

Playing violent video games: Good or bad?

There's no debate: The moral effects of videogames are evident

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The Supreme Court is weighing arguments for and against a California law banning the sale of violent video games to minors. The dispute is over whether it is a violation of free speech to ban them. But the issue is really about public health--the health of those who play and the health of everyone they encounter.

Certainly it is good for children to play--in fact, kids are not getting enough free play today, leading to high rates of ADHD and diminished social capacities. Kids learn many things through play, especially friendly rough-and-tumble play which helps the brain develop in multiple ways including building social competence.

Some people argue that activities like videogame play that on face value seem to be bad for you are really good for you. Steven Johnson points out how much more complex popular culture is today than in the past, including the complexity of videogames (compare PacMan with Sims games). He argues that the increased complexity promotes intelligence. For example, when you play a videogame, it is often a frustrating learning experience that requires you to repeatedly problem solve to learn the game. In fact, James Paul Gee suggests that you even learn "the scientific method" through the necessary trial and error of figuring out how to meet goals in the game.

According to these criteria, playing constructive and prosocial games like Sims can be "good for you" with at least one caveat---as long as you have a balanced life with real-life face-to-face friendships and enjoyment in socializing. Why worry about the latter? Because playing videogames typically keeps active primitive parts of the brain that are not social nor cognitively sophisticated. So you need to balance videogame play time with experiences that use these parts of the brain. Or you can develop a "game brain."

Okay, so that was the good news. Now, the bad news.

Playing violent video games is different from playing positive, constructive games. In fact, violent videogames have an even more powerful influence than violent television and movies, whose detrimental effects have been documented for decades. While violent videogames may promote some complex problem solving and coordination skills as well, they have multiple negative effects. Here are three related to moral functioning.

First, in violent video game play the player learns to associate violence with pleasure (rewards for hurting another character). This undermines moral sensitivity. Under normal conditions, human emotional wiring is designed to abhor violence and feel rewarded for helping others. Those who play violent video games build opposite intuitions that they take into the rest of life (I can see the effects in our society, can you?). Which intuitions would you rather your child have?

Second, children practice over and over the actions available in a game. The player practices violent behavior hundreds if not thousands of times, much more practice than normal activities receive. Whatever a person practices repeatedly becomes an automatic response. Violent games teach children how to behave like a criminal and to intentionally hurt others (e.g., burning people alive in Postal2). Is this what you want your children to be practicing for hours on end?

Third, video games can be addictive because they give immediate rewards for learning. Child and adolescent brains are typically susceptible to addictions as their brains are under development till the middle 20s. Recent brain research is suggesting that any addictive behavior (drugs, alcohol, pornography, gambling, violence) can harm the final stages of brain development in young adults, leaving them with a less than mature decision making system and diminished empathy for others. Is this what we want to encourage?

So, less empathy, pleasure in the pain of others, well practiced criminal behavior, decreased capacity for mature decision making. These are just a few of the potential side effects of violent videogame play. This kind of moral character is far from the character of our foraging ancestors who were presumably avoidant of violence, cooperative and intelligent.

The evidence is conclusive for the negative effects of violent video games. Craig Anderson and colleagues have been studying violent media for decades. They and others have found short and long term negative effects of watching or playing violent media that include increased aggressive thoughts, feelings and behavior, and decreased prosocial behavior.

Neuroscientific studies show reduced cognitive brain functions in individuals exposed to violent media. The greater the experience with violent media, the lower was the activation of brain areas for thinking, learning, reasoning and emotional control. Talk about dumbing down the kids!

In my view, violent media should be considered a health risk as great as tobacco use (actually, the effects are stronger for violent media). And society should have a say about the availability of violent media. It is unfair to put the policing of media products onto the backs of parents when there are so many human-caused toxic elements to monitor in a child's life today (food, air, water, soil, toys, personal products) and parents do not receive the information they need to help make decisions. Parents could spend 24/7 being body guards of their children's every move because of the endless onslaught of harmful products and media.

Instead, let's give parents some help and socially control the purveyance of violent media. This will not only protect minors but protect ourselves. The public health risks are too great to do otherwise. I'd rather have neighbors who have empathy and full decision making capabilities, wouldn't you?