Are violent video games really to blame?

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Following the tragic 2012 Sandy Hook shooting when Adam Lanza killed 20 children and 7 adults including his mother, much speculation circulated regarding the role of violent video games in the shooting. Newspapers conjectured, based mainly on rumor, that Lanza was enthralled with violent video games; politicians such as Senator Rockefeller and Representative Wolf lambasted video games; even some scholars claimed video games may have prodded Lanza into violence. Speculating that 20-year-old Lanza played violent video games was low hanging fruit. The vast majority of male youth in that age range play violent video games, so odds were Lanza did too. Thus, it was a surprise that, according to the official Connecticut investigation report released late in 2013, although Lanza did own both non-violent and violent video games, he mainly favored and played non-violent games such as Dance, Dance Revolution (State’s Attorney for the Judicial District of Dansbury, 2014).

Thus, nearly a year’s worth of intense debate on video game violence turned out to be based mainly in unsupported rumor. We’ve been down this road before. In the 1950s psychiatrists testified before congress that comic books caused not only juvenile delinquency but homosexuality (Batman and Robin were secretly gay, it was claimed) and in the 1980s rock bands ranging from Twisted Sister to Cyndi Lauper were blamed for suicide, violence and sexual immorality during the “Tipper Gore” hearings before congress. Alongside moral panics over everything from waltzes to novels to Dungeons and Dragons and Harry Potter, the recent moral panic over video game violence continues an easily identifiable cycle of exaggerated claims of harm in pursuit of a visible moral agenda. This moral panic is fueled by unfortunate violent tragedies such as Sandy Hook despite that criminologists have specifically referred to links between video games and mass shootings as a “myth” (Fox and DeLateur, 2014).

Evidence is becoming clearer that violent video games are not a factor in societal violence. As indicated by Figure 1, increase consumption of violent video games has been associated with a decline in youth violence. Recent research by Patrick Markey (Markey, Markey & French, in press) has indicated that the releases of violent video games such as Grand Theft Auto are associated with declines in youth violence. And, in general, research does not indicate links between video game play and youth violence, particularly when other factors such as family environment, personality and mental health are carefully controlled (Ferguson, 2011; Gunter & Daly, 2012; Breuer et al., in press).

The evidence on milder forms of aggression, particularly in laboratory studies with college students, is less clear. Meta-analyses have disagreed about whether links between video games and milder aggression are meaningful. Many of the studies involved are seriously hampered by failure to match video games on variables other than violence (comparing a highly complex, story-based involved game such as Call of Duty to simplistic puzzle games like Tetris for instance). Others use dubious aggression
measures that allow researchers to pick and choose from among aggression outcomes those that best fit their hypotheses and ignore those that don’t (Elson et al., 2014). In other words, many studies may tell us more about what the researchers wanted to see than how people actually behave.

There’s also been no evidence to suggest that video games have any more impact than the negligible effects of television (see Ferguson, 2011; Sherry, 2007). Sometimes one study (Polman et al., 2008) is miscited as suggesting greater video game effects. However this study compared playing video games to watching video games (not television) something few people do for fun. And this study found no significant differences between violent and non-violent video games.

There’s also no evidence for a consensus among scholars regarding video game or other media violence effects. Figure 2 presents a comparison between the consensus on global warming with several studies examining opinions on media violence among scholars and clinicians. As can be seen, across studies, considerable disagreement remains among scholars.

Why then do some politicians, activists and even some scholars (who should know better) try to claim that there are consistent effects or scholarly consensus regarding video game effects on aggression when evidence clearly indicates otherwise? Like previous moral panics a generational culture war seems to be at play (Przybylski, 2014). Just as with rock music and comic books, fears of video games are more common among older adults who are less familiar with games. Politicians and even media scholars often demonstrate their unfamiliarity with video games by claiming they “award points” for violent behavior or give verbal encouragements of “Nice Shot”, things most video games stopped doing in the 1990s. The reasons why some elements of society continue to scapegoat video games (as they did comic books and rock music) despite evidence to the contrary are complex. Indeed, this “sociology of media violence research” itself is a topic worthy of study. In the meantime a group of 230 scholars have written to the American Psychological Association asking them to retire their policy statements on media violence (Consortium of Scholars, 2013). v

We should accept that, whether we like violent video games or not, if we are serious about reducing crime, our attention is better focused on other issues such as poverty, mental health care or educational disparities. In 2011 no less than the US Supreme Court (Brown v EMA, 2011) looked at the evidence for violent video game effects and declared “These studies have been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason.” It’s time that we listen to the Supreme Court and refocus our attention on more pressing matters.

References


behavior: The unstandardized use of the competitive reaction time test in aggravation research. Psychological Assessment.


Figure 1:

Figure 2: