**Video Games Do Not Spawn Violence**

As we hear about shooting sprees at local high schools, people immediately begin to lay blame for the event on the video gaming industry. Critics then use these events to raise their voices against the violence that is portrayed in many of the popular video games. Critics proceed to try to ban the sale of these video games without having any real proof of their accusations. Video games do not contribute to youth violence because there is an excellent rating system in place, the simulated violence provides an outlet for aggression, and the research that critics use is just like movies, video games receive a content rating by the ESRB, Entertainment Software Rating Board which is a non-profit entity that regulates the industry that creates and markets video games. Video games receive a rating that suggests age appropriateness for the game and content descriptors which indicate attributes of the game that triggered the rating.

This is an excellent rating system. If video games are correctly identified using this system, and purchasers of the games adhere to the system, then only those people who are mentally mature enough to be exposed to violence without being influenced by it will be exposed to the higher levels of violence. For example, when the game *Mortal Kombat* came out, my teenage brother purchased the game and was playing it while I was watching. When my mother saw the scene where a person in the game fell into a pit and was impaled on spikes with a lot of blood surrounding him, she was upset that I was watching this and felt that I was too young to watch such a scene. I was only 8 years old. So, when she looked at the content rating of the game, she banned the game from being played while any children were able to view the screen. If all parents would pay this much attention to the games their children are playing, then younger, more easily influenced children would not be exposed to violence that their young minds are not able to properly process.

According to an article in Just for Kids medical magazine, pediatric psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Johnson, when young children play the games that are rated for older children they may act out what they see on screen because they have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy. However, when video game users are adhering to the ESRB rating system, then teenagers and young adults can play the video games without being influenced by what is acted out on screen. Teenagers and young adults have the capability to understand that the video game is just a fantasy world and that the behaviors portrayed by the characters in the game are not the same behaviors that should be displayed in the real world. Sometimes, when people get angry they can go play a video game to release their aggression through the fantasy type world and get over their anger without committing violent acts in reality. In a recent article entitled, The Influence of Video Games on Today’s Teens, advocates of video games argued that video games reduce violent and aggressive acts because it allows the user to release the feelings of frustrated through the simulations, therefore helping the user to no longer have the desire to act out in an aggressive or violent manner.

Video game advocates contend that a majority of the research on the topic is deeply flawed and that no causal relationship has been found between video games and social violence. It’s difficult to determine if violent video games increase violent behavior in research settings.

According to clinical psychologist, Laura Swanson, there are too many variables that can skew the outcome of the study results to be able to conduct research on this topic that would render valid or reliable results. Some of the issues that I see are the already existing aggressive tendencies of the research subjects, the current emotional mindset of the subjects, the level of individual interest in the game used in the research study and other life factors that could induce stress.

In one game study conducted by Dr. Richard Little, researchers chose two video games, one with an over 17 rating because of blood, gore and violence and one with an E rating. An E rating is considered safe for everyone, somewhat like a rated G movie is considered safe for general audiences. Each study participant was between the ages of 18-19 and placed inside a room with only a television, video game console and a chair. They played the given game for 2 hours. Before the two hours were up the teenagers playing the E rated game were bored and just wanted their time to be over. They were not interested in the game and considered it an unpleasant experience. The other group of teenagers was excited over the new game because they had just learned the basics of navigating the various levels and had a high interest in the game. The players were given a questionnaire afterwards that asked them if they wanted to strike anyone. Players of the violent game reported that they were excited and in a good mood and none of them reported that they were in an aggressive mood. Several players of the E rated game remarked that they wanted to punch the person who designed the game. Now, we know they really didn’t mean that – but as researchers, the comments had to be recorded. Therefore, this research showed that violence was provoked in the players of the E rated game more than in the players of the more violent game. This is flawed research.

If we look at the music industry, we can see the same controversy. Music albums that have explicit lyrics have a parental warning on the cover. The hostility represented in the lyrics can incite people to violence, especially those on illegal drugs or drinking a lot of alcohol. If you recall the Steven Donaldson murder case, he had read a poem by Donald Stephenson, notice the play on names. Because of the similarities in the names, Steven believed that the poem had been written just for him and was giving him Divine Instructions. Here is a piece of that poem:

*On the outside so beautiful, who could ask for more?* *Your smile so lovely, but rotten at the core. You cheated, you stole, you’re hearts blacker than coal. My love you tossed away, like rubble or trash My heart you broke, shattered like glass. Now murder eats at me, it’s all I have heard Like ants crawling, on the carcass of a dead baby bird.*

Steven Donaldson was chanting these lines as he murdered his ex-girlfriend, her new boyfriend, her sister and her mother. These lyrics had a huge impact on him and he was in his late twenties.

Not everyone has the emotional stability to keep themselves from being influenced by darker subjects. During Donaldson’s trial it was proven that he had a history of mental illness. Should there be a law that mentally ill people can’t listen to certain music or play certain video games? I don’t think that’s the answer either.

In any public setting, you can look around you and watch the interactions of individuals and be witness to various different acts of aggression. You can let your mind wander and try to discern what it was that caused that person to believe that their behavior in that situation was socially acceptable. You might even wonder if they saw that kind of behavior in a movie or perhaps a video game. It’s people who are wondering along these types of thoughts who decide to voice their negative opinions of video games when they have no valid proof on which to make these accusations. If they really stopped to gather the facts they would find that, the United States has an excellent rating system for video games. People should consider these ratings before they allow their children to play these games. People should not jump to conclusions about video games without being able to provide proof. Valid proof however, is not available because the research studies that have been attempted are flawed. If there is no valid proof that video games cause violent behavior then people should not make a rush to judgment about something they don’t really understand. In this country, a person is considered innocent until proven guilty. We need to take this stance on this issue as well. We should believe that video games do not spawn violence in today’s youth. We should believe this until it can be proven otherwise with impeccable research studies.

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According to an article in *Just for Kids* medical magazine, pediatric psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Johnson, “when young children play the games that are rated for older children they may act out what they see on screen because they have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy” (57). However, when video game users are adhering to the ESRB rating system, then teenagers and young adults can play the video games without being influenced by what is acted out on screen. Teenagers and young adults have the capability to understand that the video game is just a fantasy world and that the behaviors portrayed by the characters in the game are not the same behaviors that should be displayed in the real world. Sometimes, when people get angry they can go play a video game to release their aggression through the fantasy type world and get over their anger without committing violent acts in reality. In a recent article entitled, “The Influence of Video Games on Today’s Teens”, advocates of video games argued that “video games reduce violent and aggressive acts because it allows the user to release the feelings of frustration through the simulations, therefore helping the user to no longer have the desire to act out in an aggressive or violent manner” (Roberts 17).

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According to clinical psychologist, Laura Swanson, “there are too many variables that can skew the outcome of the study results to be able to conduct research on this topic that would render valid or reliable results” (46). Some of the issues that I see are the already existing aggressive tendencies of the research subjects, the current emotional mindset of the subjects, the level of individual interest in the game used in the research study and other life factors that could induce stress.

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