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Grand Theft Auto Is Good for You? Not So Fast...

Most evidence suggests ill effects from violent video games

By Dara Greenwood

 If your children are like 99 percent of boys and 94 percent of girls, they play video games. And, if they are like 50 percent of boys and 14 percent of girls, they prefer games with "mature" – read: violent -- themes, such as Grand Theft Auto, an urban dystopia of gun fights, car chases, pole dancers and prostitutes, where blood splatters realistically on the "camera lens." Should you worry whether such a game will warp your children's minds? A new paper by Cheryl Olson, a public health specialist at Harvard, suggests the answer may be: au contraire.

Olson surveyed children's reported motivations for video game playing and found that their top rated choices were to have fun, compete well with others, and to be challenged. She then elaborates on the psychological benefits such play might afford, describing how video games facilitate self-expression, role play, creative problem-solving, cognitive mastery, positive social interactions and leadership. Sounds more utopian than dystopian, right?

If only it were that simple. As laudable as it is to debunk negative stereotypes about non-violent game play, it is less laudable to gloss over the negative effects of violent video games. Olson's rosy spin on violent video games positions her on one side of a heated academic debate with staggering stakes in policy and industry. (See recent salvos here, here and here.)

One contingent warns that violent games reduce empathy and effective anger management skills, and promote aggression. The other contingent rebuts that such research plays into "moral panic," exaggerates the negative impact and ignores the positive effects of violent game play. Given the sheer popularity of violent video games, their psychological impact is an urgent issue for society, and for the millions of parents whose children dive into virtual worlds for hours every day. Let's take a closer look at the research in question.

According to Olson's findings, 28 percent of boys and 5 percent of girls strongly agree that

liking "guns and other weapons" motivates their game play. About 25 percent of boys and 11 percent of girls also strongly agree that video games help "get my anger out." Children citing anger management motivations were more likely to play violent video games because "you can take your anger out on the people in the game." Grand Theft Auto, the most popular of such games, apparently boasts no violence against children or animals (great!) but does provide "tremendous freedom to commit mayhem," Olson writes.

Olson then shifts to the purportedly educational function of violent game play. Particularly jarring is an anecdote she cites describing how Grand Theft Auto hones problem-solving skills: a young boy "learned that a quick way to find passengers was to run over pedestrians and wait for them to get up; they would then climb into his cab."

Also troubling is the speculation that because play-fighting is one way boys negotiate intimacy with girls, violent game play may "have a role in promoting healthy boy-girl friendships." I don't think you have to be a feminist social psychologist to imagine that punching half-dressed prostitutes to steal their money does little to prepare young boys for healthy relationships with women. Even brief exposure to these images increases tolerance for sexual harassment among men, according to a 2008 study led by psychologist Karen Dill of Fielding Graduate University.

To be fair, Olson briefly cites research suggesting that game features such as "opportunities for competence and mastery" trump violence in predicting enjoyment. And she devotes one paragraph to cautioning that such games trade on stereotypes of minorities and women. Finally, in sharp contrast to her thesis, Olson suggests that parents monitor children's game play for "negative effects such as increased anger, irritability, or aggression." Interesting. If the games facilitate healthy development, allow pre-teens to "purge negative feelings" and to inhabit the role of the bad guy while bonding and competing with their peers, why should we worry?

Here's a glimpse at the research that Olson *doesn't* talk about.

The belief that behaving aggressively gets aggressive urges "out" may persist as lay theory but it has long been discredited by experimental research. A 2001 review by social psychologists Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman revealed that playing violent video games increases aggressive behaviors, feelings, and physiological arousal and decreases prosocial behavior. Further, identifying with a game character can inspire learning, but when that character is violent, "wishful identification" may increase post-game aggression, according to a 2007 study led by psychologist Elly Konijn at VU University Amsterdam. Also, a 1995 study by Brad Bushman of Iowa State University suggests that aggressive outcomes of violent game play are magnified in people who already have aggressive tendencies. Thus, it may be exactly those who chronically use video games as an (inappropriate) anger management tool who are most vulnerable to its negative effects.

Olson notes that young adults may benefit from playing survival and horror games "over and over until the frightening content has been mastered," but such mastery may come at a price. Exposure to violent video games can desensitize people to violence. In 2006, Bruce Bartholow, a psychologist at the University of Missouri, and colleagues reported that chronic violent game players show less activation of a particular brain wave in response to violent images than non-

violent players do, indicating that they feel less aversion. And this lower reactivity predicted increased aggressive behavior in a subsequent competitive task.

Brain waves and lab games can feel distant from real life, so let's follow Brad Bushman and Craig Anderson to the movies. They wanted to determine whether people leaving a violent film might be less likely to help a young woman who had dropped her crutches (a confederate of the researchers) than those leaving a non-violent film. Guess which crowd took significantly longer to help the "injured" young woman? Yup: the violent film crowd.

Are patrons of violent films simply less sensitive than patrons of non-violent films? Bushman and Anderson accounted for this explanation by staging the crutch routine as people were entering and exiting the film. No differences emerged as a function of which movie people were headed to see. Watching violence dilutes our ability to respond empathically to others' pain.

No media psychologists worth their salt would conclude that violent video games will turn your children into gun-toting sociopaths. Instead, violent media may affect us in countless subtle ways, increasing hostility and apathy to those around us. Rather than straining to rehabilitate an antisocial genre, why not go in search of non-violent but equally exciting, challenging, and enjoyable games? Let the multi-billion dollar gaming industry respond to social pressure and create non-sexist, non-racist, non-violent games that confer as many developmental benefits as violent games apparently do.

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