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## TAKE 2 JOYSTICKS AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

Video games: Are they a pariah? A drug? A Panacea? Somewhere in between? It has become popular to blame video games for a lot of problems today. The general assumption is that video games, specifically violent video games are bad, and that they are somehow turning today's youth into violent criminals. In truth, research establishes that there is little if any evidence of a direct nexus between video game playing and violent behavior (Olson, 2004). This is not to say that they are completely innocent either because they are not. Video game playing has been associated with increased aggressiveness in certain "high risk groups" (APA, 2005; Funk, 2003) and reduced pro-social behaviors. This is a very different charge from that which they have been accused because **video games are not creating violent criminals.... what they are doing is acting as a trigger for violence in those with pre-existing violent tendencies.** This article will discuss both sides of the controversy, and will examine some of the psychological processes that may be going on beneath the surface. This article will also discuss the benefits of playing video games and how newer interactive games may serve to neutralize the bad rap that certain games bear today.

### Games as Pariah

Video games have been accused of many bad things. They have been implicated in influencing the thoughts feelings and behaviors of some of our youth. They have been known to affect "high risk" players, those who are especially vulnerable to the negative influence of these games. For them, these games may serve to perpetuate existing problems, create new ones, or fuel existing aggressive fantasies (Funk, 2003).

Investigators have not found any concrete profile of potential attackers, although some have postulated an association with past suicide attempts, suicidal thoughts, depression, male gender, and sexual repression, and anti social parents. (Olson, 2006).

Exposure to video games has been found to increase automatic aggressiveness in the short term, and repeated exposure to violent games has been found to contribute to longer term delinquency (Uhlmann and Swanson, 2004), They have been found to prime aggressive thoughts and feelings which prime aggressive or hostile behavior (APA, 2005). They have been found to create emotional, behavioral and cognitive desensitization which numbs the effects of violence, making aggression more expected and accepted (Anderson, 2003). These games have been noted to increase physiological arousal, increase paranoia, and fears of being victimization. They have been found to cause an epidemic of game addiction with a course similar to other addictions, with preoccupation, intoxication and withdrawal symptoms, rendering potential the need for Video Gamers Anonymous (Schlimme, 2002). They have also been found to teach the value of violence and to teach methods to execute violence as a means to resolve conflicts (APA, 2005). Most games present and teach exaggerated stereotypical gender roles and ethnic minority stereotypes, including sexualized aggression against women. They have also been found to reduce helpful and social behavior in some (APA, 2005;

Uhlmann et al, 2004, Anderson, 2003). Moreover, video games have been blamed for changing the player's environments, such as their types of friends, as well as situations and opportunities made available to them, as well as contributing to social isolation (Anderson, 2003).

Violent video games influence people to the same degree as other media sources. The violence in video games has *not* been found to be more dangerous than violence in other mediums (APA, 2005), although several factors about these games has led some to speculate that they could have more deleterious effects. Electronic games provide direct rewards for aggressive behaviors. The interactive, practice, and repetitive nature of these games make them more conducive to learning aggressive behaviors (APA, 2005). It's like visual courage. Through a process called behavioral modeling (Bandura, 1976) aggression can be learned. They watch, learn and model what they see, and because aggression is rewarded in these games, (73% of crimes go unpunished and 16% suffer financial or psychological penalties for bad behavior) the behavior is really encouraged (APA, 2005).

In these games, the player takes on a much more active and controlling role than in other passive mediums such as television. This allows them to control their own play ground and assume the violent role. According to the General Aggression Model (Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Gill, 2000), when people rehearse violent actions, such as when playing violent games, they are more likely to remember the actions, find them acceptable and of utility, and use them in their interactions with others.

Through a process of social comparison, (Festinger & Schacter, 1962) people consciously learn about their own abilities and attitudes by comparing themselves to similar others or role models. In the absence of any role models, people will compare themselves to almost anyone, or others that they perceive as being high status or attractive. Gamers will tend to consequently compare themselves to the pernicious predator (human or demon) that is handling the situation well and winning the game. This upward comparison may make the player feel discouraged about their own capabilities, desires, and merit, and consequently act as if they were the predator so that the discrepancy between the two is minimal.

