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Adults Who Play Violent Video Games and Their Normative Beliefs About Aggression (Part 2): Video Games and Aggression

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1. Video Games and Aggression

Many studies have been conducted in order to help explain the relationship between aggression and video games. However, researchers cannot seem to agree if violent-content video games have an effect on aggression. Through numerous correlational studies, various researchers have found results suggesting that violent video game play is positively related to increases in aggressive behavior and affect (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Anderson & Murphy, 2003; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005; Colwell & Payne, 2000; Gentile et al., 2004; Persky & Blaskovich, 2007; Sherry, 2001). Sherry (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of studies from 1975 to 2000 to determine the correlation between playing violent video games and aggression. He found that the overall correlation between video game play and aggression was relatively small ($r = .15$). He also found that the overall effect size of that correlation was small ($d = .30$), suggesting there is a relationship between video game play and aggression, but that this relationship is smaller than the relationship found between television and
aggression \( (d = .65) \). This implies that, although there is a relationship between the aggression and video games, the relationship may be small and not as strong as other media devices.

Not every study, however, has found that playing violent video games increases aggressive thoughts and affect. For example, Fleming and Rickwood (2001) found that arousal and mood were negatively correlated with violent video game play, suggesting that playing may rather lead to decreases in aggressive behavior and affect. Ferguson (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of studies completed from 1995 to 2005 to calculate an overall effect size for the relationship between violent video games and aggression and to examine whether there has been any publication bias in the research. He found that there was a positive correlation between violent video game play and aggressive behavior \( (r = .29) \) and aggressive thoughts \( (r = .25) \). However, the results of the meta-analysis also suggest that there is significant publication bias issues for both experimental and nonexperimental studies of aggression so that the effects found in many past studies many not be completely accurate. For example, many studies implemented measures that may not be reliable or valid for assessing aggression. Ferguson (2007) concludes that researchers have “not provided compelling support to indicate either a correlational or causal relationship between violent game play and actual aggressive behavior” (p. 480). Obviously, this is an area that requires more research that utilizes reliable and valid measures to determine what effect, if any, playing video games has on aggressive affect and behavior.

One related area of video game research that has been the focus of attention is the relationship between the amounts of time people spend playing video games and the amount of aggressive behavior and affect exhibited. As the amount of violent graphics and the popularity of video games has increased, so has the amount of time people are spending playing video games. In the mid 1980s children were spending approximately four hours a week playing video games (Carnagey & Anderson, 2004). Recent estimates of video game usage has increased significantly with eighth and ninth grade students reporting an average of nine hours a week and male college students reporting an average of twenty hours per week (Carnagey & Anderson, 2004).

With the astounding quantity of time people are spending engaging in games, it is important to understand what effects the amount of time spent playing video games has on aggressive behavior. Although many people are playing video games for extended periods of time, researchers have suggested that even short term exposure to violent video games causes temporary increases in aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Murphy, 2003; Bartholow et al., 2005; Colwell & Kato, 2005). Bartholow, Sestir, and Davis (2005) found that participants who had more exposure to violent video games behaved more aggressively than participants who had lower levels of exposure to violent video games suggesting that the amount of time spent playing games with violent content is related to aggressive behaviors.

Researchers have also found that various traits are related to increased amount of time spent playing video games such as lower grades (Anderson & Dill, 2000), lower self-esteem and lower number of friends (Colwell & Payne, 2000), and increased hostility (Gentile et al., 2004). In fact, it has been shown that parental limits on children’s use of video games are related to decreases in
fights and arguments and increases in school performance (Gentile et al., 2004).

Although most research has suggested that playing violent video games for even short lengths of time can cause increases in aggressive behavior and affect, Sherry (2001) suggests that playing even the most violent video games for extended periods of time may not increase aggression. He proposes that children who play games for long periods of time may transfer less aggression from the game to the external world than those who play for brief periods of time due to arousal levels decreasing over time. Evidently, the relationship between the amounts of time that people spend playing violent video games and aggression is debatable and requires further evaluation.

