The young men who opened fire at Columbine High School, at the movie theater in Aurora, Colo., and in other massacres had this in common: they were video gamers who seemed to be acting out some dark digital fantasy. It was as if all that exposure to computerized violence gave them the idea to go on a rampage — or at least fueled their urges.

But did it really?

Social scientists have been studying and debating the effects of media violence on behavior since the 1950s, and video games in particular since the 1980s. The issue is especially relevant today, because the games are more realistic and bloodier than ever, and because most American boys play them at some point. Girls play at lower rates and are significantly less likely to play violent games.

A burst of new research has begun to clarify what can and cannot be said about the effects of violent gaming. Playing the games can and does stir hostile urges and mildly aggressive behavior in the short term. Moreover, youngsters who develop a gaming habit can become slightly more aggressive — as measured by clashes with peers, for instance — at least over a period of a year or two.

Yet it is not at all clear whether, over longer periods, such a habit increases the likelihood that a person will commit a violent crime, like murder, rape, or assault, much less a Newtown-like massacre. (Such calculated rampages are too rare to study in any rigorous way, researchers agree.)

“I don’t know that a psychological study can ever answer that question definitively,” said Michael R. Ward, an economist at the University of Texas, Arlington. “We are left to glean what we can from the data and research on video game use that we have.”

The research falls into three categories: short-term laboratory experiments; longer-term studies, often based in schools; and correlation studies — between playing time and aggression, for instance, or between video game sales and trends in violent crime.

Shooting in the Dark
By BENEDICT CAREY
Lab experiments confirm what any gamer knows in his gut: playing games like “Call of Duty,” “Killzone 3” or “Battlefield 3” stirs the blood. In one recent study, Christopher Barlett, a psychologist at Iowa State University, led a research team that had 47 undergraduates play “Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance” for 15 minutes. Afterward, the team took various measures of arousal, both physical and psychological. It also tested whether the students would behave more aggressively, by having them dole out hot sauce to a fellow student who, they were told, did not like spicy food but had to swallow the sauce.

Sure enough, compared with a group who had played a nonviolent video game, those who had been engaged in “Mortal Kombat” were more aggressive across the board. They gave their fellow students significantly bigger portions of the hot sauce.

Many similar studies have found the same thing: A dose of violent gaming makes people act a little more rudely than they would otherwise, at least for a few minutes after playing.

It is far harder to determine whether cumulative exposure leads to real-world hostility over the long term. Some studies in schools have found that over time digital warriors get into increasing numbers of scrapes with peers — fights in the schoolyard, for example. In a report published last summer, psychologists at Brock University in Ontario found that longer periods of violent video game playing among high school students predicted a slightly higher number of such incidents over time.

“None of these extreme acts, like a school shooting, occurs because of only one risk factor; there are many factors, including feeling socially isolated, being bullied, and so on,” said Craig A. Anderson, a psychologist at Iowa State University. “But if you look at the literature, I think it’s clear that violent media is one factor; it’s not the largest factor, but it’s also not the smallest.”

Most researchers in the field agree with Dr. Anderson, but not all of them. Some studies done in schools or elsewhere have found that it is aggressive children who are the most likely to be drawn to violent video games in the first place; they are self-selected to be in more schoolyard conflicts. And some studies are not able to control for outside factors, like family situation or mood problems.

“This is a pool of research that, so far, has not been very well done,” said Christopher J. Ferguson, associate professor of psychology and criminal justice at Texas A&M International University and a critic of the field whose own research has found no link. “I look at it and I can’t say what it means.”

Neither Dr. Ferguson, nor others interviewed in this article, receive money from the gaming industry.

Many psychologists argue that violent video games “socialize” children over time, prompting them to imitate the behavior of the game’s characters, the cartoonish machismo, the hair-trigger rage, the dismissive brutality. Children
also imitate flesh and blood people in their lives, of course — parents, friends, teachers, siblings — and one question that researchers have not yet answered is when, exactly, a habit is so consuming that its influence trumps the socializing effects of other major figures in a child’s life.

That is, what constitutes a bad habit? In surveys about 80 percent of high school-age boys say they play video games, most of which are thought to be violent, and perhaps a third to a half of those players have had a habit of 10 hours a week or more.

The proliferation of violent video games has not coincided with spikes in youth violent crime. The number of violent youth offenders fell by more than half between 1994 and 2010, to 224 per 100,000 population, according to government statistics, while video game sales have more than doubled since 1996.

In a working paper now available online, Dr. Ward and two colleagues examined week-by-week sales data for violent video games, across a wide range of communities. Violence rates are seasonal, generally higher in summer than in winter; so are video game sales, which peak during the holidays. The researchers controlled for those trends and analyzed crime rates in the month or so after surges in sales, in communities with a high concentrations of young people, like college towns.

“We found that higher rates of violent video game sales related to a decrease in crimes, and especially violent crimes,” said Dr. Ward, whose co-authors were A. Scott Cunningham of Baylor University and Benjamin Engelstätter of the Center for European Economic Research in Mannheim, Germany.

No one knows for sure what these findings mean. It may be that playing video games for hours every day keeps people off the streets who would otherwise be getting into trouble. It could be that the games provide “an outlet” that satisfies violent urges in some players — a theory that many psychologists dismiss but that many players believe.

Or the two trends may be entirely unrelated.

“At the very least, parents should be aware of what’s in the games their kids are playing,” Dr. Anderson said, “and think of it from a socialization point of view: what kind of values, behavioral skills, and social scripts is the child learning?"

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/science/studying-the-effects-of-playing-violent-video-games.html?_r=0
Can Video Games Cause Violence?

What does a recent Supreme Court ruling mean for psychological research?
Published on April 1, 2013 by Romeo Vitelli, Ph.D. in Media Spotlight

When the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a decision on the Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association case on June 27, 2011, that ruling not only established that video games were covered under the First Amendment but that video game content could not be regulated by governments. Part of the reason for the court ruling was that psychological research linking violent games and violence was "unpersuasive". Though psychological research is often used in the courtroom in issues relating to child safety, the lack of consistent findings connecting video games to violent behaviour in children helped sway the court against regulation.

Moral panics over the potentially damaging effects of media violence on children are hardly new. Along with Frederic Wertham's crusade against comic books during the 1950s, similar concerns have been raised over violence in movies, television, and the Internet though the link between media violence and violent behaviour in children has never been reliably demonstrated.

