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Virtual Violence, Real Misconceptions

Since the first violent video game "Death Race" was released in 1976, the debate about whether or not playing video games increases the likelihood of real-world violence has been a controversial topic. Beginning around that time, concerns have been raised about how violence portrayed in video games affects its players, and this continues to be a concern today. There have been countless studies and experiments to try to test the theory, and while some earlier ones have found a correlation, recent studies have found overwhelming evidence that violent video games do not cause real-world aggression. While some critics argue that the portrayal of violence in video games contributes to aggression in players, recent psychological studies have found that gaming does not increase aggressive behavior and instead serves as a healthy outlet for negative emotions, offering players emotional, social, and cognitive benefits.

One of the first times this concern was raised in the media about the correlation between video games and violence was by the United States General Surgeon, Dr. C. Everett Koop. In an article posted in *The Times* in 1982, Dr. Koop expressed his growing concerns about young people and their mental health, stating his worries about the youth of America growing addicted to video games and how that would affect them. However, this article explicitly states that no scientific evidence has been found to support Dr. Koop's theory. This was one of many underdeveloped ideas in the new field of psychology in the late 70s and early 80s. Like Dr. Koop, people had concerns about new technology and what will happen to young people if they

continue to use them. This debate did not stop after that *Times* article and continues to be a controversial topic to this day that many psychologists, parents, critics, etc. have struggled to find an answer for.

Despite older studies that may have found a correlation between violent video games and an increased aggression in players, the focus should primarily be on recent studies that use newer information, data, and technology to find the most accurate answers. Today, psychological and technological developments have improved immensely and have allowed for more controlled and evidence-based studies to be conducted on the topic. Now more than ever, with a stream of gun violence on news headlines across the country, this debate needs to be put to rest so the real cause of violence can be identified and prevented. The most recent studies find that not only do video games not increase aggression in players, but actually allow for a healthy outlet of negative emotions to cope with negative feelings, as well as benefiting players cognitively and socially.

In 2023, The Stanford Brainstorm Lab, which according to their website, remains "the world's first academic lab dedicated to mental health innovation through active collaboration with tech companies, leaders, and nonprofit organizations," conducted a study on this topic (Stanford Medicine). They "spent months reviewing 82 medical research articles that encompass all the reputed literature and scholarship in the field for any studies with any sort of causal link between playing video games and violent behavior," and ultimately found no correlation between violence and video games (Future). The study defined violence as *any* physical act of aggression, as well, which could mean simply pushing someone to far more violent acts, so it was all-encompassing for a broad category of possible physical acts. The researchers "actually noted a *decrease* in violent crime following the release of popular, violent video games and went on to hypothesize that video games may serve as an outlet for violent tendencies rather than a

catalyst," (Future). However, this remains just a theory based on their evidence so far and the researchers have yet to look further into this hypothesis. In short, one of the most reputable schools of medicine in the nation concluded that playing video games and real-world violence do not have a correlation, which makes many inclined to re-think their stance on this decades-old debate.

A similar study was published in *Royal Society Open Science* and the *National Library of Medicine* and the *University of Oxford* in 2019. All of these publications have been highly reputable foundations and universally trusted sources for decades. The NIH, for example, gets their sponsorship from the federal government and authenticates everything they publish by heavily reviewing it. This study used a large sample of British adolescents who played violent video games, and then evaluated their aggressive behavior for the next month. In the end, they concluded that "there was no evidence for a critical tipping point relating violent game engagement to aggressive behavior," (Przybylski, Weinstein). While compelling, it would be more interesting to see this same study conducted with a larger population and over a longer period of time. However, based on the evidence found here, readers can reasonably conclude that a larger experiment of the same kind would yield similar results.

Essentially, modern studies have shown that the claim that video games cause players to be more violent has no grounding in scientific and psychological studies. Furthermore, studies speculating on different theories for why video games can actually be beneficial instead of harmful can be found in recent years. For example, many scientists theorize that video games have actually caused a decrease in violence based on the Great American Crime Drop and catharsis theory, arguing that the video games provide an emotional release that decreases their

violence and outlets it into a healthy coping mechanism. Additionally, gaming can foster a healthy social life online and increase cognitive function in young adults.

