



Article Title: Video Game Violence as a Myth

Author: Johansen Quijano-Cruz

A professor of English in the Center of Multidisciplinary Studies (Rio Piedras, PR). Professor Cruz has published several articles regarding ESL education and video games, contributed a chapter in a book to be published during summer 2008 dealing with language games, and has other articles under consideration for publication in several online game journals.

Abstract: The following article deals with the video game violence debate. It talks about how anti-video game advocates are reaching unscientific assumptions based on loosely related data and how research has proven that video games do have positive effects in people. It cites statistics from various U.S. departments and correlates the data with trends in violent behavior, and proposes that video games have given american youth something to busy themselves and keep them out of mischief.

INTRODUCTION

Video games and their effects on people, specially today's youth, is a hotly debated topic amongst scholars, politicians, and society's leaders. Much of this debate and controversy surrounding video games is due to its violent content. Even though some scholars will not hesitate to say that "image-based video games became controversial as soon as they hit the market" (Abanes, 2006,11), it is more accurate to say that video games have been a constant topic of debate ever since they joined the mainstream popular

culture during the mid-1980s with the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Some people of the non-gaming sector of society claim that video games and their portrayals of fictional graphic violence and implied sexual acts affect today's youth negatively. This belief, however, is unfounded and entirely false.

Any gamer who was born in or around 1980 and grew up with Double Dragon, Bad Dudes, NARCS, and Splatterhouse, and who spent their teenage days with Street Fighter II, King of Fighters 94, and Mortal Kombat, would have to disagree with the 'video games lead to violence' statement. In fact, it is not rare at all, at least in the lower-class sectors of society, to find that many from the video game-playing crowd have become lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers, managers, teachers, or high-ranking officers in the military, while many of the non-gamer population have been arrested, are in jail, or have been killed.

In his essay titled *Video Game Violence*, Patrick Masell writes that "one would be hard pressed to find a student at Whitmer High School that hasn't played at least one of these games." He continues his narrative by saying that none of these video game players have "erupted in an orgy of gang warfare." This is a scene that is repeated in virtually all schools throughout America. Teenagers play video games, and, therefore, if the beliefs of the anti-video game populace were to be true, every school should be filled with students oozing with hatred. However, "people who claim to be inspired by games to commit violent acts make up less than one percent of those who play video games." (Masell)

Even though the fact is that about 50% of Americans play video games, and that in the past 10 years there has been a steady decrease in violent crime, there are a lot of people who, like Jack Thompson, still say that video games make people violent and that video games are to blame for all of the violent events happening today. Many of these people will quickly mention the Columbine massacre (a tragedy if there ever was one) and blame it on video games. While it is possible that a needlessly violent game like *Postal 2* might have had some influence on this sad event (along with movies like *300*, television shows like *Cops*, classic stories like *The Iliad*, and the ongoing wars all over the world which are broadcasted on our television sets), people should not analyze social trends (is there more or less violence

now than there was ten years ago when video games were not as popular?) by looking at single incidents. According to Johnson (2005) "Over the last ten years - a period of unprecedented fictional violence in the American household, thanks to *Quake* and Quentin Tarantino films - the country simultaneously experienced the most dramatic drop in violent crime in its history" (191). Furthermore, according to FBI statistics, America is at a 20 year low for crime, a trend which began with the release of the NES. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice agree with those of the FBI, as they state that the rate of violent crime has steadily decreased from 1992 to 2006, a time when violent games like GTA, Halo, and God of War were released. If social trends are the criteria that is taken into account, instead of individualized cases, it is simple to arrive at the conclusion that video games, in fact, have not made society more violent than it was.

