Violence in Online Gaming: Pushing the Limits

By

Christy L. Kinnion
2730-8 Meridian Dr. Greenville, NC 27834
ckinnion@email.unc.edu
252-531-0059

Professor Deb Aikat

JOMC 223

December 8, 2004

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Use of the Internet has risen dramatically over recent years with the integration of the World Wide Web. The "Internet Revolution," as it is called, allows users the freedom to do or find nearly anything on the Net; a person with moderate knowledge of navigation and search engines can surf for headline news, locate a high school friend, find a rare book, even do his or her holiday shopping from the comforts of home. A growing trend involves using the Internet for entertainment purposes, specifically playing video games (also known in the Web world as online gaming).

Theoretically, online gaming seems harmless enough. One might ask, "what's wrong with playing a few games to pass the time?" Well, this ain't your daddy's Atari, and you won't find Ms. Pac Man eating everything in her path. Many of today's computer and video games contain questionable content, including slavery, lynchings, world wars, concentration camps, Nazi experiments, the cold war, race riots, and nuclear war, just to name a few. All a part of our history, some say. So, I now ask, where is the justification in police shootings, carjacking, burglary, rape, and murder? If those are not enough to scare or shock you, add presidential assassination to the list. All of these acts can be witnessed, even reenacted down to the last minutia, in a variety of new games including "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," "Second Renaissance," and "JFK Reloaded."[1] Yes, these games are rated for content and maturity, but how effective is the rating system in keeping these games out of the wrong hands, and does that minimize the effects of violence on children and young adults?

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[1] Hanahel, Sam. "Group Cites Video Games for Violence, Sex." 24 Nov. 2004 <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory?id=278017>.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is currently the rating system used for computer and video games; these games are rated in terms of age appropriateness and content. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) states that the ESRB has rated thousands of games by more than 400 software publishers since it was established in 1994.[2] The association also states the following statistics in reference to parental attitude, awareness, and involvement:

- Sixty-five percent of parents with children under the age of 18 say that computer and video games are a positive addition to their children's lives.

- Ninety-six percent of parents surveyed who have children under the age of 18 said they are paying attention to the content of computer and video games their children play.

- Forty-four percent of parents in households that own game console or computers used to play interactive games say they play games with their kids daily or weekly. Overall, 60 percent of parents say they play interactive games with their kids at least once a month.

- Parents are involved when games are purchased, with players under the age of 18 saying their parents were present at the point-of-sale 89 percent of the time.

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[2]ESA Media Center. Home page. Entertainment Software Assoc. 1 Dec. 2004
<http://www.theesa.com/pressroom.html>.

Why do people play games? In 2001, 87% of most frequent computer and video game players said the number one reason they play games is because it's fun.[2] Games are challenging to 72%, an interactive social experience that can be shared with friends and family for 42%, and a lot of entertainment value for the money for the remaining 36%. More recent studies show, however, that this trend has grown significantly and shows no signs of slowing down. The following is a list compiled by the ESA.

Top Ten Industry Facts

1. U.S. computer and video game software sales grew eight percent in 2003 to $7 billion – a more than doubling of industry software sales since 1996.

2. In 2003, more than 239 million computer and video games were sold, or almost two games for every household in America.

3. Half of all Americans age six and older play computer and video games.

4. The average age of a game player is 29 years old.

5. The average game buyer is 36 years old. In 2003, 94 percent of computer game buyers and 84 percent of console game buyers were over the age of 18.

6. Thirty-nine percent of game players are women.

7. Eighty-five percent of all games sold in 2003 were rated "E" for everyone or "T" for teen.

8. Ninety-two percent of parents surveyed who have children under the age of 18 say they monitor the content of the interactive games their children play, and 55 percent of parents say they play interactive games with their kids at least once a month.

9. Forty-three percent of game players say they play games online one or more hours per week, up from thirty-seven percent in 2003 and thirty-one percent in 2002.

10. More than half of game players expect to be playing as much or more 10 years from now as they do today.

With ever-increasing sales, nearly doubling since 1996, it seems an almost fruitless attempt to keep children from being exposed to violent games. With an average of two games per household, a child will certainly have the opportunity to view and/or play a violent game; this could in turn lead to both aggressive behavior and a type of "electronic addiction." Dr. Jeanne Funk, published in the Journal of Clinical Pediatrics, says that "kids like violent and high stress games," and "if they are allowed to, they will play them."[3] Dr. Funk found that among the 7th and 8th graders surveyed, 49% preferred electronic games involving violence, and 29% preferred sports or "high stress" games. Only 2% preferred educational games. Her study indicated that 80% of electronic games had some violent content. In 1998 a study out of Simon Fraser University by Stephen Kline revealed that one out of four people who play video games are addicted and have behavioral issues.[4] Twenty-five percent of the 650 young people surveyed reported playing between seven and 30 hours a week. Kline was struck by the "feelings of isolation and helplessness" expressed by many of the gamers. Not surprisingly (and considering the study is now seven years old), they preferred games such as Doom, Final

[3] Violence and Electronic Games. Home page. Safety Ed International. 2 Dec. 2004 <http://www.safetyed.org/help/electgames.html>.

[4] Video Game Culture: Leisure and Play Preferences. Home page. Media Awareness Network. 2 Dec. 2004 <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/research_documents/studies/video_games/vgc_conclusion.cfm>.

Fantasy, and Mortal Combat—all violent fantasy games which could even then be played on a home computer. The SFU report warned that the game industry (which at that time was a reported $17-billion-dollar-a-year global industry) was larger than the children's TV and film industry and was shaping the lives of children.