As stated previously, a video game can have a component that is much different than other forms of media in that it may rewards violent actions performed by the player. Unlike television, video games enable the player to control the movements of a character in a virtual world. Most video games reward players for exhibiting violent behaviors in the characters they are controlling by receiving points, achievements and/or higher status, completing levels, and winning the game. Some video games punish violent behaviors such as when innocent bystanders or “friendlys” are shot instead of the enemy which can result in the player losing points or status or having to begin the level over.

Researchers have examined what effects reward and punishment of violent actions in video games can have on later aggressive cognition, affect, and behavior. In a series of three experiments, Carnagey and Anderson (2005) found that rewarding violence in video games can increase aggressive affect, cognition, and behavior. They found that participants who were rewarded for violent actions exhibited more aggressive behaviors than participants who played the same game where violence was punished or did not occur. This suggests that the reward component that is exclusive to video game media may increase aggressive behaviors, affect, and cognitions.

Although researchers have focused primarily on whether playing violent video games that have components of control and reward leads to aggressive behaviors and affects, there is also interest in whether people who play more violent games deem aggression as an acceptable behavior.

2. Video Games and Normative Beliefs About Aggression

As stated above, normative beliefs about aggression are beliefs about the acceptability or unacceptability of aggression in particular situations. These beliefs are influenced by a person’s family, peers, and culture which includes the media within that culture. Eron et al. (1972) found that people who watch many hours of violent television and prefer to watch violent programs do not consider the aggressive behaviors viewed on the shows as deviant. In fact, many of the participants suggested that these behaviors were appropriate ways to solve real-life problems, therefore endorsing aggression as a normal response to everyday problems.

Other researchers have found that the ways in which a person thinks and feels are important in
influencing their interest and exposure to violent games, films, and television (Sigurdsson et al., 2006). These researchers also found that people who are accepting of violence as a normal behavioral response are more likely to expose themselves to violent forms of media. These findings suggest that peoples’ beliefs and feelings about aggression can cause them to have more or less exposure to violent forms of media (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Krahe and Moller (2004) found that the normative acceptance of physical aggression increased with an increase in exposure to violent video games. These researchers also found that for both males and females the frequency with which violent video games were played and the amount these types of games were liked were related to the acceptance of aggression as normative. This suggests that there is a positive relationship between normative beliefs about aggression and exposure to violent video games with more exposure related to increased beliefs that aggression is a normal response.

Not only are there differences in beliefs about the normality of aggression among video game players, there are also differences in video game use and aggression between males and females and differences in how games are rated.

3. Video Games and Aggression: Gender Differences

When people think of typical video game players, males are most likely to come to mind, but females are becoming more involved in the gaming world with an estimated 40% of the gaming market being female (Oser, 2004). Researchers have found that females reported being less experienced with video games than males (Fleming & Rickwood, 2001) and in fact, males reported playing more violent video games for longer amounts of time than females (Colwell & Payne, 2000; Funk et al., 2002; Krahe & Moller, 2004). Even while playing the games, males appear to be more involved overall, but females become more focused and involved when playing a third person rather than a first person game (Farrar, Krcmar, & Nowak, 2006). In a first person game, the player is represented by a given avatar; in a third person game, the player is not represented by any particular avatar but may manipulate groups of avatars or other digital representations. While males tend to prefer video games that contain violent and aggressive content such as Call of Duty and Mortal Kombat (Funk et al., 2002), females tend to prefer games that have opportunities for social interaction, contain non-sexualized role for the female characters, and have non-aggressive content such as The Sims (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). Evidently there are differences between males and females who play video games and two areas where there are marked differences is in the amount of aggression contained in the games males and females prefer, and the amount of aggression males and females display.

Males and females may respond differently to exposure to violence and aggression in video games. Arriaga, Esteves, Carneiro, and Monteiro (2006) found that playing violent video games increased the arousal levels of female participants more than male participants, but Fleming and Rickwood (2001) found that both males and females showed increased arousal levels after playing violent video games. Numerous researchers have found that males appear to be more affected by violent video games than females, suggesting that males may become or be more aggressive in general and are more sensitive to aggression. (Anderson, 1997; Archer & Latham,
Deselms and Altman (2003) found that exposure to violence in video games decreased male participants sensitivity to violence while women participants become more sensitive to violent content after playing violent video games. Although both males and females responded to the violence they viewed in the games, this research supports the idea that male sensitivity to violence and aggression may cause them to be more affected by video games by being more aggressive in their actions. In fact, Huesmann et al. (1992) found that boys are more physically aggressive than females and are more likely to believe that aggression is an acceptable behavior across a range of circumstances and targets.