First and foremost, the Great American Crime Drop has been questioned and theorized over by criminologists for years. Many people believe the United States has been experiencing more crime than ever before because of ongoing news coverage, but statistically, the United States has never seen a decrease in crime like the one experienced from the early nineties to today. It appears like more violent crime occurs due to the massive amounts of news coverage Americans see on a daily basis, but crime has declined immensely since the early 1990s. Professor of Law at University of California in Berkeley, Franklin E. Zimring, who later won the Stockholm Prize in criminology in 2021, describes the Great American Crime Drop in his book *The Great American Crime Decline.* He explains that since the early nineties, "relatively superficial changes in the character of urban life can be associated with up to 75% drops in the crime rate" and attempts to understand the cause, like so many other criminologists (Zimring). One of his theories involves how life for Americans changed with new technology. Instead of going out and getting involved in real crime, adolescents played video games and got involved in virtual crime. This theory has been speculated over, and many scholars believe it to be a number of lifestyle factors that led to the Crime Drop, like technological advances, improved finances, and better access to healthcare and housing, Scholars often cite the rise of video games, however, as one of the reasons America experienced a decline in crime in the early nineties and continues to maintain said decline today.

Psychologists believe video games can prevent crime for a number of reasons, one of which being the catharsis theory. Kendra Cherry, a psychosocial rehabilitation specialist who wrote the *Everything Psychology Book*, defines the catharsis theory as a psychoanalytic theory

that can bring “a powerful emotional release that, when successful, is accompanied by cognitive insight and positive change,” (Cherry). Essentially, the catharsis theory discusses healthy coping mechanisms to deal with everyday stress. Video games can be considered a healthy outlet, or catharsis.

In recent years, rage rooms have become a popular catharsis activity. People will pay to break random objects with weapons in a room to experience this catharsis effect. However, psychologists do not think it proves to be a productive way to manage stress. Dr. Elizabeth Scott, a writer and psychologist, wrote an article discussing the potentially harmful effects of rage rooms. She argues that researchers have found that while rage rooms might allow people to feel temporary relief from stress, they can actually foster bad habits. Scott explains, “studies have found that physical outbursts of aggression teach your body to respond to feelings of stress, anger, and frustration with violence,” meaning if someone continuously responds to emotions with physical violence, like in a rage room, that will become the body’s go-to response, even outside of a controlled environment (Scott). The emotional release becomes associated with the physical act of violence, and this association can lead to violent outbursts becoming someone’s norm. Scott’s analysis can be applied to the catharsis found in video games. Feelings of stress, anger, negativity, etc. can be released through video games as a healthy coping mechanism without teaching the physical body violence. Because players do not physically conduct violence themselves, but rather play a video game using a controller or a mouse or a keypad, this will not teach the physical body to become violent in response to emotions. It teaches the physical body to respond to stress not by being violent, but by playing a video game.

Essentially, playing video games can serve as a healthy coping mechanism. Not only can video games take someone’s mind off of everyday stress, but evidence shows how video games

can increase cognitive function. A study published in “Behavioral Sciences” tested to see how video games affect cognitive function. The study’s findings “indicate that higher levels of video gaming proficiency are linked to improvements in visuospatial short-term and working memory, psychomotor speed, and attention,” and that other aspects were found, too, depending on the genre of the game (Zioga, et al). Action-packed video games, for example, were found to enhance attention and psychomotor speed. Additionally, video games have been helpful for training in certain fields to help decrease errors due to the cognitive functions it can provide. Surgeon training, for example, often includes encouragement to play video games after a study found that “training curricula that include video games may help thin the technical interface between surgeons and screen-mediated applications, such as laparoscopic surgery” and “video games may be a practical teaching tool to help train surgeons” (Rosser). Many other studies, too, have found evidence to support the conclusion that video games not only remain unharmful, but can actually be beneficial to cognitive training.

While new scientific evidence supports the idea that video games do not cause violence, some older studies do exist that have found a correlation between aggression and video games. However, one of the most important and universal rules in the field of psychology, says that correlation does not equal causation. Two closely related things do not signify a causal relationship. Furthermore, aggressive people might seek out video games because they have a preceding interest in violence, which can often be dismissed in these studies. There could be a correlation between video games and aggression due to violent people being interested in playing violent games, but this does not mean video games have made them violent or that everyone who plays video games commits acts of aggression.

In the eighties, Americans saw the rise of a conspiracy called “Satanic Panic,” which depicts the idea of correlation not equaling causation. It involved widespread concern for young people being involved in Satanic worship, and the idea was cast on media outlets across the nation. Many people began attacking certain ideas that could be associated with Satanism, like heavy metal music. Certain criminal cases were tainted from this conspiracy, like the West Memphis Three, a case involving three teenage boys who were wrongfully convicted for the triple murder of some young boys in a small town in Arkansas. They were convicted because they often wore black clothing and listened to heavy metal music, and during the time, “Satanic Panic” was all over the news. The police officers associated the three teenage boys with Satanism and decided they must have committed the crime. The West Memphis Three remains a prime example of how correlation does not equal causation. The three teenagers did listen to heavy metal music and wore dark clothing, and one of them was even interested in learning about the occult, but that does not make them Satanic murderers, even if all Satanic murderers listen to heavy metal music and wear black, too.

