

Violent Video Games: The Scapegoat for Aggressive Youth

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**Introduction**

Since the early 90's, when violent video games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993) were released, social panic arose towards finding a correlation between violent video games and aggressive behaviour in youth. While research was growing in this area, it was not until the Columbine school shooting in 1999 that assumptions of youth aggression caused by violent video games received the mainstream attention that it continues to receive today (Garbarino, 1999; Brym, 2008). In a majority of video game studies published in North America (such as Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999), researchers have upheld that video games cause aggressive behaviour in youth. Alternatively, oppositional studies have also been published (such as Kutner & Olson, 2008; Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008; Markey & Markey, 2010; Griffiths, 2002; Cunningham, Engelstätter, Ward, 2011), but have not received the mainstream attention they deserve. Although violent video games are often blamed for the aggressive behaviour of youth in Western society, as it currently stands, there is no proven link between the two (Markey & Markey, 2010; Carey 2013). For the purpose of this research paper, it will be argued that violent video games do not cause aggressive behaviour in youth, but rather, previous dispositions from socialization of the individual, as well as the media's influence on passive members in Western society, shape one's perception to believe that video games cause violence. Moreover, benefits, such as helping increase media literacy, and helping youth position themselves in society, will also be discussed in the context of youth playing video games.

**Socialization of the Individual: The Foundation**

One is not born human, but rather becomes human through social interactions. Socialization refers to the processes that allow individuals to become members of society, develop a sense of self, and learn to interact in social relationships with others (Brym, 2008, p. 52). Socialization is an active process that takes place in all stages of life and occurs in a variety of settings within families, schools, peer groups, mass media, and occupational roles (Brym, 2008, p. 52-54).

The process of becoming socialized occurs in a cultural context, which can vary from one society to another. For example, in the development of a toddler, one can see early aggression with the stage of negativism. During negativism, a child is opposing and stubborn, refuses to cooperate, and breaks social norms (Brym, 2008, p. 53). However, experts insist that negativism is essential towards the development of a child for his/her autonomy (Brym, 2008, p. 53). Given this belief, one can see that aggression already finds origin within a child's upbringing in the home. If aggression is encouraged at a young age, before children are exposed to violent video games, one can infer that aggression is predisposed, and does not arise from playing violent video games.

Moreover, one must account that of the video gamer demographic, youth (18 and younger) make up 18% of the total population (Gallagher, 2010; ESA, 2011). This demographic is small, yet receives the most media and research attention (Gallagher 2010). If violent video games cause aggression in youth, one would assume that juvenile crime rates should be at an all time high, considering that the sale of video games has doubled since 1996 (Corriea, 2013). However, the arrest rate for juvenile crimes has declined by 49.3% since 1994 (FBI, 2008), showing that youth violence has no correlation with violence experienced in video games. Rather, it can be inferred that aggressive behaviour of youth is influenced by socialization in the home, amongst peers, and through the media.

Aggression, like any form of behaviour, is learned through identification with agents of socialization. Aggression, therefore, is the product of socialization, and not the lack of it (Brym, 2008, p. 121). Brym (2008) states:

Youth may become aggressive due to influences such as psychological, social, and culture factors, such as personality, social environment, family situation, and the broader cultural values to which youth are exposed. (p. 121)

Thus, Brym (2008) argues that aggression is not uniform, but rather cumulates over time. In addition, youth socialized in violent environments are the ones who express aggressive behaviour upon playing violent video games. This is not to say that violent video games cause them to behave this way, but rather those who actively seek to play violent video games have more aggressive tendencies, and

therefore play these games to gratify their needs (Brym, 2008; Makuch, 2013).

In addition, studies that attempt to correlate violent video games with aggressive behaviour fail to factor in a child's predisposed violent tendencies, their family environment, and mood problems (Carey, 2013). These studies also fail to recognize that by the end of primary socialization, children have learned to differentiate levels of realism and understand narrative meanings of violence (Brym, 2008, p. 121). It would be an oversight to claim that aggression formulates with playing video games, as aggression is something that inherently occurs through socialization. If a child is exposed to a violent home, they may come to see aggressive behaviour as acceptable for solving problems, which parents might suggest is due to violent video games, and not due to their parenting skills or other agents of socialization (Brym 2008; Gallagher 2010; Carey 2013). In blaming violent video games for causing aggressive behaviour in youth, individuals often forget that society was, and still is very violent.

### **Media Biases: Video Game Violence and Aggression**

There have been numerous studies conducted indicating that violent video games cause children to develop aggressive behaviour. Unfortunately, these studies consume a majority of the news media, therefore paying minimal attention to the studies that find no correlation between violent video games and aggressive behaviour (Brym, 2008, p. 70). For instance, the discussion surrounding possible contributions of video games to the development of positive attitudes, such as altruism or social acceptance, are still neglected (Vorderer & Bryant, 2006, p. 476). Therefore, it is evident that the news media has, and continues, to frame violent video games as causing aggressive behaviour. News media might not change one's point of view over an issue, but it can change an individual's perception of what is important. In this case, people come to believe that studies focused on showing correlations between violence and video games are more important than studies that show no correlation between the two. However, a past study that conducted a meta-analysis determined that there is no relationship between violent video game exposure and aggressive behaviour, therefore proving that past "well

determined” studies do not provide enough concrete evidence to suggest such a claim (Ferguson, 2007, p. 314).