Identification with the aggressor follows, and is a well documented defense mechanism (Freud, 1966). It is an unconscious process whereby someone who has been victimized in the past, is motivated to rid themselves of this role and subsequently identifies with, and takes on the role of their aggressor. They achieve this by finding their own victim and watching someone act out that role so they don't have to. In these games, by attacking characters, or killing them off, the player is symbolically attacking or destroying those weaker ego-dystonic parts that they don't like about themselves. They get to disown or project out unwanted aspects of themselves into the characters. They get to trade places, and take on an entirely new identity. It also allows them to project out some personal, social, or family conflict. Moreover, research should look into the role relationships and conflicts in these games to see if these relationships mimic relationships in their real life. It would be important to ascertain who the gamers feel they are when

they are playing these games, as games will allow the player to explore different aspects of the self. With this that they can learn more about how they feel, who they are to the victims, and who the victims are to them. They can also learn about allies in these games and how they feel about them. An interesting question might be to ask gamers if they make a better ally or opponent, and why. Being able to critically evaluate these games is essential and may help to prevent identification with the aggressor (APA, 2005). It will also help to elucidate the differences between fantasy and reality, help to understand how violence is interpreted, and help to understand how different methods of violence and human versus fantasy perpetrators influence differently. Future research should look into the variables that contribute to identification with the aggressor. We already know that rewarded and rationalized violent activities, committed by attractive perpetrators contribute to this process. We need more.

The family system in which these gamers are reared should be explored. Characteristic behaviors, values, boundaries and coping mechanisms are often learned from within the family. Excessive or pathological gaming and aggression may result from a family system in which there is excessive genial meddlesomeness and an inability to deal with conflict. This may support a relationship between excessive game playing and the issue of conflict resolution suggesting that these gamers solve some of their problems maladaptively through these games. These families may devote a lot of energy to not solving conflicts, and the gamer adopts the family's avoidant approach to solving problems. Preoccupation with games may also be adapted to rebel against an over or under controlled family structure, and to deal with feelings of emptiness. In effect, playing these games may become an unhealthy compensation for this void and functions to control emptiness and loneliness, while at the same time being able to assert themselves through aggressive game playing. If this is a form of rebellion, it will be important to look at the factors that cause them to employ this type of rebellion. In a culture that values masculine prowess, playing these games may be seen as representing positive assets such as independence, strength, self-discipline, and intelligence. With this being said, game developers and researchers should look into the markedly disparate sex ratio, hence the disproportionately low representation of female characters in these games and as players.

A different type of identification is evidenced as well. Not only does a gamer psychologically and behaviorally identify with the aggressor, but research evidences that the body and brain do as well. It's as though the brain treats the vivid entertainment violence as something real and the gamer becomes the character on the screen (Atkinson, 2004). Body and soul. It's as if they are of one mind, and their bodies become enmeshed as the physiological and neuro-chemical changes when playing these games mimic real life changes in the body when under attack. They react emotionally to the aggressive actions of the character and their opponent. They are engulfed in empathy and understanding without actually being there (Gouskos, 2006).

Dehumanization of the victim, anonymity of perpetrator and disorientation have also been known to contribute to a sense of aggression, sense of power and dominance (Zimbardo, 2006). Zimbardo stated "instead of changing yourself and becoming the

aggressor, it becomes easier to be hostile against other people by changing your psychological conception of them. You think of them as worthless animals”(Zimbardo, 2006). These forces can be applied to violent video games. In violent games, especially first person shooters like in Doom, (the one most implicated in creating real world violence at Columbine High), the gamer as perpetrator is completely anonymous and out of sight. All we see is the weapon and the rest of him is given to the imagination. Other forms of anonymity prevail as the aggressor is diffused or hidden in standard uniforms, or cars or appearing as fantasy characters such as demons, monsters or aliens. They do not really contain an individual identity. They are diffused into uniformity and a shared destiny. Victims in these games are often dehumanized. Their humanity is regressed Vis a Vis uniforms, being the “bad guy” or “enemy” or being a monster or demon.

Disorientation also applies to these games as their electronic environment is disorientating. Gamers are playing in a rapidly moving and ever altering and simulated world. Its permanence and evidence is lost, as one can close the computer just like a book and it goes away until we pick it up again. The world in these games never stops for anyone. Each player consequently has to reorient themselves to the games changing landscapes, scores, and characters, upon returning after breaking. The importance of anonymity, dehumanization and disorientation are variables that should be investigated and research should look into the effect of increased realism in these games, and how the ability to enter the game as oneself or costumed designed character impacts play and effects.

### Games as Panacea

The distinction between aggression and violence is mandatory here because game violence has been noted to have an effect on subsequent aggression not violence and the two should not be used interchangeably (Olson, 2004). Aggression is more benign, and there are various subtypes (Buchanan Gentile, Nelson, Walsh, & Hensel, 2002). It can involve hurting another physically through bullying, and fighting, but it can also involve other methods such as verbal attacks, and more covert phenomenon such as spreading rumors or isolating others. Violence always involves hurting the physical integrity of another with the intention to harm or kill. Aggression can trigger violence but most children who are aggressive or anti social do not grow up to be violent. Moreover, most violent adolescents were not aggressive as children. (Olson, 2004). A fascinating point is this. As per the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Statistics, FBI Crime report, (Ferris, 2006), as violent game usage increases, violent crimes decreases. As our youth are pretend killing more, they are killing each other less in the real world. But why?

If not catharsis, which has never been substantiated as a factor in reducing aggression or violence, how can we explain for the low crime rate? The answer: Free will. Our youth have choices in responding to situations in their lives, and this is one of them. They can be bombarded with images, become electronic murderers, and so forth. But it really comes down to mental intermediation and what happens when the game is over. Whenever it is clear that the game is over, most well-adopted players should be able to move onto other activities pending the next round of game play.

In addition to the well known benefits of game playing starting as young as early childhood (Li & Atkins, 2004), violent video games come with their own moral and social lessons. They help teach ethics, provide dress rehearsal for future actions and conflict resolution, assist in learning more about themselves from seeing examples of good and bad behaviors. They can provide outlets for accessing dormant strengths. These games provide elements of choice, and responsibility. They also provide a safe outlet to expel anti social fantasies (Olson, 2004). Violent games, particularly first person shooter games also promote feelings of power and dominance (P. Zimbardo, personal communication, March 19, 2006). This can have positive repercussions if it increases assertiveness and self esteem. First person shooter games have also been used to recruit soldiers (AA-America's Army), and train the military, perhaps for these reasons. *Oh, and yes finally, on a lighter note, lets not forget, these games are fun!*

Video games, violent or not, come with many known benefits. Play is healthy-period. These games are challenging, help youth learn new skills, solve puzzles, multitasking, think critically and strategically, increase memory, hone coordination, and reflexes, acquire impulse control, and enhance the ability to pay attention and focus. In school, video gamers were noted to be faster and better performers (Abraham, 2006). Psychologist Ellen Bialystock, a research professor at York University in Toronto Canada noted that video gamers consistently outperformed non-players in a series of tricky mental tests. It is believed that playing these games will induce physiologic and organic changes which slow down the aging process of the brain. People may retain cognitive functioning for longer.

Computers have become the new playground, a place where kids can meet to play, discuss strategies, and competitive rankings etc. They have their own computer community. The development towards multi-player games from single player games is a developmental accomplishment, and a tribute to the gaming industry. The socializing qualities, both on and off screen, can not only reduce violence, but can also potentially undo some of the bad stuff. Unlike single player games which can promote more isolation and depression in some, multi player games bring people together on and off screen. They can provide a sense of emotional attachment, with a sense of belonging, purpose, allegiance, friendship, and community. Players are already making attempts to meet other players near or far, to discuss these games.

