

Children and Violent Video Games:  
Who is to Blame?

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## Outline

Thesis: Children picking up games meant for older audiences is not the fault of the game makers nor the stores that sell these games, but rather the responsibility of the parents who don't monitor their children's playing habits.

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Everyday, video games become more and more realistic, and with that realism games are becoming more and more violent. The medium is no longer just a pastime for children, but teens and adults are playing games as well. Violent games are made to appeal to those older audiences, but unfortunately children who don't know better happen to get their hands on them and then imitate what they see and do in real life. So who is to be held responsible for this? Children picking up games meant for older audiences is not the fault of the game makers nor the stores that sell these games, but rather the responsibility of the parents who don't monitor their children's playing habits.

In order to understand the impact that games have on today's world, one must first know a little bit about the history of video games. The first video game traces back to 1958 as a demonstration of the mainframe computers of the time. William Higinbotham, a physicist at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, noticed that visitor's were bored of the static exhibits from year to year. He set out to create a more exciting demonstration of the systems they had at the laboratory, which was a nuclear energy research facility. After some time, Higinbotham came up with the idea for a tennis game that later evolved into the sensation, Pong. Unfortunately for him, he had no interest in marketing his creation nor to patent it, and later it was resurrected as the quarter burning addiction, Pong (Burnham 28).

After *Tennis for Two*, as Higinbotham called it, came *Spacewar!* from a group of MIT students. These bright college students were used to mediocre demos of bouncing balls and maze demonstrations, but didn't feel that these did the job. They decided that a good demonstration program should satisfy three criteria. First of all, the demo should push computer to its limit and show off as many features of the system as it can.

Secondly, the demo should be different every time its run. Last of all, the viewers should be given the chance to participate in the demo. The students decided that the best way to do this was to create a video game that featured two space ships attacking each other. In May 1962 the game was officially shown off at the first meeting of the Digital Equipment Computer Users' Society (DECUS) (Burnham 45).

It wasn't until 1966, when Television was just reaching mass market popularity, that the idea of playing video games on a Television Set came about. Television Engineer, Ralph H. Baer, was always one to ponder new uses for Televisions than just watching them. In September 1966, he wrote a four-page paper on the use of video games on TV sets. Baer and Bob Tremblay, one of his technicians, began building the system that he had planned out and soon had the first video game ever played on a TV screen, *Fox & Hounds*. From these original plans and a lot of modifications, the first game console was finally finished and could play a little over a dozen games by switching out a cardstock template on the system. He called his contraption the *Brown Box* and was marketed by Magnavox in 1971 as the *Magnavox Odyssey* (Burnham 55).

Since then, tons of huge advances have been made in the realm of video games. In 1972 Atari created *Pong*, an adaption of a tennis game on the *Odyssey* and *Tennis for Two* by Higinbotham. In 1976, Fairchild Camera and Instrument released the *Fairchild Channel F*, the world's first full-color video game system. Then, in 1977 Atari released the *Atari VCS* which went on to sell 25 million units world wide and 120 million games. It wasn't until 1984 when Nintendo created the *Famicom*, short for family computer, in Japan and in 1985 when they released it as the *Nintendo Entertainment System*, or the *NES*, in America that video games finally hit the mainstream audiences.

The NES went on to sell 65 million units world wide (Burnham 61-63).

Since the NES, games have evolved into a billion dollar industry with gamers ranging from kids just old enough to hold a controller in their hands, to adults and even the elderly. In the 1980s the more avid gamers were playing approximately four to five hours per week while more casual gamers were playing for only thirty minutes a week. The heavy gamers were also the more avid television viewers (Singer 22). Today, approximately 10% of children aged two to eighteen play video games for more than an hour a day. For boys aged eight to thirteen, the average is between seven and eight hours a week (Anderson 354).

Video game companies are beginning to target older audiences, especially males in college due to increased sells to this age group. In 1998, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program reported that at least six hours of gaming per week was spent by male high school seniors preparing to enter college. That number increased to 14.8% by the next year. As for playing times, 2% of the seniors played video games for more than twenty hours per week which increased to 2.5% by the next year (Anderson 354).