Beginning in 1983 when U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop implicated violent video games as a leading cause of family violence, news stories about video games such as Death Race (allowing players to run over "gremlins") and Custer's Revenge (with a naked Custer avoiding arrows to have sex with a Native American woman) have helped reinforce the idea that graphic violence in video games was potentially harmful. In 1994, the video game industry established the Educational Software Rating Board (ESRB) as a voluntary system where video games could be rated according to violence or other inappropriate material. Rating video games according to age-appropriate categories was intended to prevent underage children from playing games considered too intense for them.

But the controversy was hardly settled. After the Columbine high school massacre in 1999, family members of the shooting victims sued 25 video game companies which they blamed for the deaths. In particular, the game Doom came under intense scrutiny over reports that the Columbine shooters may have been influenced by the spectacle of shooting various targets to accumulate points.

Influenced by the massacre and the question of whether media violence may have been a cause, Senate Committee Commerce hearings were held in 2000. During the hearings, Senator Joe Lieberman (whose campaigning against video games helped create the ESRB rating system) raised the apparent connection between video games and violence and even suggested that media violence could turn children into killers. In condemning the ESRB system, Senator John McCain suggested that the rating scheme was "nothing but a smoke screen to provide cover for immoral and unconscionable business practices."

At the same time, there was a sharp rise in research studies examining the link between child violence and video games though the results were rarely consistent. In an excellent overview of video game studies recently published in American Psychologist, author Christopher J. Ferguson of Texas A&M International University pointed out that many scholars working in the area of child violence added to the moral panic with studies that were often flawed. While psychological studies designed to correct for these problems continued to show a link, other studies turned up no relationship at all between video game violence and antisocial behaviour in children. The debate over video games has led to a serious split between different groups of researchers which was as much about politics as research findings.

Along with handing down a decision on video games and the First Amendment, the Supreme Court has taken a hard stand on the credibility of psychological research in general. Part of the problem seems to come from the lack of real consensus among researchers and the heated arguments they tend to make defending their own view on whether video games led to violence. In his review, Christopher J. Ferguson pointed out some of the main problems that helped influence the Supreme Court decision. These include:

- Lack of real agreement over whether a consistent relationship between video game violence and real-life violence
- Problems over how aggression is actually measured. Since there are no commonly accepted tests of aggression, researchers often use laboratory measures that may not be valid or reliable enough to test the link between media violence and aggressive behaviour.
- The possibility of publication bias. Usually studies with positive results get published in professional journals while negative findings often go unpublished. Many researchers tend to ignore studies that disprove their own research which can slant their own conclusions over whether a link exists.
- The problem of small effect sizes. How large a correlation does there need to be between video game violence and real life aggression? Almost all meta-analyses agree on a correlation of about 0.15 which, while significant, is really not that large. Researchers also debate whether an effect size that small is enough to rein in the entire video game industry as a result.
Whatever the status of the research so far, the only clear outcome is that the divide between pro- and anti-video game activists seems as wide as ever and both sides are citing research to support their arguments. In some cases, they are even looking at the same research studies and coming away with opposite interpretations of the findings.

So what does all this mean for parents of children wanting to play video games? And will any real consensus resolve the bitter division? While Ferguson argues that scientific debate like this is actually healthy, he also warns against the use of inflammatory statements by professional groups that misrepresent research. As one example, he referred to the American Academy of Pediatrics’ 2009 statement which stated that “playing violent video games has been found to account for a 13% to 22% increase in adolescents’ violent behavior; by comparison, smoking tobacco accounts for 14% of the increase in lung cancer.” Not only are the figures in question exaggerated but the statement also implies a clear cause and effect relationship (which they then equate with the cigarettes causing lung cancer).

Aside from credibility issues, there is also the question of sponsorship. Should studies commissioned by the video game industry be taken at face value? How about studies put forward by anti-violence advocate groups which already show a clear bias on the subject? Many of these groups have a lot of time and money invested in promoting the dangers of video game violence and are hardly likely to be objective, especially if research they sponsor fails to meet their expectations. Scientists who receive research funding from advocacy groups, no matter where they stand in the debate, often find themselves in an awkward position of becoming advocates rather than impartial researchers.

All of which comes back to the familiar problem of science being used to promote moral panic, however justified that panic might seem. As Ferguson points out in his article, “scientists who are exposed to the violent imagery of some games and are subsequently offended may interpret ambiguous data in light of their emotional responses to offensive material”. This is a problem that often lies at the core of many psychological research studies which are expected to guide public policy on controversial subjects, whether it involves child abuse, the harmful effects of rock music, or in this case, violent video games.

While the issue of whether violent video games are harmful for children is far from settled, every new tragedy that comes to light becomes introduced as evidence in the debate (including the Newtown massacre in December). That the latest statistics show youth violence at a 40-year low despite the popularity of video games is something that has to be considered, especially with media psychologists insisting that game violence is directly responsible for shooting rampages (along with psychiatric medication, availability of guns, or whatever other pet cause is being advocated).

So where does this leave us? That psychological research can be used and misused to promote one moral panic after another is hardly a revelation. Still, many psychologists have already spoken out over the need for more rigid guidelines in using psychological research as well as avoiding the use of overly broad statements than can damage the credibility of psychological research.

As for the question of whether video games are really harmful, the lack of a clear answer after decades of research suggest that the real problem may well lie with our not being able to ask the right questions.

http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/media-spotlight/201304/can-video-games-cause-violence
Science Briefs

Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions

Studies provide converging evidence that exposure to media violence is a significant risk factor for aggressive and violent behavior.

By Craig A. Anderson, PhD

After 40+ years of research, one might think that debate about media violence effects would be over. An historical examination of the research reveals that debate concerning whether such exposure is a significant risk factor for aggressive and violent behavior should have been over years ago (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Four types of media violence studies provide converging evidence of such effects: laboratory experiments, field experiments, cross-sectional correlation studies, and longitudinal studies (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a; Bushman & Huesmann, 2000). But the development of a new genre-electronic video games-reinvigorated the debate.

