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'Video Games Are Like Smoking and Lung Cancer' and Other Urban Legends in the Violent Video Game Debate



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According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an urban legend is “An often lurid story or anecdote that is based on hearsay and often reported as true” (Merriam-Webster, 2010). Most typically the term is applied to stories of vanishing hitchhikers, hook-bearing murderers and such; they are tales of uncertain origin, told as if true, and tend to carry a moral message for society (Croft, 2006). In conducting research on video game violence and watching the debates among politicians, pressure groups and scholars in this realm, I have observed the repetition of several claims or stories by all three groups. Stories which are often (although not always as we’ll see) of uncertain origin, are told as if true (but in each case are demonstrably false) and contain a moral message designed to encourage others to act on an issue the storyteller views as pressing.

I adapt the concept of an urban legend to include these scientific urban legends. Like contemporary urban legends, scientific urban legends can be identified by the following hall-marks:

- 1.) They are stated as absolute fact. In the case of a scientific urban legend the statement at hand has either been debunked in the published literature, or at the very least, is highly controversial. Despite this, the statement is still communicated as absolute fact, without any mention of the debunking literature or controversy. The notion that violent video games have caused an ((non-existent)) epidemic of school shootings or youth violence is an example.
- 2.) The basis of the story remains unclear. The claim that there are 3,500 studies of media violence with only 18 not finding harmful effects is one such example. This statement was repeated by no less than the American Academy of Pediatrics (Cook, 2000) despite the fact that no one has any idea where these figures came from, only that they are demonstrably untrue (Freedman, 2002). Sometimes a claim can be traced back to a single source (e.g. Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Grossman, 1996), although the origins of the claim remained mired in unclear logic or questionable statistics.

- 3.) The messages are the most frightening possible...making wild claims of scientific certainty regarding inevitable and serious harm. Nonsense claims that media violence may explain upwards of 30% of societal violence (Strasburger, 2007) would fit in this category, as would long-debunked claims, equating the effect size of media violence research to hard science demonstrations, such as the relationship between smoking and lung cancer.

The issue of video game violence has attracted a great deal of societal attention. It is now well understood historically that new media tend to provoke patterns of moral panic in which such urban legends are common (Ferguson, 2010; Kutner & Olson, 2008). For instance in the 19th century, experts claimed young women should not read dime novels due to the alleged inability of women to distinguish reality from fiction. Similarly, in the 1950s, psychiatric experts testified before the U.S. Senate that the characters Batman and Robin, in comic books, were secretly a gay couple who would lead children to delinquency and homosexuality. It is an unfortunate aspect of all such media in moral panics that not only politicians and pressure groups, but also scholars can be counted on to make extreme claims that violate the traditions of scientific conservatism, skepticism and careful observation.

Perhaps the first of the video game urban legends was the belief that violent games were “linked” with school shooting incidents. This was a common refrain following the 1999 Columbine High Massacre, regularly indulged in by politicians and pressure groups. Unfortunately, some scholars also joined in this litany, making claims that many school shootings were “linked” to violent games (e.g. Anderson, 2004). Of course almost all young men play violent games at least occasionally, so making such “links” are not difficult. Despite the fact that older adults commit as many, if not more, mass shootings as do teenagers, it’s interesting to observe that the issue of violent games never arises when an older adult commits mass homicide (tenure was the boogeyman in the recent case of a female biology professor in Alabama). The supposed video game link was laid to rest in 2002 by the U.S. Secret Service which found no evidence for such a link. Yet it continues to be resurrected.

Arguably, more pernicious is the argument that the effects of video game violence on aggression are similar to those for smoking and lung cancer or similar medical effects (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Such a wild claim should have attracted great scrutiny, but instead has been uncritically repeated by politicians and some scholars. Unlike the school shooting claim, the 3,500 studies claim, and the interactivity claim discussed later, the lung cancer urban legend is clearly attributed to Bushman and Anderson (2001) who used some dubious statistics to make this claim. These statistics have since been debunked in the published literature (Block & Crain, 2007; Ferguson, 2009). Nonetheless

politicians and some scholars continue to repeat this claim without making any mention of the debunking articles. Of course any comparison between the dubious outcome measures used in most aggression studies and the unquestionable validity of deaths from smoking is fraught with error. But even taken at face value, the two bodies of research and the research results they produce aren't remotely similar.

Another common urban legend is that the U.S. military uses video games to desensitize soldiers so that they will kill more reliably. The origins of this particular idea seems to lay with David Grossman (1996), although he refers to some earlier U.S. Army work, comparing the rates at which U.S. soldiers in World War II fired at the enemy with those of modern U.S. infantrymen, such as during the first Gulf War. Results indicating that the conscripted, often rudimentarily trained farmers, schoolteachers and lawyers, called to duty during World War II, were handed a semi-automatic M1 and told to fire at identifiable targets, shot less often than the highly trained volunteer career infantrymen, firing fully automatic M-16s, while using night-vision goggles and were instructed to fire in the general direction of the enemy.

Despite all the differences between the two groups, Grossman focused on the advent of simulations in training as the crucial difference; hence an urban legend was born. Never mind that the U.S. Army has denied these claims (video games are used for vehicle and team training and decision making and even recruitment, but not desensitization) or that police organizations use similar simulations to reduce impulsive "bad" shootings. Nor does it seem to matter that today's youth, consuming far greater amounts of violent games than any past generation possibly could, are the least violent youth in 40 years. The sound byte is repeated often, presumably given its because of its emotional appeal.

Lastly, I address the claim that the interactivity of video games makes them more harmful than other media. This argument was one basis for California's recent anti-game law. However, though it is often repeated as speculation, by now the evidence is clear that, even taken at face value, media violence research finds no evidence for an increased effect for video games (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009; Sherry, 2001). Politicians and even some scholars, nonetheless, repeat this claim ad infinitum, despite that it is long past time to lay it to rest. One gets the sense that the motivation for repeating this belief is that it must be true according to those that proposed the theory. Unfortunately the research evidence has not lined up to support it.

One expects the repetition of urban legends by pressure/activists groups with a clear axe to grind. What is more disappointing is how often some scholars have indulged in repeating these urban legends uncritically. Of course it is now known that pressure/activist groups such as the National Institute of Media and the Family or the Center for Successful Parenting have funded much of the "anti-

game” literature. As such, I argue that the line between the advocacy of these pressure groups and the science funded by these groups may have been hopelessly blurred. When scientists step into the public eye and repeat nonsense urban legends...whether that Batman and Robin were gay or that video game research can be compared to smoking/lung cancer research, scholars cause a great embarrassment to the scientific enterprise. Once society begins to realize that the extreme claims made are not coming true, and I argue this is beginning to happen for video game research, the damage done to science can be very significant. Therefore, I call upon scholars on all sides of this debate to exert far greater conservatism in the claims being made, and to remain alert for the potential that they themselves may be repeating, or even creating, scientific urban legends.

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