The debate, as we all know, is in regard to the correlation between violence in TV, film, and games and its effect on human behavior. The Kline survey revealed that the "emotional experience of game play was intense, characterized by strong feelings of pleasure, excitement, and involvement. As such, it would appear that much of the appeal of video games lies in the feelings of emersion that are achieved when TV is made interactive." Interviews of the young gamers showed that they were even in agreement that there were negative consequences associated with playing violent games and admitted to playing too much. Interviews also showed that most parents did not monitor these children, set few rules, and rarely played with them. That shows a significant change if we assume that the current ESRB results are accurate.

Exposure to violence is inevitable in our society; however, "interactive" violence as suggested above can be monitored and limited. Players who are not mature may not understand the function of these games according to Celia Pierce, media scholar.[5] Pierce suggests that the humanist understanding of violent fantasy games is as follows: "Most of the alarmism about violence is based on a profound misunderstanding about the social and emotional function of games. Games allow people who are midway between childhood and adulthood to engage in fantasies of power to compensate for their own

[5] Media Scholars' Brief in St. Louis Video Games Censorship Case. The Free Expression Policy Project: Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law. 5 Dec. 2004 <http://www.fepproject.org/courtbriefs/stlouissummary.html>.

feelings of personal powerlessness. This role-playing function is important for children of all ages." This suggests that the games are good for children and have few adverse affects. Psychologist, Kevin Durkin, also on the case agreed; however, he added that evidence did indicate aggressive game play promoted the release of aggressive tensions. Craig Anderson, a proponent of the causal hypothesis, reported that exposure to "graphically violent video games increased aggressive thought and behavior" based on a lab experiment and study in 2000. The following year, he followed that study with a new meta-analysis that concluded that violent games increased aggressive behavior in children and young adults.

Another point to consider is that an emerging number of these games are not only violent and verbally and sexually explicit—many now seem to be targeting specific groups and races. Though it seems to be too early for a conclusive study, there is no doubt that these games promote stereotyping and hate. On Martin Luther King Day of this year (2004), Resistance Records, a distributor of racist, anti-Semitic "White Power" music began to advertise "Ethnic Cleansing," a CD-ROM based game whose object is to kill "sub-humans" who are clearly Blacks, Latinos, and Jews.[6] Players can choose to dress in KKK robes or as a Skinhead as they attempt to commit genocide. The ads actually say, "Celebrate Martin Luther King Day with a virtual Race War!" This may seem shocking to you, but even more so is the fact that there are other racist games available, only not quite as sophisticated as Ethnic Cleansing. I do not have children of my own, but I would never allow them to play or even watch games such as this. Yes,

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[6] Racist Groups Using Computer Games to Promote Violence. Home page. Anti-Defamation League. 4 Dec. 2004 <http://www.adl.org/videogames/>.

parenting and acceptance of other cultures should be encouraged at home, and no, "hate" cannot be blamed entirely on this video game or other violent games; however, every one of us can be influenced. Young minds especially are more susceptible to this type of intolerance and bigotry. Parents may not see the signs until it is too late, and the seeds have been planted.

Another thing parents need to be cautious of: games that suggest they are educational yet are still violent in nature. The one news story that really grabbed my attention and spurred my interest in this subject was about the afore-mentioned game, "JFK Reloaded." This game became headline news and was widely discussed on TV and radio including NPR's Day to Day. The release of JFK Reloaded was timed to coincide with the 41st anniversary of Kennedy's murder in Dallas and was designed to demonstrate a lone gunman was able to kill the president.[7] The creator of the game, Kirk Ewing, claimed to respect the late president and the family, yet add points to the player's score if they succeed in shooting Kennedy fatally and deduct points if they accidentally kill then first lady Jackie Kennedy. Ewing justified that the game was to undermine the well known conspiracy theory and said, "We believe the only thing we're exploiting is new technology." This game is now available for download for a mere ten dollars, which means it's cheap and easily accessible. For ten bucks, a person can practice killing one of the paramount leaders of our time.

In conclusion, though there is no significant evidence to support a direct correlation between online gaming and say, mass murder, it is apparent that levels of

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[7] Kennedy assassination recreated in video game. Home page. CNN.com. 22 Nov. 2004
<http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/11/21/kennedy.game.reut/>.

anxiety and displays of negative and harmful behavior are increasing in children and young adults who play these games. The argument will persist that violence is all around us; this much is true. However, it is logical and conceivable that it affects us as humans regardless of age. Adults can read between the lines; we can make that distinction—draw that line—between fantasy and reality. The question is whether our children and teens can. The interaction itself makes video games far more harmful than TV or film. For that reason, it is important that parents monitor their children's gaming and take an active role in their activities. Some tips for parents:

- Look for the rating and understand what it means.

- Watch the game and decide if the level of violence and/or sexual content is acceptable.

- Learn more about video games and violence by researching.

- Discuss the games and the violence with your children

- Consider access to games at other households. (Just because they can't play it at your house doesn't mean they can't elsewhere).

- Set time limits on especially violent or high stress games; too much adrenaline is not good for any child. (The suggestion is two hours max).

- Promote a balanced life. Encourage your child to take part in other activities in addition to their gaming like sports.

  Complete censorship is not the answer; that is improbable and unrealistic.

Moderation and understanding by both parents and online gamers is the right solution

to decreasing exposure to violence and alleviating the concern regarding violence and

online games.

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