Two features of video games fuel renewed interest by researchers, public policy makers, and the general public. First, the active role required by video games is a double-edged sword. It helps educational video games be excellent teaching tools for motivational and learning process reasons. But, it also may make violent video games even more hazardous than violent television or cinema. Second, the arrival of a new generation of ultraviolent video games beginning in the early 1990s and continuing unabated to the present resulted in large numbers of children and youths actively participating in entertainment violence that went way beyond anything available to them on television or in movies. Recent video games reward players for killing innocent bystanders, police, and prostitutes, using a wide range of weapons including guns, knives, flame throwers, swords, baseball bats, cars, hands, and feet. Some include cut scenes (i.e., brief movie clips supposedly designed to move the story forward) of strippers. In some, the player assumes the role of hero, whereas in others the player is a criminal.

The new debate frequently generates more heat than light. Many criticisms are simply recycled myths from earlier media violence debates, myths that have been repeatedly debunked on theoretical and empirical grounds. Valid weaknesses have also been identified (and often corrected) by media violence researchers themselves. Although the violent video game literature is still relatively new and small, we have learned a lot about their effects and have successfully answered several key questions. So, what is myth and what do we know?

Myths and Facts

**Myth 1.** Violent video game research has yielded very mixed results.

Facts: Some studies have yielded nonsignificant video game effects, just as some smoking studies failed to find a significant link to lung cancer. But when one combines all relevant empirical studies using meta-analytic techniques, five separate effects emerge with considerable consistency. Violent video games are significantly associated with: increased aggressive behavior, thoughts, and affect; increased physiological arousal; and decreased prosocial (helping) behavior. Average effect sizes for experimental studies (which help establish causality) and correlational studies (which allow examination of serious violent behavior) appear comparable (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).
Myth 2. The studies that find significant effects are the weakest methodologically.
Facts: Methodologically stronger studies have yielded the largest effects (Anderson, in press). Thus, earlier effect size estimates -based on all video game studies- probably underestimate the actual effect sizes.

Myth 3. Laboratory experiments are irrelevant (trivial measures, demand characteristics, lack external validity).
Facts: Arguments against laboratory experiments in behavioral sciences have been successfully debunked many times by numerous researchers over the years. Specific examinations of such issues in the aggression domain have consistently found evidence of high external validity. For example, variables known to influence real world aggression and violence have the same effects on laboratory measures of aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 1997).

Myth 4. Field experiments are irrelevant (aggression measures based either on direct imitation of video game behaviors (e.g., karate kicks) or are normal play behaviors.
Facts: Some field experiments have used behaviors such as biting, pinching, hitting, pushing, and pulling hair, behaviors that were not modeled in the game. The fact that these aggressive behaviors occur in natural environments does not make them "normal" play behavior, but it does increase the face validity (and some would argue the external validity) of the measures.

Myth 5. Correlational studies are irrelevant.
Facts: The overly simplistic mantra, "Correlation is not causation," is useful when teaching introductory students the risks in too-readily drawing causal conclusions from a simple empirical correlation between two measured variables. However, correlational studies are routinely used in modern science to test theories that are inherently causal. Whole scientific fields are based on correlational data (e.g., astronomy). Well conducted correlational studies provide opportunities for theory falsification. They allow examination of serious acts of aggression that would be unethical to study in experimental contexts. They allow for statistical controls of plausible alternative explanations.

Myth 6. There are no studies linking violent video game play to serious aggression.
Facts: High levels of violent video game exposure have been linked to delinquency, fighting at school and during free play periods, and violent criminal behavior (e.g., self-reported assault, robbery).

Myth 7. Violent video games affect only a small fraction of players.
Facts: Though there are good theoretical reasons to expect some populations to be more susceptible to violent video game effects than others, the research literature has not yet substantiated this. That is, there is not consistent evidence for the claim that younger children are more negatively affected than adolescents or young adults or that males are more affected than females. There is some evidence that highly aggressive individuals are more affected than nonaggressive individuals, but this finding does not consistently occur. Even nonaggressive individuals are consistently affected by brief exposures. Further research will likely find some significant moderators of violent video game effects, because the much larger research literature on television violence has found such effects and the underlying processes are the same. However, even that larger literature has not identified a sizeable population that is totally immune to negative effects of media violence.

Myth 8. Unrealistic video game violence is completely safe for adolescents and older youths.
Facts: Cartoonish and fantasy violence is often perceived (incorrectly) by parents and public policy makers as safe even for children. However, experimental studies with college students have consistently found increased aggression after exposure to clearly unrealistic and fantasy violent video games. Indeed, at least one recent study found significant increases in aggression by college students after playing E-rated (suitable for everyone) violent video games.

Myth 9. The effects of violent video games are trivially small.
Facts: Meta-analyses reveal that violent video game effect sizes are larger than the effect of second hand tobacco smoke on lung
cancer, the effect of lead exposure to I.Q. scores in children, and calcium intake on bone mass. Furthermore, the fact that so many youths are exposed to such high levels of video game violence further increases the societal costs of this risk factor (Rosenthal, 1986).

**Myth 10.** Arousal, not violent content, accounts for video game induced increases in aggression.
Facts: Arousal cannot explain the results of most correlational studies because the measured aggression did not occur immediately after the violent video games were played. Furthermore, several experimental studies have controlled potential arousal effects, and still yielded more aggression by those who played the violent game.

**Myth 11.** If violent video games cause increases in aggression, violent crime rates in the U.S. would be increasing instead of decreasing.
Facts: Three assumptions must all be true for this myth to be valid: (a) exposure to violent media (including video games) is increasing; (b) youth violent crime rates are decreasing; (c) video game violence is the only (or the primary) factor contributing to societal violence. The first assumption is probably true. The second is not true, as reported by the 2001 Report of the Surgeon General on Youth Violence (Figure 2-7, p. 25). The third is clearly untrue. Media violence is only one of many factors that contribute to societal violence and is certainly not the most important one. Media violence researchers have repeatedly noted this.

**Theory**

One frequently overlooked factor in this debate is the role of scientific theory. Pure empirical facts often have relatively little meaning and are seldom convincing. When those same facts fit a broader theory, especially one that has been tested in other contexts, those facts become more understandable and convincing. Recent years have seen considerable progress in basic theoretical models of human aggression (for recent integrations see Anderson & Bushman, 2002b; Anderson & Huesmann, in press; Anderson & Carnagey, in press).