Research has provided evidence that males may be more sensitive to aggression and more likely to behave aggressively than females. It has also been shown that males tend to prefer games with more violent content and aggression than females but one issue that has not been addressed so far is how do consumers of video games know what games are more violent than others? One way to determine what type of content and how much violence a game contains is to look at for which age level the game is appropriate and what rating the game is given.

4. Video Game Ratings

Rating systems have been put in place for most major forms of media beginning with films in the 1960s, music in the 1980s, video games in 1994, and finally, television in 1996 (Funk, Flores, Buchman, & Germann, 1999). The ultimate goal of ratings is to limit the amount of access vulnerable individuals have to forms of media that contain explicit content such as sex, crude language, and violence. When video games first appeared in the United States in the 1970s, the content and graphics were not a large concern. As technology and the graphics of games have become more violent and realistic, parents and legislators have begun to express concern about the content within these games and pushed for access restrictions for children (Funk et al., 1999).

In 1994, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) was established in order to assign video game content ratings which were designed to provide consumers with concise impartial guidance about their age-appropriateness and content (Entertainment Software Association, 2006). ESRB ratings have two equal parts: rating symbols which suggest age appropriateness for the game and content descriptors which indicate elements in a game that may have triggered a particular rating and may be of concern. Upon reviewing and before releasing games, game publishers submit responses to a detailed written ESRB questionnaire regarding the pertinent content in the video game, then raters recommend an appropriate rating category and content descriptors (Entertainment Software Association, 2006).

The ESRB has six different ratings that it assigns to video games which are: early childhood (EC) which is suitable for ages three and older; everyone (E) which is suitable for ages six and older; everyone ages ten and older (E10+); Teen (T) which is suitable for ages thirteen and older; mature (M) which is suitable for ages seventeen and older; and finally, adults only (AO) which is suitable for ages eighteen and older (Entertainment Software Association, 2006).
There are many content descriptors that the ESRB uses when describing video games including alcohol and drugs, blood, gore, violence, language, sex, and nudity and each rating is associated with different types of content descriptors. This means that video games with higher ratings contain more violent content and therefore more content descriptors warning about what will be witnessed while playing the game.

Since the establishment of video game ratings there has been little research conducted to determine how efficient and accurate these ratings actually are but some researchers are looking into these questions. Thompson and Haninger (2001) wanted to quantify and categorize the depiction of violence, drugs and alcohol, and sex in E rated video games. As stated previously, E rated video games according to the ESRB are suitable for ages six and older. The researchers discovered that 35 of 55 (63%) games involved intentional acts of violence for an average of 30.7% of the game time. In 33 of the games injuring characters was rewarded or required for advancement in the game. Additionally, 14 of 32 (44%) games did not receive a content descriptor of violence from ESRB when they in fact contained numerous acts of violence. The results suggest that even though E rated games have been deemed appropriate for children ages six, there is a significant amount of violence in these video games.

Following the findings of their previous research, Haninger and Thompson (2004) conducted another study in order to quantify and characterize the content in video games that are rated T (for teen). These researchers also wanted to determine if there was agreement between the ESRB content descriptors and the actual content observed in the games. The results suggested that in a random sample of 81 games that were studied, 79 involved intentional violence for an average of 36% of game play, 73 rewarded the player for injuring other characters or required the player to do so, 56 rewarded the player to or required the player to kill, 34 depicted blood, 22 depicted sexual themes, 22 contained profanity, 12 depicted substances, and 1 involved gambling. The researchers’ observations identified 51 instances of content in 39 games that warranted a descriptor by the ESRB where none was actually given. This suggests that although the ESRB content descriptors provide a good indication about what types of content one may observe while playing a video game, the absence of a descriptor does not mean the absence of that type of content. Similar to the results found in their study with E rated games, Haninger and Thompsons’ (2004) results suggest that there is a significant amount of violence in T rated games and that not all information about the content of the game is always depicted by the content descriptors given by the ESRB.