According to a study published in the *New York Times*, it was determined that between “1994 and 2010, the number of violent crimes among youth offenders fell by more than half”, whereas at the same time, the sales of video games doubled since 1996 (Corriea, 2013). This reinforces a negative correlation between purchasing more video games and the decrease in violent crime rates. Therefore, news media and researchers should not be advocating video games as the only risk factor towards aggressive behaviour such as school shootings. In fact, Dr. Craig Anderson from Iowa State University claims that there are many factors that can contribute to aggressive behaviour in youth such as feeling socially isolated or being bullied (Corriea, 2013). These factors reinforce the lack of recognition that mental health issues are receiving. It is apparent that researchers, news media, and politicians do not address mental health issues as the main cause of aggressive behaviour in youth. Therefore, this leaves violent video games as the scapegoat or catchall as the leading cause for aggressive behaviour in youth (Dodge, 2012a).

Despite the lack of evidence linking video games to aggressive behaviour, individuals continue to blame violent video games for events that occur in society. This was exemplified with the case of Adam Lanza, the man responsible for the elementary school shooting at Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut. Instead of blaming the real perpetrator (Lanza), the government blamed violent video games as the major factor that pushed Lanza into killing the schoolchildren in Sandy Hook (Dodge, 2012b). According to Dodge (2013b), critics such as NRA leader Wayne LaPierre and others are ignorant for believing that violent video games are the perpetrators for causing violent behaviour, as opposed to actual human beings. It is evident that based on these misconstrued notions, more research needs to be conducted and displayed publicly to enforce that there is no linkage between violent video games and aggressive behaviour. One can conclude that video games do not kill people, but rather people kill people.

**Benefits of Video Games: Positive Influences and Increasing Literacy**

It is inevitable that news media aims to maximize its audiences by demonizing video games as violent and as the main contributors in negatively influencing youth. This is reinforced within research surrounding this topic, which tends to focus mainly on biases and short-term negative effects of video gaming, while dismissing the possibility that video games may have positive effects on youth. For instance, some studies show that predisposed youth aggression is reduced when these youths play violent video games because these games relieve stress and hostile feelings (Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008). Moreover, a number of educators and researchers have ignored video games for their potential in facilitating learning because they are focused on how video games might facilitate violence and aggression (Squire, n.d., p. 2). On the other hand, some studies have been conducted that showcase the positive aspects of video games and the potential they hold to positively influence children. For example, Squire (n.d.) stated that “video games have the ability to establish models for improving learning environments, providing clear goals, challenging students, allowing for collaboration, using criterion based assessments, and giving students more control over the learning process” (p. 4).

According to Mark Griffiths (2002), video games, whether they do or do not present violence, have the ability to consume the attention of children and the capacity to engage children in learning experiences (p. 47). This is beneficial for children who suffer from severe deficiencies in language and understanding, and for those who have social and emotional difficulties (e.g. children living with autism) (Griffiths, 2002, p. 48). Griffiths takes into account a scenario in which a seven-year-old autistic boy, who suffered from these deficiencies, was able to excel through playing video games because it was determined that these video games can help children with basic skill development through providing them with patterns, speed, and storylines (2002, p. 48). Based on the analysis of video games, Griffiths (2002) also determined therapeutic benefits that coincide with learning and playing videos, which include the following skills: language, math, reading, and social skills (p. 48). Language skills developed as a result of playing video games enabled children to facilitate sharing and

discussion, answering questions, and following directions (Griffiths, 2002, p. 48). The math skills developed as a result of playing video games may not seem beneficial; however, they enable children to learn to interact with the score counters in video games (Griffiths, 2002, p. 48). Lastly, Griffiths also stated the importance of video games and their link to reading and social skills. Reading skills include character dialogue, and can be found on screen or on the remote (e.g. 'play,' 'quit,' 'go'). Moreover, social skills enable children to develop a sense of community with other players who may have an interest in playing video games as well (Griffiths, 2002, p. 48). Inevitably, these skills not only reinforce the positive aspects of playing video games to the development of skills amongst children with special needs, but they also contradict any preconceived biases such as violence and aggression, that are too often associated with children and playing video games.

## **Conclusion**

The debate of whether violent video games do or do not cause aggression in youth will be an argument disputed for many years. Currently, there is a lack of scientific research bridging the two factors and far too many incorrect methodologies are chosen for lab experiments that attempt to prove a link between violent video games and youth aggression. These lab experiments try to study how children play violent video games by placing them in artificial social environments. However, these settings fail to account for other factors that influence youth aggression. Factors such as predisposed aggressive tendencies from socialization of individuals, as well as the media's influence on passive members in Western society, are factors that influence youth to be aggressive, and not violent video games. Moreover, researchers against violent video games tend to overlook the benefits of children playing video games. Rather, video games increase media literacy and help youth position themselves in a very dynamic society. Therefore, it is valid to state that violent video games do not cause youth aggression, but rather, this aggression results from predispositions to seeing and growing up in a violent world.

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