Most such models take a social cognitive view of human aggression, integrating social learning theory, advances in cognitive psychology, script theory, developmental theories, and biological influences. Using such general models, media violence scholars now have a clear picture of how media violence increases aggression in short and long term contexts. Immediately after exposure to media violence, there is an increase in aggressive behavior tendencies because of several factors. 1. Aggressive thoughts increase, which in turn increase the likelihood that a mild or ambiguous provocation will be interpreted in a hostile fashion. 2. Aggressive affect increases. 3. General arousal (e.g., heart rate) increases, which tends to increase the dominant behavioral tendency. 4. Direct imitation of recently observed aggressive behaviors sometimes occurs.

Repeated media violence exposure increases aggression across the lifespan because of several related factors. 1. It creates more positive attitudes, beliefs, and expectations regarding use of aggressive solutions. 2. It creates aggressive behavioral scripts and makes them more cognitively accessible. 3. It decreases the accessibility of nonviolent scripts. 4. It decreases the normal negative emotional reactions to conflict, aggression, and violence.

**Unanswered Questions**

Several major gaps remain in the violent video game literature. One especially large gap is the lack of longitudinal studies testing the link between habitual violent video game exposure and later aggression, while controlling for earlier levels of aggression and other risk factors. Indeed, of the four major types of empirical studies mentioned earlier, this is the only type missing. There are such studies focusing on television violence but none on video games.

Another gap concerns potential differences in effect sizes of television versus video game violence. There are theoretical reasons to believe that violent video game effects may prove larger, primarily because of the active and repetitive learning aspects of video games. However, this is a very difficult question to investigate, especially with experimental designs. How does one select violent video game
and television stimuli that are matched on other dimensions? On what dimensions should they be equivalent? Number of bodies? Amount of blood and gore? Realism of the images? There are a couple of unpublished correlational studies that have compared the effects of television and video game violence on aggression, using comparable measures of violence exposure. Both yielded results suggesting a larger effect of video game violence. But the issue is not settled.

Finally, more research is needed to: (a) refine emerging general models of human aggression; (b) delineate the processes underlying short and long term media violence effects; (c) broaden these models to encompass aggression at the level of subcultures and nations. Several different research groups around the world are working on these various issues.

References


About the Author: Craig A. Anderson received his PhD in psychology from Stanford University in 1980. He has been a faculty member at Rice University (1980-1988), Ohio State University (visiting, 1984-1985), and the University of Missouri-Columbia (1988-1999). He joined Iowa State University in 1999 as Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology. He has received teaching awards at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, and has been awarded "Fellow" status by the American Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association. He is currently on the Executive Council of the International Society for Research on Aggression. His research on attribution theory, depression, social judgment, covariation detection, biases, and human aggression has been published in top social, personality, and cognitive, journals. His recent focus on violent video games has led to U.S. Senate testimony, addresses to and consultations with numerous scientific, governmental, and public policy groups worldwide, public policy research awards, and articles and stories in top science news outlets. His published works can be found at his web site.

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What Science Knows About Video Games and Violence

By Brandon Keim on Thu, 28 Feb 2013

As the thirteenth mission of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 begins, you’re submerged in a sewer, watching soldiers herd prisoners at gunpoint through the nighttime streets of a near-future dystopia. A few inches in front of you, just below eye level, raindrops dapple the water, a bit of graphical realism that subtly reinforces the game’s first-person perspective. You are there.

Twelve minutes later, you’ve gunned down 21 people and one dog. Most fall amidst head-shot geysers of blood. You’ve also killed some unknown number by rocket launcher or machine gun, their deaths lost in the haze. Every now and then, blood spatters onto the screen, as if in your eyes.

A Pressing Question

It’s a bloodfest. It’s also—at least to this journalist, watching a YouTube video walkthrough—glorious fun, a well-designed piece of action-hero arcade blockbuster thumb candy. Yet for the very same reasons it’s so appealing, it’s difficult not to be troubled, too. Is it possible, even likely, that so much vicarious slaughter ever bleeds into the psyches of at least some people who play these games?

Given that first-person shooters represent a $5 billion market, played by millions of people every day, it’s a scary possibility, and one pushed into the national discussion soon after it was reported that Adam Lanza, who killed 26 people in Newtown, Connecticut, was an avid Call of Duty player. Also disturbing, however, is the possibility that first-person shooters don’t influence real-world violence and are less a genuine suspect than a convenient scapegoat. After all, it’s easier to talk about fake blood than real behavior.

Not surprisingly, people have turned to science for answers on the question of violence and video games. For now, though, there are no answers, at least not of the quantitative, immediately useful variety. Some researchers argue that video games like first-person shooters indeed influence violent behavior—not causing it in some simple, linear way, but making it more likely to occur. Other researchers say this link doesn’t exist. Still others say it might, but it’s impossible to say right now. What’s possible to know scientifically quickly gives way to uncertainty and intuition.

The Hazy Science of Aggression

So what do we know? Before looking at the science, it’s worth taking a moment to think about how scientists might arrive at something like a conclusive answer: By taking several tens of thousands of people, from children on up to adults, dividing them into groups with comparable socioeconomic, genomic, and behavioral profiles, setting them to
play first-person shooters with varying amounts of regularity, then following them for years, routinely conducting psychological tests and tracking their real-world behaviors.

It would be an extremely revealing experiment. It’s also one that nobody has carried out, nor will they. The logistical challenges would be enormous—and even if it was possible, it would be hugely unethical, involving the deliberate exposure of potentially vulnerable people to something that might hurt them and others.

“Playing violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and physiological arousal.”

Lacking such a study, scientists have studied video game violence in more limited ways. Typically this involves asking small numbers of students to play games for a few minutes, then seeing whether their behavior changes according to laboratory measures of aggression: Whether they react less negatively to violent videos, respond more forcefully to irritation, or are in a generally more aggressive frame of mind—tending to complete, for example, the word “explo_e” as explode rather than explore.

There are a great many studies of this variety. The results aren’t uniform and have come under a certain amount of methodological criticism, but they tend to point in a common direction.

“We did a comprehensive review of every experimental study, reviewing 381 effects from studies involving 130,000 people, and results show that playing violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and physiological arousal,” says Brad Bushman, a psychologist at Ohio State University who is one of the best-known proponents of the idea that first-person shooters influence real-world violence.