Just like “Satanic Panic,” even if every single person convicted of gun crimes plays violent video games, that does not mean that every single person that plays violent video games risks becoming a violent offender. The violent offenders likely became attracted to these video games because they already had a preceding interest in violence, not the other way around. An article published in an academic journal actually tested the hypothesis of whether or not everyday sadists find themselves particularly attracted to violent video games. The study found that overall “everyday sadists specifically like to play violent video games and suggest that this tendency is adaptive in that they emotionally benefit from playing violent video games,” (Greitemeyer, et al). This means that there certainly could be a correlation between video games

and susceptibility to commit violence, but not that video games cause the acts of violence to be committed.

Additionally, gun violence can be commonly attributed to a number of factors, none of which mention video games. Many criminologists theorize that gun violence most often may be caused by psychological and environmental factors. While science has not found an exact cause that predetermines violence, many valid theories exist on the subject. The *American Psychological Association* released a report stating developmental issues, like familial problems, economic problems, early-onset aggression (between the ages of seven to eleven specifically), influences from family or peers, as well as mental health issues have been common antecedents to gun violence and argued that community-level organizations can prevent it if recognized and caught at a young age (APA). Psychological studies, especially for gun violence, continue to be developed today and researchers have a lot of questions without solid answers yet. However, the current studies, like the one from the *American Psychological Association*, has a reputation for being a reliable, scholarly, peer-reviewed journal that can be trusted as an accurate source for past and present information and research.

Another argument against video games involves the idea that gaming leads players to lack social skills. However, most video games involve playing with others. Often, players will wear headsets to communicate with people from all over the world, which can lead to cooperation and communication skills as a result of working together on a mission in a game. This shows how spent playing video games can be productive, social time that builds community and relationships with others.

Another interesting study published in the *American Psychological Association* tested whether or not people who spend a significant amount of time online spread more hate on the

internet. The article says, “counter to expectations, the use of first-person shooter games actually decreased the likelihood of producing hate material online,” and that “this could suggest that violent video games serve as an outlet for aggression, and not a precursor,” (Costello, Hawdon). This study was very interesting because it ended up finding that people who spent less time online were more likely to spread hate on the internet as opposed to people who spent more time online. This was due to the communities people often formed online. Video games, while not in person, allow players to connect with others and build teamwork skills. Often very complex and strategical, they require a lot of foresight into what plans to take, etc. Working with others on a team can be incredibly beneficial, and it can build someone’s social network, even virtually.

However, a balance must be maintained with online gaming. Playing video games first thing in the morning until going to sleep at night, then waking up and repeating that cycle every day does not make for a mental wellbeing. The same would be true for many cases, like watching movies and television, playing board games, etc. Generally, when someone dedicates all of their time towards something that does not contribute to their overall life, like family or work, it can be harmful. Even work at times can become addictive and there must be a balance to maintain before it turns into an unhealthy habit that hinders social, mental, and physical wellbeing.

One of the last refutation theories that holds weight involves the desensitization of players towards violence. The portrayal of violence in video games can connect with decreased empathy and desensitization. Some studies, like the study published in “Behavioral Sciences” that tested to see how video games affect cognitive function, while finding that video games can be a healthy coping mechanism and do not lead to violent outbursts, did find that certain video games “were negatively associated with empathy,” (Zioga). This proves to be a valid concern.

However, news articles, social media, violent movies, violent music, etc. all has the power to desensitize people to violence. The bigger concern with viewing violence comes with a sense of learned helplessness, which involves people becoming so desensitized that they feel helpless and out of control. Arguably, video games work against this. While they do portray violence, the players control the game. Learned helplessness does not happen in video games because gaming involves levels that can be beat with the right motivation. Video gaming does not get out of the player's hands, like how news, movies, television, etc. can. The style of video games should be considered, as well. Video games appear animated after being graphically designed. Seeing animated violence differs immensely from seeing real violence which can cause real trauma for people.

In conclusion, there will probably not be a time when video games that portray violence do not cause controversy. However, based on scientific evidence, parents, teachers, guardians, etc. can safely conclude that video games do not put players at risk of becoming violent people in real life. The evidence suggests that perhaps video games can even benefit the human mind by improving cognitive function, teaching cooperation and social skills, and becoming a healthy coping mechanism. While concerns have been discussed about desensitization and antisocial behavior, these claims prove to be unfounded and unsupported by scientific research and reasoning. Video games, while sometimes portraying violence, do not make people violent. Now, society can put this decades-old argument to rest and focus on preventing violent crimes, starting by finding out the real cause of it.

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