### Somewhere in Between

The even newer development of MMORPG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) has usurped the popularity of single player games. These newer multi player games, offer many of the same, and may prove to be more beneficial than their smaller counterparts, but may also come with the potential for problems. The size of these games is overwhelming and intoxicating. The excitement is all encompassing, as these players feel like they are a part of something really bigger than themselves. With this, these players may feel too much emotional contentment and satisfaction with their on line society and consequently deter from quality contact from the outside community. On the contrary, these games can provide an intense sense of belonging and community and reduce isolation and loneliness. This may foster self esteem and stimulate interest in

companionship and trigger the need for the same from the outside community. For some, these on line communities are fake. For others, they are very real, whether they meet or not. It is hoped that these mysterious buddies do not act as a replacement for the real more proximal and palpable friendships and that gamers appreciate the social and human value of gamers and non gamers alike. Future research should look into all of these variables.

British Pediatrician and Psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1990), believed that before a baby learns to separate from their parents, they need a soothing object (such as a blanket or pacifier), to take the place of the unavailable or abandoning parent. This object helps them manage the space between themselves and the parent, which is called “transitional space” (Winnicott 1990). The advent of adolescents marks the second separation and individuation from parents. The computer game may act as the soothing transitional object, comforting and befriending, and allowing for a creative process to deal with some of life’s stressors about separation, adulthood, society, and inadequacies in relationships. It’s like a posy. They don’t have to do it alone. The computer game as transitional object in some cases may serve the purpose to slow down and distance oneself from demands, and to delay growing up. The gamer has effectively prolonged their current position and at the same time gained a rewarding sense of control in a medium where their mastery is uncontested: gaming. In both cases, they may enter the life tasks with increased confidence, self awareness and ability. Future research should look into this.

Future research should also look more deeply into the profile and personality of these “high risk” players. Most importantly, those with a history of violence or susceptibility for violence should be prohibited from playing these games. Ideally violence should be reduced in these games (APA, 2005), and we need to make these perpetrators less heroic. They should pay many consequences for their evil doings and show some much more empathy for the victim. The victim should also show their pain and suffering so as to develop more of a potential for empathy in the perpetrator (APA, 2005). Good guys should be rewarded. They should possess a veneer of coolness and triumph to promote identification. An electronic superman, wonder woman, or a really sensational police officer could be interesting. Future research should also look into how these games are being played, as not everyone plays the same. People use these games differently, and for different reasons. Just because it’s a violent game, doesn’t mean that everyone is guilty of mass destruction. There are soft and hard players. There has been some research into different types of players (Alix, 2005), and research should continue. It would also be interesting to investigate how many players enjoy both violent and non-violent games alike, versus a sole preference for one over the other. The vast popularity of violent games and the popularity of “Sims” make you wonder.

Games should be supervised by parents and there should be a limit on the time spent playing so it does not distract from other constructive activities. Kids need a place to discuss feeling and meaning of games, as adolescents is a time of many changes and they need room to explore thoughts and feelings. Academic institutions and families should

offer outlets for these types of discussions. Parents should find out what their kids would be doing instead if they were not playing games.

We need to find out what is going on in the game for them as the experience is not the same for anyone. Scratch beneath the surface and explore what meaning, if any, these games have for them, and what the characters are all about, and what the make believe murders are all about. We need to find out why these games are so popular.

We have to make nice to the video game industry and put gaming into perspective. Gore laden video games may be dangerous to those that are metaphorically, (or not), already holding a loaded gun. These games for them may have the power to trigger aggression and violence. The games are not the bad guys-but some of these players may have mental health problems that need to be acknowledged. It's important to pay attention to who the player was before the game, and to acknowledge that those with pre-existing aggression to violent tendencies might prefer violent interactive games, as it would be consistent with their behaviors. Most normal players are aware that the game is not real and that they are playing in an unreal world. *Ironically enough, we are talking about preventing deaths, but many feel that if they can't play these games, they would rather die.*

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