To Bushman, video games aren’t likely to be the sole source of violence, but an amplifier. Indeed, if game-players, especially game-playing children, really do become more aggressive, Bushman is almost certainly right. It’s well known that aggressive children are more likely to become violent adults. Yet the studies that Bushman and colleagues cite tend not to answer a key question: Does game-induced aggressiveness persist? Does it become a hard-wired way of being in the world, or does it dissipate in a few minutes or hours?

A Cautionary Tale

“I don’t think we have enough science to suggest that playing video games causes violence in children any more than watching violence on TV,” says Ryan Hall, a psychiatrist at the University of Central Florida, referencing a vast body of scientific literature that has failed to find any strong connection between violent television and corresponding behavior. “There is no indication at this time that violent video games are training killers.”

Gary Slutkin doesn’t think that virtual violence is a cause in itself, but neither does he think it’s harmless.

To Hall, fears about video game violence are reminiscent of earlier moral panics about rock music, Dungeons & Dragons, and especially comic books, which in the 1950s were the subject of scholarly concern and even a Senate hearing about their role in juvenile delinquency. At that hearing, forensic scientist Frederic Wertham decried the “endless stream of brutality” in comic books, denouncing one title in particular as embodying sadistic fantasies that would be “particularly injurious to the ethical development of children.” That comic was Superman.

Half a century later, notes Hall, comic books were again a subject of discussion at the American Psychological Association’s 2010 annual meeting. This time around, contemporary comics were portrayed as dangerous,
Superman and other 1950’s crime-fighting heroes lauded as moral exemplars from whom boys once learned the virtues of public service.

Hall’s points are echoed by psychologist Christopher Ferguson of Texas A&M International University, who in January met with Vice President Joe Biden to help chart a course for studying video game violence in Newtown’s aftermath. “It’s normal for the country to be frightened and traumatized. It’s a normal human reaction to want answers. Whether they’re the right answers doesn’t always matter. We want to restore a sense of control,” Ferguson says. “There’s this historical pattern. People are desperate for an answer, and so they reach out. Media is something people like to point at.”

Monkey See, Monkey Shoot?

Another perspective, one less entrenched in debates over the methodology of studying the behavioral effects of video games, comes from Gary Slutkin, the founder of Cure Violence, an organization that has successfully reduced gun violence in parts of Baltimore and Chicago. Accustomed to working in communities where physical violence is an everyday part of life, Slutkin doesn’t think that virtual violence is a cause in itself, but neither does he think it’s harmless. Instead, he thinks the games make people more susceptible to becoming violent.

“The military knows this very well,” Slutkin says, noting the U.S. military’s use of video games in training soldiers, partly to break down their instinctive repulsion to killing. To Slutkin, what’s known about our brains is justification for concern: Humans are social, highly conditioned creatures who learn how to behave by watching what’s around us, turning social messages into so-called scripts that play in our minds as we engage the world.

These messages come from various sources, from media to the behaviors of people around us—and even if violent television doesn’t seem to produce violent behaviors, it’s a mistake to treat video games as an equivalent technological form. Video games are interactive rather than passive, an advantage that in other contexts, such as education, is regularly exploited. Games also create a system of constant reinforcement, rewarding behaviors practiced again and again.

Determining the relationship between video games and violence “may take 20 or 30 years.”

“Video games could be expected to have a larger effect than media violence. The player is participating. They’re being reinforced,” says Rowell Huesmann, a psychologist at the University of Michigan. “The important thing is repetition. I think any child can play Grand Theft Auto or a first-person shooter a few times, and it’s not going to have much effect. But if they play day in and day out, over a period of years, any psychologist who understands the power of observational learning is going to find it hard to believe that it’s not going to have a major effect on increasing risk.”

Slutkin and Huesmann believe that violence is contagious, spreading in a manner similar to infectious disease, but with behaviors rather than microbes as the instruments of transmission. Of course, pathogens don’t always cause disease: Many other factors, such as a person’s immune system strength, alter an infection’s course. In keeping with this analogy, first-person shooters weaken the psychological immune system. They change the odds of whether violence takes root or whether a person can resist it.

Judgment Call
Even the idea that violence is contagious is still, however, a hypothesis, and the cognitive influence of video games a matter of plausible speculation rather than demonstrated fact. As with psych-lab aggression tests, understanding of video game violence soon becomes uncertain. “All research has potential flaws,” Hall says. “It’s very hard to have the perfect study. That being said, I don’t think you stop looking. But you have to understand that this may take 20 or 30 years.”

As to whether parents should allow their children to play first-person shooter video games, to indulge brutal fantasies of high-caliber, graphically realized murder, Ferguson considers it a judgment call.

“If parents turn to science to guide them, with this idea that they’ll be avoiding harm, they’re probably not going to get very far,” he says. “A different issue, and probably the right issue for parents to focus on, is whether they morally approve. And then we’re on firmer ground.”

Think you're immune to video-game violence?  
Think again

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Trevor is the main character in the game 'Grand Theft Auto V.'(Photo: Rockstar Games)

(WUSA TODAY) Wonder what could be so enticing that people globally spend 3 billion hours every week doing it?

Try video games, that great electronic escape where virtual characters take over the story lines and real-world problems feel far away. As popularity of these games continues to grow, scientists are examining what compels people to invest so much time in fictitious worlds — and whether outcomes of these games have any relevance to reality.

Some studies suggest that playing electronic games provides a form of stress relief; other research cites the social aspect of gaming with friends as a major benefit. And a recent study by Andrew Przybylski, a researcher at the University of Essex in England, finds that a least part of the attraction is the chance to explore aspects of our "ideal selves" in a make-believe world without consequences.

"Imagine, for instance, someone really wants to be a more extroverted person in their daily life but cannot expand themselves at work or at home," he says. "Games can provide this person a context to 'try on' a more extroverted self who is more assertive and sociable by running a large team, such as a guild in the game World of Warcraft."

If your character saves the world from forces of evil, after all, you've earned the respect of your community and landed on higher moral ground.

Of course, few would argue that video games laced with violence — Grand Theft Auto, say — send a message of respect and morality to users. But whether the opposite is true is a topic that's hotly contested. After all, thousands have played violent games and not gone on to steal motor vehicles, join organized crime gangs or physically assault other people. Yet there have been well over 100 studies done that document the rise in hostility and aggression in people who regularly play violent video games.

