

Evil or Benign? Video Games Need Parental Monitoring

With a game controller in his hand, Johnny is blasting away at his opponent in *Call of Duty*, an intense video war game. Just as in other popular action video games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Halo* and *Grand Theft Auto*, it's kill or be killed.

Without question, shoot-'em-up video games have caught the attention of today's youth. But the real question is not whether kids—especially boys—are playing. It's how do these violent video games affect how Johnny views himself and his world? Is Johnny, after shooting his way out of trouble in *Halo*, more likely to act out in frustration at school, punching someone in the hall when angered?

"The jury is still out," says Peg Achterman, communications professor at Northwest University (Assemblies of God) in Kirkland, Wash. "I grew up watching Road Runner, who dropped things on Wile E. Coyote's head all the time. Did it desensitize me? It's hard to say."

The concern isn't just whether someone is more likely to punch someone else, mimicking the violence of the video games.

"It's more whether or not your empathy is controlled," Achterman says.

Achterman argues that a person's ability to feel compassion is undermined by playing **violent video games**, where death is treated in such a casual manner as players rack up points for kills. There's concern that casual treatment of violence could desensitize people to real-life violence.

But Richard H. Clark, who plays, reviews and blogs about video games on a Christian website, doesn't think playing violent video games turns people into killers.

"It's possible to play almost anything and it not affect you as long as you are aware, vigilant and sober about what it is that you're playing," Clark says. He argues that kids playing the games are able to separate reality from fantasy.

"They see it almost as a sport," says Clark, who writes for the website .

Still, many people worry about a game's consequences.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, in testimony before Congress, concluded that exposure to **media violence** likely leads to viewing violence as a valid solution for a dispute. The organization also noted pretend violence leads to having a toned-down response to real-life violence, to seeing the world as a dangerous place, and to being more apt to engage in violence.

Clark concedes playing a violent video game such as *World of Warcraft*, where there's lots of role-playing is different. A gamer isn't just passively watching.

"With a video game, you are interacting with it," Clark says. "That fact does change the impact it has."

Nevertheless, video games have not led to an epidemic of **youth violence**. The rate of juvenile crime in the United States is at a 30-year low. It's true that youths who have committed school shootings, big-profile events that have drawn national attention, have been video game players. But 90 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls play video games today.

According to a U.S. Surgeon General's report, the strongest risk factors for youths committing school shootings is related to mental stability and quality of home life, not exposure to video games.

Violence isn't the only concern. Japanese versions of violent video games have a reputation for being more sexual. Team

Ninja, a Japanese video game producer, has made women characters in *Dead or Alive* suggestively full-figured, purported to meet the requests of players.

Stacy Lynn Harp, who has a master's degree in psychology and is co-creator of Active Christian Media website, says games can promote the message of devaluing women—and girls.

"There are games where women are attacked," Harp says. "That can lead to violence against women."

Clark also sees a risk of gamers developing a twisted viewpoint about women by playing certain titles.

"The risks of males playing those kinds of games are that they see females as sex objects," Clark says. "That's a huge risk—viewing women as just to be used."

Experts agree parents play an important role in monitoring video games played by their children. Parents should screen the games, ensuring they are age appropriate (all games are rated). Parents also should further regulate usage by putting time limits on game playing.

Clark says parents can err in policing games by being too strict or too lenient. In their attempt to protect, parents can view video games as problematic and ban them completely. On the other hand, parents can place no restrictions on game usage and allow video games to become, in effect, a babysitter.

"Playing video games can be a valuable way of spending your time, depending on the game and person, especially if games are played with someone else," Clark says.

But there's another dark side to violent video games.

"They can be addictive," Harp says. As a former elementary schoolteacher, Harp saw how her students could be drawn to the games, especially *World of Warcraft*.

“The kids I talked to would spend eight to 10 hours a day playing if they could,” Harp says. “Kids would say that in *World of Warcraft* they just had to get to the next level. They were obsessed with that.”

Instead of doing homework or playing outside with friends, a youth ends up in front of the computer screen, playing a video game.

Harp says that compulsion can be broken if the child is kept off the game for a couple of days and engages in other activities.

The idea of a dad sitting next to his son playing a video game can be a good idea, leading to some good-natured bonding. Harp says that’s fine—as long as the dad isn’t obsessed with playing.

“They have to be a good example,” she says.

Harp has another suggestion.

“It would be cool if children and parents transitioned to board games, like *Life*, or *Chutes and Ladders*, or *Candyland*.”

In those traditional board games, there’s more communication and face-to-face time, opposed to screen-to-face time.

Ultimately, parents have the opportunity to have great input into shaping the behavior of their children.

“But if your babysitter is a machine, especially in your children’s formative years, then they’re going to be a lot like that machine,” Harp warns.

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