screen ‘deaths’ by the time they’re 12), is not as harmful as game violence as in games the player is required to positively identify with the aggressor. According to her games ‘provide a complete learning environment for aggression’ the short term effects of playing such games being that the player becomes primed for aggressive thoughts. One study showed that children shown photos of ‘neutral’ situations after playing violent video games eg two youths walking towards each other on a street, interpreted them as having a violent edge, children who hadn’t been playing violent games saw no threat in the photos. Dill also concluded that Long term effects can be that individuals learn and act out aggression related scripts that can be memorised and used in real life conflict.

Antisocial Ambitions?

This is a slightly different argument – not that games cause violence but that addiction to playing games will inevitably have negative consequences for an individual’s education and their ability to engage socially with family and friends. However the longer an individual spends immersed in violent scenarios the more likely they are to incorporate such narratives into their ‘real’ lives. Not always via such

prominent outbursts of violence as the Columbine school shooting but through becoming withdrawn or overt retaliation towards authority figures. As one of the young people at my youth group admitted the real appeal of video games is that they put you in control. Perhaps this is in response to how powerless they feel in home situations and in society at large but if they spend so long in control via the video games they may feel reluctance to comply with those who seek to impose what they see as controlling measures upon their lives, be they teacher or parent figure. In this way video games only add to the rally call of youth culture against any form of adult 'interference' in their lives.

Positive – Video games do not promote Violence.

Inconclusive Evidence?

One home office report that researched a variety of studies into video game violence concluded that there is no strong evidence to be made for or against the argument. In one instance a survey concluded that violent games have a positive role to play in providing a relatively harmless outlet for aggression for young people.

Many supporters of video games also plumb for the 'correlation is not causation' approach – Violent games do not create violent children it's simply the case that violent children prefer to play violent video games. Klebold and Harris the teenagers responsible for the Columbine school shootings of 1999 had been playing the extremely violent game Doom that same morning. But as Canadian Satirist Michael Moore points out in 'Bowling for Columbine', a damning exploration of America's violence saturated culture, the children had also been ten pin bowling that morning – could that not also be the cause of the violence? His point is steeped in irony but serves to highlight that society at large is to blame – not just video games. As research conducted by Birmingham University Psychologists into the impact of violent films concluded "This study suggests that the well established link between poor social background and delinquent behaviour extends to the development of a preference for violent films." Other contributory factors do have to be taken into consideration as the vast majority of violent video game players are not prone to violent outbursts.

Summing Up

Violence is cool. Tarantino knew that in the nineties when he synced torture scenes with 'super sounds of the seventies' in Reservoir Dogs. Clint Eastwood's 'man with no name' knew that in spaghetti western classics and today the Matrix's Neo and the X-men's Wolverine know that most of the world's problems can be solved with an Uzi or vicious metal talons accompanied by a dose of hard pumping dance music. Everyone who plays games like Grand Theft Auto where you can steal a car, change the radio station in it if you don't like the music and then go out and shoot policemen also knows it.

It's been simply the fact that I realise I often think violence is cool that's made me reassess the games I play and the films I watch and whether they include violence, of a form, in order to critique it or celebrate it. The problem is not simply entertaining violent thoughts but viewing violence as entertainment – many games are one dimensional in that they focus on selling the game through violent and sexual content rather than instilling within it a value system.

When J K Rowling oversaw the making of the Harry Potter games she insisted that the games be instilled with the same 'noble' ideals contained within the books – themes of loyalty, friendship and courage. Video games are great at telling stories and stories in society do serve to endorse, influence and encourage certain types of behaviour. Games such as 'The Sims' have even introduced themes of mourning so that death is not simply glossed over.

As media is all pervasive it's difficult to know where to draw the line. The following summary and suggestion points are not hard and fast rules but guidelines that can be used for initiating dialogue on the issue.

Violence is not ‘normative’ male behaviour: The argument that games act as an outlet for aggression assumes that this is the case and that there are no other, better outlets such as dialogue, creativity, sport, flower arranging etc

Video games contribute to society’s unhealthy fascination with violence: There are far too many ‘positive’ associations to be made with violent heroes or anti-heroes.