Video games, in fact, do not have a particularly strong effect regarding violent behavior on those who play them. According to U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, "violent media falls under 'small effect size' influence" (Abanes, 2006, 95). This means that while video games may indeed affect the adrenaline levels in the body, as would any exhilarating experience, this effect is a short-term one. The effect is not strong enough, or long enough, to induce violent behavior. Furthermore, adrenaline rushes do not translate into violent behavior. Although some 'scientific' studies claim that they 'prove' that violent video games cause violent behavior in humans, their conclusions are merely assumptions based on certain minimal evidence. One of these studies attempts to find correlation between violent video games and criminal behavior. To do this, researchers Craig Anderson and Karen Dill, authors of many of the anti-video game 'research' papers, gave students in a certain university questionnaires to fill out. They discovered that students who had previously engaged in 'criminal' activities played more violent video games than those who did not. Their conclusion was that video games made them be violent. However, the critical reader should notice that a) correlation does not imply causation, and 2) discovering that people who previously engaged on 'delinquent' acts play violent video games now does not translate into video games being at fault for their past 'criminal' behavior. Also, the term 'criminal behavior' is never truly defined. Another attempt at 'proving' that video games are violent involved a group of college students playing a violent game, *Wolfenstein 3-D*, also known as *Wolf 3d*, (1992) and another playing a non-violent game, *Myst* (1993). After playing, the students would be able to 'blast' other

students with a horn. Their conclusions say that students who played Wolf 3d blasted students longer than those who played Myst. The main problems with this investigation are that these games are extremely outdated and are not played often anymore. Furthermore, 'blasting' someone with noise, specially if it's done at the request of a third person for the sake of 'research', is an action that every human knows will not harm another, and cannot, therefore, translate into true 'violent behavior', which includes but is not limited to punching, kicking, stabbing, maiming, disemboweling, or killing another subject.

Regardless of what anti-game members of the community might think, the fact is that "violent video games have few, if any, adverse effects on the vast majority of its audience, and those who are negatively influenced often are unstable to begin with." (Masell). Richard Abanes quotes U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher when he says that video game's effects are short term, and that there are 27 other factors, like socio-economic status and parent-child relationships, that are more likely to affect a child's leaning towards violent or non-violent behavior. (101) Dr. Satcher's statement states that "many variables go into a youth committing an act of violence, and to say video games are chief among them is ludicrous" (Masell). Furthermore, it is very likely that "parental neglect is possibly the largest factor in juvenile delinquency" (Masell).

It may be that not only do video games not have a negative effect on gamers, but that they actually have positive effects. In his book *Everything Bad is good for You*, Johnson talks about a study in the University of Rochester which looked at three groups of professionals - hard-core gamers, occasional gamers, and non-gamers. According to Johnson, "the gaming population turned out to be consistently more social, more confident, and more comfortable solving problems creatively. They also show no evidence of reduced attention span compared with non-gamers" (153). Furthermore, world builders or simulation games "invite talk amongst players about right and wrong, good and evil, and related ethical-moral issues" (Abanes, 2006, 34). Games like *Rome: Total War* and *Civilization* are used by educators in order to draw students' attention and get them interested in history, just as role-playing games like *Odin Sphere* and the *Lunar* series are used in language classrooms to expose students to the written word by using alternate means of instruction, to engage them in critical thinking, and to get

them to talk about things they identify with. Even games like Wario Ware and Monkey Ball are used in elementary levels to develop students' coordination and attention spans. A BBC article states that "US scientists have found that regular players of shoot-em-ups, such as Half-Life and Medal of Honor, have much better visual skills than most of the population" (BBC, 2003), while another article states that "doctors who spent at least three hours a week playing video games made about 37 percent fewer mistakes in laparoscopic surgery and performed the task 27 percent faster than their counterparts who did not play video games" (Dobnik, 2004). Research against video games has been questionable so far, while research that outlines the positive qualities of video games has been constant. Findings have been so consistent, specially in the medical area, that "in some hospitals, children are being allowed to play Game Boy before and after surgery as a means of relaxation." (Abanes, 2006, 100) Furthermore, research has discovered that playing video games can help children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and that patients who are treated with video games improve their concentration levels. Research has also found that these patients can transfer this heightened concentration span into other activities.

To conclude, video games are not the negative, mind-bending tool that anti-game advocates would have people believe they are. Video games do not play a significant role in influencing people to act violently; there are 27 other criteria that do this. Furthermore, playing video games can have positive effects in the gamer. Statistics from the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice prove that during the past ten years, a decade that has seen the release of extremely violent media, real-life violence has diminished into an all-time low. In the end, video games did not give our society a 'murder simulator'; video games gave the youth of America something to do other than rape and murder.

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