

Video and Violence

Villanova and Rutgers universities share new research on a hot-button subject.

By Michael A. Kashmer / *Digital Broadband Programming Consultant*

The effect of violent video games on real-world behavior remains a hotly debated subject. Plenty of serious research, plus tons of anecdotal evidence, can support or deny either side of this national discussion.

Some sources claim there is a clear connection between playing violent video games and an increased level of aggressive behavior. Video games can be the single prominent factor, say those who look to blame the media, violent video games and young-adult entertainment in general.

Social research conducted at Villanova and Rutgers universities confirms that videos can be a powerful influence in shaping young minds but surprisingly finds that homicides consistently *decrease* after the release of new versions of violent games. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP.com) also has helpful studies on this subject.

Children who watch shows in which violence is very realistic, is frequently repeated and goes unpunished are more likely to imitate what they see. In this age of sharply polarized views on so many subjects, I think we can all agree that parents need to pay attention to what their children watch on screens of any size. AACAP says that kids with emotional, behavioral, learning or impulse control problems may be more easily influenced by TV violence.

The colors, music, attractive virtual characters and amazing graphics pull children right in. Gary Slutkin, the founder of Cure Violence, an organization that works on reducing gun violence in parts of Baltimore and Chicago, doesn't feel that virtual violence is in itself a cause of real-life violence, but neither does he think it's harmless.

MORAL PANICS OF THE PAST

Some history can help put current alarms about video violence into perspective. More than 60 years ago, a similar correlation was made between comic books and dangerous behavior. During the 1950s, a congressional hearing centered on what caused "juvenile delinquency." One comic book was singled out by testifying scientists as harboring sadistic fantasies and being a special threat to the ethical development of children. That comic was Superman.

Another moral panic took place during the era of rock 'n' roll. This time it was about how the forceful lyrics

and driving beat would drive young people to distraction. Older citizens didn't understand the style and music of Elvis Presley or Janis Joplin. Misinformation helped foster extreme positions on both sides.

I served in Vietnam as an officer aboard a Navy troop ship for nearly three years and was always amazed that some senior military officers had such strong feelings about what this music could do. They said pop music "would get the troops all riled up and make them harder to control." If you just let the soldiers wander around, they thought, no one would get into any trouble. Right.

Aggressive behaviors are sometimes promoted in other ways. For example, some product names, especially those aimed at young male adults, run the gamut from being simply tasteless to bigoted and exploitive.

Teenagers don't have the luxury of standing back and looking at their social media usage. Their landscape changes constantly, with platforms coming and going quickly. For the young, a powerhouse such as Facebook is no longer the dominant social platform it once was.

In summary, there is much people still do not know about the relationship between video games and violence. One researcher, Rowell Huesmann, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, says 20 or 30 more years of study will be needed to get a better answer. Meanwhile, it is a judgment call.

One last comment: Video screens deliver real-life violence in addition to imaginary violence. For example, a short article in *The New York Times* on July 29, "Why Families Were Separated at the Border," by Manny Fernandez, contained graphic news reports and videos. What do youngsters think about seeing kids their own age physically pulled away, crying, from their mothers?

Is this violence OK? Ben Lujan, a congressman from New Mexico, recently visited a facility that held separated children and, visibly frustrated by what he encountered, had to walk out. ❖

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