Ever since video games began becoming more and more realistic and showing more than just a few large square pixels on the screen, video games have also become more and more violent appealing to older audiences. One might say that as the first gamers were growing up, the games grew up with them. In order to appeal to the older audiences playing video games, companies started releasing more and more violent games with mature themes.

"Violent video games came of age in the 1990s, with the killing games *Mortal Kombat*, *Street Fighter*, and *Wolfenstein 3D*" according to Craig A. Anderson and Brad J.

Bushman of Iowa State University (354). *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* are part of the fighting genre of video games. These are games in which two combatants duke it out in a one on one sparing match. While *Street Fighter* had more of a cartoony look and no blood and gore, *Mortal Kombat* was known for its exaggerated amount of gore. In *Mortal Kombat* every hit on an opponent created a rushing stream of blood that splattered on the ground and then disappeared. *Wolfenstein* was the first true first person shooter, which many consider the most violent video game genre. In a first person shooter (FPS), the camera acts as what the character in the game actually sees, as if the gamer was actually in the game. In an FPS, frequently the only part of the main character that you can see is his or her hand, and the gun it grasps. *Wolfenstein* featured the main character B.J. Blazkowitz, a one man fighting machine for the allies in World War II. He must infiltrate Castle Wolfenstein, a Nazi base, and take on Hitler himself. Each shot from B.J.'s weapon caused blood, gore, and dead bodies when the player hit their intended target.

Since these games, many more violent video games have sprung up. Most recently is the series *Grand Theft Auto* by Rockstar Games. In this game you play as a gangster who steal cars, takes jobs to transport drugs or even kill certain people, and much more. The range of freedom in this game is what makes it so violent. If the player doesn't want to take on a mission, he or she can simply steal a car and perform mayhem throughout the city, shooting people on the streets, running them over, or even using a flame thrower to catch them on fire. It is games like this that have many worried about the affects of violence on children.

So do violent video games really create violence in the real world? In January

2003, Christian Kwee was shot and killed at an internet cafe after beating a group of other players in the game *Counter-Strike* and boasting about his victory. Also in January 2003, a babysitter tied a six year old boy to a chair, gagged him, and put him in a dark room for playing *Pokémon* on his *Game Boy* at a high volume. A 30 year old man had a seizure and died after playing video games for 8 hours a day, six days a week in February 2002, so his mother files a lawsuit against Nintendo (dontblamegames.com). Just recently, two teenagers took a rifle from a locked room in their home and started randomly shooting at tractor-trailer rigs on the highway just like in *Grand Theft Auto*. They killed two people (msnbc.com).

These are just a few examples of video games being a factor in violent acts in the real world. However, who should be held responsible for this happening? Families of two people who were shot by the two teenagers firing at trucks on the highway are suing Take-Two Interactive Software who developed *Grand Theft Auto*, Rockstar Games who published it, and Wal-Mart for selling it for \$246 million (msnbc.com). But are these companies really to blame?

Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman tells us that "teens in grades 8 through 12 report that 90% of their parents never check the ratings of video games before allowing their purchase, and only 1% of the teens' parents had ever prevented a purchase based on its rating (354)." The violent games that parents should be worried about, including *Grand Theft Auto*, *Counter-Strike*, *Doom*, and *Mortal Kombat*, all have an 'M' rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) and are meant for gamers seventeen and older. It is not the fault of the developer or publisher that younger kids are playing these games than intended, nor is it the fault of the stores who sell it. The fault

should lie in the parents who don't monitor their children's playing habits.