"We just finished a major review of studies, looking at 381 effects of violent video games in over 130,000 people," says Brad Bushman, a professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University. "We found that violent video games unmistakably raised levels of aggression and heart rate, and decreased feelings of compassion toward others."

Adding to the concern over violent games: A study in the Feb. 4 issue of the journal Psychological Science found a correlation between the type of character people chose to play and their behavior immediately following the session. Assuming the role of a virtual villain, for instance, prompted players to treat people in negative ways after the game concluded, according to
study co-author Patrick Vargas, a professor of psychology at University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign. Meanwhile, those who played the virtual hero acted more generously toward others in a post-game setting.

The bottom line: Emotions and attitudes generated in the virtual world do not simply disappear once the game is finished, and the interactive component of video games enhances this lingering effect. In one study, violent video games raised a child's risk for aggressive behavior more than watching a violent film.

It's unrealistic, however, for parents to shield kids from video games entirely. As Przybylski points out, "more than 97% of American children between the ages of 12 and 16 play electronic games. These games are here to stay as a central feature of modern childhood."

Still, experts say it is possible to choose games that tap into positive qualities, rather than ones that glorify the negative. The biggest mistake parents make: thinking their child is too smart to confuse fiction and reality.

Says Bushman, "No one is immune to the effects of violent video games, any more than anyone is immune to the effects of smoking cigarettes."

HOW SAFE IS THAT GAME? A guide to decoding ratings

Virtually all video games come with an ESRB rating — the age-appropriate level assigned to them by the Entertainment Software Rating Board, a non-profit group created by the gaming industry in 1994 to self-police its products.

"These ratings can be confusing," says psychology professor Brad Bushman, who adds that European ratings are more streamlined and stringent (not to mention administered by a panel of experts outside the gaming industry). Here's what those labels on your child's game mean (for more info go to esrb.org):

EARLY CHILDHOOD: Content is intended for young children.
EVERYONE: Content is generally suitable for all ages. May contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.
EVERYONE 10+: Content is generally suitable for ages 10 and up. May contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.
TEEN: Content is generally suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling and/or infrequent use of strong language.
MATURE: Content is generally suitable for ages 17 and up. May contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.
ADULTS ONLY: Content suitable only for adults ages 18 and up. May include prolonged scenes of intense violence, graphic sexual content and/or gambling with real currency.
RATING PENDING: Not yet assigned a final ESRB rating. Appears only in advertising, marketing and promotional materials related to a game that is expected to carry an ESRB rating, and it should be replaced by a game's rating once one has been assigned.

http://www.wtsp.com/story/tech/2014/03/30/violent-video-games-reality/7078225/
Children and Video Games: Playing with Violence

Video gaming (playing video games) has become a popular activity for people of all ages. Many children and adolescents spend large amounts of time playing them. Video gaming is a multibillion-dollar industry – bringing in more money than movies and DVDs. Video games have become very sophisticated and realistic. Some games connect to the Internet, which can allow children and adolescents to play online with unknown adults and peers.

While some games have educational content, many of the most popular games emphasize negative themes and promote:

- the killing of people or animals
- the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol
- criminal behavior, disrespect for authority and the law
- sexual exploitation and violence toward women
- racial, sexual, and gender stereotypes
- foul language, obscenities, and obscene gestures

There is growing research on the effects of videogames on children. Some video games may promote learning, problem solving and help with the development of fine motor skills and coordination. However, there are concerns about the effect of violent video games on young people who play videogames excessively.

Studies of children exposed to violence have shown that they can become: “immune” or numb to the horror of violence, imitate the violence they see, and show more aggressive behavior with greater exposure to violence. Some children accept violence as a way to handle problems. Studies have also shown that the more realistic and repeated the exposure to violence, the greater the impact on children. In addition, children with emotional, behavioral and learning problems may be more influenced by violent images.

Children and adolescents can become overly involved and even obsessed with videogames. Spending large amounts of time playing these games can create problems and lead to:

- poor social skills
- time away from family time, school-work, and other hobbies
- lower grades and reading less
- exercising less, and becoming overweight
aggressive thoughts and behaviors

Tips for Parents
Parents can help their children enjoy these games and avoid problems by:

- checking the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings to learn about the game’s content.
- selecting appropriate games—both in content and level of development.
- playing videogames with their children to experience the game’s content.
- setting clear rules about game content and playing time, both in and outside of your home.
- strongly warning children about potential serious dangers of Internet contacts and relationships while playing games online.
- talking with other parents about your family’s video game rules.
- remembering that you are a role model for your children – including video games you play as an adult.

If parents are concerned that their child is spending too much time playing video games or appears preoccupied or obsessed with aggressive or violent video games, they should first set some limits (for example – playing the games for one hour after all homework is done) and try to encourage the child to participate in other activities. If there is continued concern about their child’s behavior or the effects of videogames, a consultation with a qualified mental health professional may be helpful.

For additional information see also Facts for Families:
#13 Children and TV Violence,
#40 The Influence of Music and Music Videos,
#54 Children and Watching TV, and
#59 Children Online.

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 8,500 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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that would be horrible in real life. But the "killing prostitutes" thing was what really got people going.

Now that Grand Theft Auto 5 has finally come out, some folks still aren’t happy about letting people be as sick as they want to be in a fantasy world that does not exist:

I can’t believe I’m saying this about college students, but some of them are right. It’s fiction. And fiction has always been filled with violence and depravity. Shakespeare, anybody? I’m not saying the makers of GTA 5 are Shakespeare, of course. Or even Tarantino. Or even Uwe Boll. But they’re operating in the same tradition. They’re playing to the groundlings. Cheap thrills for the cheap seats. The only thing that’s changed is the technology.

Back in the ’50s, moral scolds went after horror comic books for corrupting the fragile minds of America’s youth. Back in the Old West, hacks cranked out potboilers about notorious outlaws, and it was a sign of the End Times. The examples are too numerous to count. Fiction has always glamorized violence and brutality and moral decay, and it always will. And there will always be people who want to decide for you whether or not you can handle it.

Some people think video games cause violence. Other people think guns cause it. And busybodies on both sides of the aisle who think they know how to run your life better than you do are always stepping in. “If we could just put limits on [X], we’d have fewer problems with [Y].” Well, that’s not how life works. Violence exists because people exist.