Media informs as well as reflects: Films, games and TV influence what’s cool and what’s not and introduce behavioural ‘norms’

Games don’t have to be antisocial: Limiting the time young people play games is always a good idea, some parents say 45 minutes per day midweek 60 at weekends. Also only having one console per house situated in the living room will give parents more control and there are a whole range of four player games that are fun for all the family!!

Developing Ability: it’s well documented that games help develop hand/ eye coordination and games that include strategy planning and puzzle solving are great educational tools.

Be Aware: look for the age restrictions on game covers, check for content in game guides or bug the sales assistant at the game store for ‘healthy’ alternatives! Also never forcibly set restrictions rather negotiate boundaries with young people.

Limited Censorship: if full blown censorship of games that contain any violence seems too difficult then you could limit teenagers to playing games that are certified 11 plus instead of 15 or 18. eg instead playing Space shoot ‘em up ‘Doom’ cert 18 they could play ‘Star Wars Bounty Hunter’ cert 11 plus.

Conclusion: What would Jesus play?

Would Jesus pass over the prospect of shoot ‘em up mayhem and settle instead for the all age family targeted antics of Mario Party or would he insist everybody head outside to do something less boring instead... like fishing?

Of course Jesus didn’t have video games but he did know about violence. Old Testament annals are chock full of graphic scenes of violent conquest. Even God himself is often presented as a warrior and David praises him for increasing his dexterity in war ‘He trains my hands for battle, my arms can bend a bow of bronze.’(Psalm 18). However David is also prevented from building the temple because of the blood he has shed (1 Chron 28:3). It seems that establishing the nation of Israel through warfare was a necessary part of salvation history but that the ultimate goal of the kingdom of God was to bring an end to violence, even an end to death, through establishing the throne of one true ‘prince of peace’(Isa 9:6)

Certainly entertaining violent thoughts are not a part of this kingdom’s rules for as Jesus warned anyone who shows anger towards someone else will be subject to judgement (Matt 5:22). Though the prospect of censoring entertainment media may seem difficult perhaps we have to acknowledge that it’s an inevitable part of seeking to become Christlike and that God’s kingdom is all about finding positive alternatives to what’s currently on offer.

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This article first appeared in *Youthwork* magazine July 2003. Reproduced here with *Youthwork’s* permission. www.youthwork.co.uk

Questions to ask the Youth Group:

1. Which would you prefer to do, be outside skating or playing football for three hours or to be inside playing vid games for 12 hours?
2. Do you think that it's hypocritical for adults to censor the games you play but not the films that they watch?
3. What do you think is the appeal of playing really violent video games?
4. Do you think that there are any benefits from playing violent video games? If not, why play them?
5. If you wouldn't want to do the things that happen in video games in 'real' life then why is it cool to fantasize about doing them through a video game?
6. Why is it that boys play more video games than girls? Do you think as a result boys are less social and girls more so? Eg do girls spend more time on their mobile phones?

Top Ten Alternative:

Ten Fantastic Titles that don't focus on violence.

1. **Legend of Zelda - The Windwaker**
Format, Company, Rating
Gamecube, Nintendo, Age 3+
Arguably the best game of any console game at the moment – a brilliant action adventure game.
2. **Pacman World 2**
PS2, Sony, Age 3+
An extremely addictive platform game that's fun for all the family.
3. **Britney's Dancebeat**
PS2, THQ, Age 3+
Dancemats are fast becoming features at youthgroups up and down the country – this is one of the best accompanying games.
4. **EA Sports FIFA Football 2003**
GC/PS2/Xbox, EA, Age 3+
Great player animation and playability make this a must on all formats.
5. **Monopoly Party**
PS2/ Xbox, Infogrames, Age 3+
The legendary boardgame provides even more fun for all the family as a vid game.
6. **Supermonkey Ball 2**
GC, Sega, Age 3+
A challenging solo game and a host of fun mini-games like Monkey Golf provide excellent entertainment for up to four players.

7. **Kingdom Hearts**
PS2, SCEE, Age 11+
A unique role playing and adventure game that incorporates characters from the world of Disney.
8. **Micro Machines**
GC/PS2/Xbox, Infogrames, Age 3+
Tons of fun for four players as the living room becomes a racetrack.
9. **ICO**
PS2, Sony, Age 3+
A beautifully animated action and adventure game in which title hero Ico has to escape from a mysterious castle.
10. **Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex**
Xbox/GC, Vivendi, 3+
A lively action platform game aimed at younger players.