Obviously there are some differences between the ESRB’s and researchers’ beliefs about what content descriptors should be included and what the ratings of certain video games should be. Funk, Flores, Buchman, and Germann (1999) wanted to determine if there were similarities between consumer’s perceptions of what content descriptors and ratings of video games are and ESRB’s actual content descriptors and ratings. The results suggested that when violent content was not a central theme of game or when it was prominent in the game there was strong agreement between consumers and the ESRB on ratings and content descriptors. One area where there was considerable variance between the two groups was in regards to cartoon-
type violence depicted in games. Depending on the respondent’s age, gender and status as parent or nonparent, consumers rated the games containing cartoon-type violence more or less violent than the ESRB.

The results of these studies together suggests that although the rating and content descriptor system used by the ESRB is helpful in determining what games may be appropriate for certain individuals, many of the games that are rated E for everyone or T for teen depict many violent acts that may not be appropriate for the age level suggested. It is also interesting to note that many players are not necessarily playing games that are appropriate for their age level, either by choice or because they are unaware of what the game is rated or the content depicted. It has been shown that playing M rated video games is very common among children ages 12-14 (Olson et al., 2007). M rated video games are for mature audiences only, meaning ages 17 and older, due to the prevalence of intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content, and strong language. Due to the increasing numbers of people who are playing violent video games, more research needs to be conducted to determine how accurate this rating system is and how accurate players perceptions are regarding the ratings of games being played.

5. References

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3 THOUGHTS ON “ADULTS WHO PLAY VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES AND THEIR NORMATIVE BELIEFS ABOUT AGGRESSION (PART 2): VIDEO GAMES AND AGGRESSION”

plotka
on February 1, 2014 at 1:46 AM said:

it is usually great to see these details within your post, i was looking precisely the same but clearly there was hardly any right resource, thanx now i've the connection that we wanted my research.

Cichopek
on February 1, 2014 at 2:16 AM said:

Hi Shane, I’ve quite appreciated these content as well as the helpful summaries that they provide. You say each “the Son is God” and suggest we shouldn’t say “God died on the cross.” Can you explain? Thanks!
nigeria dating
on February 5, 2014 at 12:16 AM said:

Hmm it seems like your internet site ate my first comment (it was incredibly long) so I guess I’ll just sum it up what I had written and say, I’m thoroughly enjoying your blog. I too am an aspiring blog writer but I’m nonetheless new to everything. Do you’ve any recommendations for novice blog writers? I’d surely appreciate it.|Woah! I’m very loving the template/theme of this blog. It’s simple, yet effective. Lots of times it’s complicated to acquire that “perfect balance” among user friendliness and visual appearance. I have to say you have done a superb employment with this. Also, the blog loads very fast for me on Safari. Outstanding Blog!|Do you mind if I quote 2 your articles as extended as I offer credit and sources back for ones site? My blog web site is inside same area of interest as yours and my site visitors would truly benefit from a lot of the information you present here. Please permit me know if this alright with you. Thank you!!|Hi would you mind letting me know which webhost you might be using? I’ve loaded your blog in 3 different net browsers and I must say this blog loads a lot faster then most. Can you recommend a excellent internet hosting provider at a truthful price? Thanks, I appreciate it!!|Fantastic website you have here but I was wanting to know should you knew of any discussion boards that cover the same topics talked about here? I’d really adore being a part of community exactly where I can get guidance from other experienced persons that share the same interest. Should you have any suggestions, please allow me know. Numerous thanks!!|Hey! That is my very first comment the following so I just wanted to give a quick shout out and say I definitely enjoy reading your blog posts. Can you recommend any other blogs/websites/forums that go more than the same topics? Enjoy it!!|Do you have a spam issue on this website; I also am a blogger, and I was curious about your situation; we now have produced some nice practices and we are looking to exchange ways with other folks, please shoot me an email if interested.