I mean none of this as an attack on Caleb Bonham. He has every right to be disgusted by Grand Theft Auto 5, and I would advise him not to play it. I admire him for interviewing students about it and getting their reactions, and he presents a legitimate moral question. I don’t blame him for coming to the conclusion he does. I just don’t agree with what he thinks it all means.

And for the record, I wouldn’t approve of a video game that allowed characters to rape each other. So I’d take the appropriate step: I wouldn’t buy it.

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Violent video games not shown to cause real-world violence

By Susan Perry | 01/08/13

Studies have consistently found that violent video games like 'Call of Duty' do not harm the human brain or increase the likelihood of violent acts.

On Saturday, the town of Southington, Conn., will be collecting violent video games, CDs and DVDs from its residents in exchange for gift certificates from local businesses. The items will be tossed into a dumpster and later burned.

Southington is a 30-minute drive from Newton, the site of last month’s tragic Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, in which 20 students and six teachers were killed. Unconfirmed media reports have suggested that the gunman, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, played violent video games, including the best-selling Call of Duty and StarCraft.

Soon after the shootings, many politicians and media pundits began calling for tougher regulations of video games. Outgoing Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., led the charge. Citing such games as a “causative factor” in real-world violence, Lieberman told Fox News’ Chris Wallace that Congress needed to take steps to make the producers of the games — and of violent movies as well — “tone it down.”

“Thank God, not all of them [people who play violent video games] become murderers,” he said on the Senate floor. “But some of them do, and we have to ask why.”

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W. Va., agrees. He introduced legislation last month that would instruct the National Association of Sciences to investigate and report back to Congress on the effects of violent video games on children.

“Recent court decisions [especially a 2011 one from the California Supreme Court] demonstrate that some people still do not get it,” Rockefeller said in a statement. “They believe that violent video games are no more dangerous to young minds than classic literature or Saturday morning cartoons. Parents, pediatricians and psychologists know better.”

What the evidence shows

Press reports suggest that Rockefeller’s bill is unlikely to find much support in the Senate — and, perhaps, for good reason. For, as psychologist Vaughan Bell points out in a recent article in the British newspaper The Observer, the effects of violent video games have already been widely studied.

Those studies have consistently found that although these games may seem repugnant to many of us, they do not harm the human brain or increase the likelihood of violent acts.
In fact, fast-moving action video games are associated with positive cognitive outcomes. “We now have numerous studies on how playing action computer games, as opposed to puzzle or strategy titles such as The Sims or Tetris, leads to an improvement in how well we pay attention, how quickly we react, how sensitive we are to images and how accurately we sort information,” Bell explains.

Nor do studies suggest that video games lead young people to act out violently in real life. Writes Bell (using British spellings):

> Using randomised controlled trials, research has found that violent video games cause a reliable short-term increase in aggression during lab-based tests. However, this seems not to be something specific to computer games. Television and even violence in the news have been found to have a similar impact. The longer-term effects of aggressive gaming are still not well studied, but we would expect similar results from long-term studies of other violent media — again a small increase in aggressive thoughts and behaviour in the lab.

> These, however, are not the same as actual violence. Psychologist Christopher Ferguson, based at the Texas A&M International University, has examined what predicts genuine violence committed by young people. It turns out that delinquent peers, depression and an abusive family environment account for actual violent incidents, while exposure to media violence seems to have only a minor and usually insignificant effect.

**A country-by-country examination**

After the Sandy Hook tragedy, Washington Post reporter Max Fisher looked at the world’s 10 largest video game markets and found “no evident, statistical correlation between video game consumption and gun-related killings.”

In fact, he says, the evidence suggests that gun violence slightly decreases in countries as video consumption increases.

> “Video game consumption, based on international data, does not seem to correlate at all with an increase in gun violence,” writes Fisher. “... Countries where video games are popular also tend to be some of the world’s safest (probably because these countries are stable and developed, not because they have video games).”

What the data does show, he adds, is “that America’s rate of firearm-related homicides is extremely high for the developed world.”

**A link to poor health**

Excessive video game playing is correlated with two bad outcomes: an increased risk of obesity and general poor health, says Bell. And some individuals who spend long hours playing video games may be using that form of entertainment to avoid “uncomfortable life problems,” he adds.

But “this can easily apply to books as video games,” Bell points out.

> “The verdict from the now considerable body of scientific research is not that video games are a new and ominous threat to society but that anything in excess will cause us problems,” Bell concludes. “The somewhat prosaic conclusion is that moderation is key — whether you’re killing aliens, racing cars or trying to place oddly shaped blocks that fall from the sky.”

http://www.minnpost.com/second-opinion/2013/01/violent-video-games-not-shown-cause-real-world-violence
The effects of violent video games. Do they affect our behavior?

by: Brad J. Bushman, Ph.D. Professor of Communication and Psychology, The Ohio State University; Professor of Communication Science, VU University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

In 1972, the Surgeon General issued the following warning on violent TV programs: "It is clear to me that the causal relationship between televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action. ... There comes a time when the data are sufficient to justify action. That time has come." (Steinfeld, 1972).

That was over 4 decades ago! In the years since this Surgeon General warning was issued, hundreds of additional studies have shown a link between violent media exposure and aggression (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002a). The Surgeon General warning was about violent TV programs and films. What about violent video games?

Are Violent Video Games More Harmful than Violent TV Programs and Films?

There are at least three reasons to believe that violent video games might be even more harmful than violent TV programs and films.

- First, video game play is active whereas watching TV is passive. People learn better when they are actively involved. Suppose you wanted to learn how to fly an airplane. What would be the best method to use: read a book, watch a TV program, or use a video game flight simulator?
- Second, players of violent video games are more likely to identify with a violent character. If the game is a first person shooter, players have the same visual perspective as the killer. If the game is third person, the player controls the actions of the violent character from a more distant visual perspective. In a violent TV program, viewers might or might not identify with a violent character. People are more likely to behave aggressively themselves when they identify with a violent character (e.g., Konijn et al., 2007)
- Third, violent games directly reward violent behavior, such as by awarding points or by allowing players to advance to the next game level. In some games, players are rewarded through verbal praise, such as hearing the words "Nice shot!" after killing an enemy. It is well known that rewarding behavior increases its frequency. (Would you go to work tomorrow if your boss said you would no longer be paid?) In TV programs, reward is not directly tied to the viewer's behavior.