According to the ESRB website, "ESRB independently applies and enforces ratings, advertising guidelines, and online privacy principles adopted by the industry." The group was established in 1994 by the Interactive Digital Software Association. There are five main ratings as part of the ESRB. The lowest rating is Early Childhood (EC), which means a game is suitable for children three and older and have no material that parents would find inappropriate. Everyone (E) is the second lowest rating. Games with an E rating are for children six and older and may contain minimal violence, comic mischief, or mild language. Games meant for gamers aged thirteen and older are rated T for Teen and may contain violent content, mild or strong language, or suggestive themes. The second highest rating is Mature (M). These games are meant for adult audiences seventeen and older, and sexual themes, intense violence, or strong language. The last and highest rating is Adults Only (AO). There are only sixteen games with this rating which is for games that are not suitable for anyone under eighteen years old and contain graphic depictions of sex and violence. Most stores do not sell games with this rating at all (esrb.com).

With the creation of the ESRB, parents have no excuse to not know what the content of a game their child is playing. The rating is found on the front and back of the game's box as well as on the game cartridge or CD itself. Information on the rating system and what all of the ratings mean can be found on the ESRB's website as well as free pamphlets in any video game store.

One of the main opponents of video games made for more mature audiences is Senator Joseph Lieberman who thinks that all violence and gore should be removed from

video games. According to Gregg Keizer in his article *Ratings Systems Can Curb Violence in Video Games* he states that "the senator's missing the point. Computer games and video games are *not* just for kids any more than movies are just for preteens." He goes on to predict that "adults will soon be driving sales" which accurately depicts what is currently happening with today's newer games (94).

It seems that video games are becoming an easy target to blame for lack of proper parenting. A kid borrows his parent's gun, shoots some cars as they pass on the highway, and when realizing he's going to be in big trouble after he's accidentally hurt someone, what's he going to do? Blame video games. It's an easy way out, as soon as the parent finds out that Grand Theft Auto convinced their child to steal a gun and open fire on innocent victims of course they're going to flip and point fingers at the makers of the game. Heaven forbid they take responsibility for letting their children play the game to begin with. Who's gun did they take? Who didn't secure the gun in such a way that their child couldn't get a hold of it to wreck havoc? The parents who rather than display to the world that they aren't doing their job by watching what their kids are doing would point the finger elsewhere creating a media frenzy.

In the article *Video Games Should Be Censored*, Lionel Van Deerlin states that "we feel no hesitancy in going after the marketers of toys which can cut, strangle, or otherwise threaten children physically. Is it not irresponsible to permit the poisoning of young *minds*? (61)" All those "toys" that can "cut, strangle, or otherwise threaten children physically" have warnings on them that children under a certain age shouldn't be using them, just as video games do. And video games aren't causing physical damage to the people who use them, those people are doing it to themselves.

The guy who died from a seizure from playing too many video games could have just as easily done that watching TV, and there are warnings on all games of the possibility of causing seizures. All the other examples were the fault of the people committing them. *Grand Theft Auto* didn't shoot the cars on the highway, the kids who stole their parent's gun did because the parents weren't doing their job. *Counter-Strike* didn't shoot the kid at the internet cafe, his opponents did after being sore losers. *Pokémon* didn't gag the little kid being babysitted, his babysitter did.

So, after all this talk of the bad influences of video games, are there actually beneficial uses for violent games such as *Counter-Strike*? A study by Professor Talmadge Wright concluded that violent online games such as *Counter-Strike* can actually be beneficial rather than harmful. He observed players as they used advanced teamwork, communication, and tactics in order to complete their objectives. The most common emotion he observed? Laughter, as the players joke and applaud one another as they complete objectives (dontblamegames.com).

The Army even uses video game combat simulators in order to save lives. The system is a high-resolution wall-sized screen that depicts various terrain environments and gives trainees the ability to learn about how to react in places such as Afghanistan without being there in the danger of battle. It also allows for soldiers to become more familiar with their weapons and equipment as well as the places they get shipped off to without being in the same dangers (dontblamegames.com).

Even though violent video games may in fact have some harmful affect to children, there are good uses for the same games when used properly. Parents should monitor their children's playing habits and know what each game their kids play is rated.

Video game manufacturers and the stores that sell games are already doing as much as they can to keep these games out of the hands of children, so what is left lies in the parents' hands. Older gamers and the video game industry should not be punished for a parent's inability to monitor their children.

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