In summary, there are good theoretical reasons to believe that violent video games are even more harmful than violent TV programs or films. We also have empirical data showing this (Polman et al., 2008). In this study, children were randomly assigned to play a violent video game or watch someone else play it. There was also a nonviolent video game control condition. The results showed that boys who played a
violent video game were more aggressive afterwards than were boys who merely watched.

Are Violent Video Games Good For You?
Some people claim that violent video games are good for you. Some players believe that violent video games are cathartic (i.e., they allow players to release pent up anger into harmless channels). The scientific evidence directly contradicts this idea. Over 130 studies have been conducted on over 130,000 participants around the world (Anderson et al., 2010). These studies show that violent video games increase aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure), and aggressive behavior. Violent games also decrease helping behavior and feelings of empathy for others.

Other people claim that playing violent games increases eye-hand coordination, and research supports this claim (e.g., Green & Bavelier, 2007). However, violent content might not be required to obtain these beneficial effects. Perhaps similar video games without violence would also increase eye-hand coordination.

Why Do People Deny the Harmful Effects of Violent Video Games?
Although the scientific evidence clearly shows that violent video games have harmful effects, many people still deny these effects, especially violent game players. There are at least four reasons why.

- First, people may think: "I play violent video games and I've never killed anyone." This fallacious reasoning is a good example of how the "availability heuristic" coupled with the "base rate problem" (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973) distort reasoning. People have great difficulty judging influences on events when the base rate probability of the event is very low. It is not surprising that people who play violent video games have not killed anyone because very few people kill anyone. For example, fewer than 6 people per 100,000 are murdered each year in the United States (U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010). It is very difficult to predict rare events, such as murder, using exposure to violent video games or any other factor. However, murder is the most salient violent event to most people; so when they don't have "available" in memory cases of people playing violent games and then murdering, they ignore the base rate of murder and conclude that violent games have no effect on aggression.
- Second, researchers have also found that people believe the media have a much stronger effect on others than on themselves. This effect is very robust and is called the third person effect (e.g., Davison, 1983). The consequence of this psychological effect is that people may often agree that media violence has a bad effect on some people, but not on themselves. This thinking then leads to a denial of the overall importance of the effects from a public health standpoint.
- Third, the entertainment industry frequently claims that violent media do not increase aggression (Anderson & Bushman 2002b). Even though the public may recognize that making such claims is in the economic self-interest of the entertainment industry, the repetition of the claims of no effects still seems to have an effect. Since the 1972 Surgeon General warning, the scientific evidence has
grown even stronger (see Figure 1). But an analysis of over 600 news reports shows that over time, news stories are more likely to deny the harmful effect of media violence (see Figure 1). Most Americans aren't even aware that the U.S. Surgeon General issued a warning about TV violence. Perhaps this is because most **Americans get their information from the mass media.** The entertainment industry is probably reluctant to admit that they are marketing a harmful product, much like the tobacco industry was reluctant to admit that they were marketing a harmful product.

**Figure 1.** Conservative Scientific (Lower Boundary of 99.9% Confidence Interval) vs. News Reports of the Effect of Media Violence on Aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002b)

- Fourth, people do not understand psychological processes as well as they understand biological processes. If you see a violent video game player assault another person, it is difficult to know the direct cause of the assault. Was it playing violent video games for hours on end, or was it something else? The psychological process by which playing violent video games produces this result is not as intuitive to most people as are biological processes. People are probably more accepting of the idea that smoking causes lung cancer, for example, because it is much easier to grasp the idea that smoke going into the lungs, damages cells, and starts tumor growth.

These processes combine to create an atmosphere in which non-expert journalists, and even some social scientists, write articles and books arguing that violent video games are not harmful. However, the vast majority of social scientists working in the area believe that violent video games can be harmful (e.g., Pollard Sacks, Bushman, & Anderson, 2011).
References


http://ithp.org/articles/violentvideogames.html
Study: Violent video games do not cause real violence

Consumption of violent video games, movies and television programs is not a significant contributing factor to actual violence, a new study found.

Instead genetic predisposition and upbringing largely determine a person’s propensity for violence, wrote the study’s authors.

The study, published last Friday, was conducted by Christopher Ferguson of the University of Texas A&M, James Ivory of Virginia Polytechnic University and Kevin Beaver of Florida State University. The researchers used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and measured whether a variety of factors — including exposure to violent media, upbringing, and genetics — correlated with criminal behavior.

“A history of teen delinquency, lower intelligence, and a history of school problems all predicted adult criminality,” wrote the study’s authors. “Media use was not associated with either increased or decreased risk of adult criminality.”

In the wake of mass shootings such as the one at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., some pundits have blamed violent video games and TV for inspiring the perpetrators to commit violence.

Democratic California Sen. Dianne Feinstein explicitly blamed violent video games for contributing to the shooting, and warned the legislators would have to take action if entertainment companies did not regulate themselves.

Violent video games play a “very negative role for young people, and the industry ought to take note of that,” she said in a statement last month, according to The Associated Press. “If Sandy Hook doesn’t do it, if the knowledge of these video games this young man played doesn’t, then maybe we have to proceed, but that is in the future.”

But the research suggests that legislators and pundits who decry violent media are whipping up a moral panic over something that doesn’t inspire real violence, wrote Ferguson.

“Politicians can look like they are ‘doing something’ or (as the NRA and their political allies did) try to distract the public from issues like gun control using a moral panic over media,” wrote Ferguson in an email to The Daily Caller News Foundation, noting that the National Rifle Association also blamed mass shootings on violent media.

Social scientists and journalists also have an incentive to distort the threat of violent entertainment, he wrote.

“By arguing there is a pressing social problem, social scientists can get grant funding and headlines for their research (it’s usually harder to get either by saying something isn’t a big problem),” Ferguson wrote. “Given most news readers are older adults who don’t really play video games, or watch as many movies, the news media can, in essence, pander a bit to their audience.”

Identifying violent media as the “bad guy” in crime stories may also be easier for people than examining the complicated intersection of nature-nurture factors that produce violence, he wrote.

“It’s nonsense, but more comforting than to acknowledge that some of these events we really just can’t do much about,” Ferguson added.

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