

# Conflicting Beliefs about Video Games in the U.S.

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Conflicting Beliefs about Video Games in the U.S.**

Nearly two-thirds of the U.S. population 13 years or older play video games (“U.S. Games 360 Report,” 2018). The video games industry is rapidly developing, generating a record \$43.4 billion in revenue in 2018 in the U.S., an 18% percent increase from the previous year (ESA, 2019). Although reported violent crime in the U.S. has been falling steadily since 1992, the trend has recently flattened, and there were 418 mass shootings in 2019 (GVA, 2019). As Silverstein (2020) notes, “there were more mass shootings across the U.S. in 2019 than there were days in the year.” Critics blamed violent game Doom for stimulating Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to commit the heinous shooting at Columbine High School in 1999. Since then, politicians and advocacies have pointed to violent video games as a cause. Professional gamers, professors, and gaming trade associations have rejected this claim. Defenders and critics of violent video games are competing to influence games’ perceived responsibility for social pathologies, either by attributing violent events to games, or to broader causes, and to games’ cognitive and psychological effects. While people do not find the claim that video games cause violence to be credible, it is propagated by opponents of gun control so vigorously that it gains some acceptance.

### **Review of Research**

Since the Columbine massacre, critics have attributed real-life violence to couple reasons. Movie and television violence are some concerns. Anderson (1997) studied the effects of violent movies on aggressive thoughts and found that “violent scenes can increase feelings of hostility.”

Coyne (2016) conducted a three-year longitudinal study on adolescents viewing aggression on television and found that aggression in media can have a “long-term effect on aggressive behavior during adolescence,” meaning exposure to media violence may be interpreted differently from exposure to real-life violence.

Music has raised concern too. Rubin, West, and Mitchell (2001) examined the relationship between popular music preferences and attitudes, concluding that “heavy-metal music listeners exhibited more aggression and lesser regard for women,” and “rap listeners showed more aggression and distrust.” Sharman and Dingle (2015) tested “extreme” music and found that it can match the “physiological arousal” of angry participants to “increase in positive emotions,” making it “represent a healthy way of processing anger for these listeners.” Individuals can find extreme music to be a remedy.

The competitiveness of sports can cause aggression. Cabagno and Rascle (2006) analyzed the aggression of team sports players and found that “instrumental aggressive behaviors” increase when competitive level rises, but “hostile aggressive behaviors” decrease. In other words, players become more aggressive to achieve a goal and less intent to cause harm. Marasescu (2013) studied the effects of aggressive youth sports, such as hockey, on the personal development of players, finding that “there is no way of determining whether sports breed aggressive characteristics, or aggressive individuals gravitate toward sports.” Even in aggressive sports, players can develop virtues such as sportsmanship and teamwork.

While these concerns suggest benefits and detriments, they fail to explain how and why the concerns, especially video games, have been perpetuated as plausible explanations for violent crimes.

## **Blaming Video Games for Teaching Violence**

Since Columbine, politicians demonized video games by claiming it teaches people to kill and act violently. Jack Thompson is an anti-video-games activist. In 2003, 16-year-old Dustin Lynch was charged with murder in the death of JoLynn Mishne and was “obsessed” with Grand Theft Auto III. Mishne’s father passed a note to the judge, saying that “the attorneys had better tell the jury about the violent video game that trained this kid [and] showed him how to kill our daughter” (Hudak, 2003). In another case in 2006, Cody Posey was charged with the murder of three members of his family and obsessively played Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. The lawsuit argued that the game made violence “pleasurable and attractive,” and caused Posey to “act out, copycat, replicate and emulate the violence.” Thompson claims that “Posey essentially practiced how to kill on this game” and “if it wasn’t for Grand Theft Auto, three people might not now be dead” (Krueger, 2006).

Following the Virginia Tech shooting, Thompson said gunman Seung-Hui Cho played Counter-Strike, a first-person shooter game, and claimed that “these are real people that are in the ground now because of this game.” Thompson adds “when a kid who has never killed anyone in his life goes on a rampage and looks like the Terminator, he’s a video gamer.” Thompson insists that “he wouldn’t have killed 32 if he hadn’t rehearsed it and trained himself like a warrior on virtual reality” (Benedetti, 2007). Politician Mitt Romney said that “pornography and violence poison our music and movies and TV and video games. The Virginia Tech shooter, like the Columbine shooters before him, had drunk from this cesspool” (Bacon, 2007).

After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut in 2012, Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman spoke in favor of “toning down” the violence in entertainment and believes that “the violence in the entertainment culture, particularly with the

extraordinary realism to video games and movies now, does cause vulnerable young men, particularly, to be more violent” (Haskell, 2012).

In 2018, after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Paul Gold, the neighbor of the shooter Nikolas Cruz, mentioned that Cruz played video games for long periods of time and described his gaming behavior as “kill, kill, blow up something, and kill some more, all day” (Brown, 2018).

A year later, following the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, Trump said “we must stop the glorification of violence in our society,” including through the “gruesome and grisly video games that are now commonplace” (Draper, 2019). House Minority Leader and Representative of California Kevin McCarthy was asked about the factors contributing to shootings and responded, “the idea that these video games that dehumanize individuals to have a game of shooting individuals, I’ve always felt that it’s a problem for future generations and others.” McCarthy continued, “We’ve watched studies show what it does to individuals, and you look at these photos of how it took place, you can see the actions within video games and others” (Wu, 2019).

### **Not Guns, but Video Games**

Opponents of gun control point to video games to shift the blame away from easy access to guns. The National Rifle Association Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre branded the video game industry as a “callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people – through vicious, violent video games.” He also claimed that “guns don’t kill people. Video games, the media and Obama’s budget kill people” (Tassi, 2012). Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick noted that the El Paso shooter mentioned the popular

shooting game Call of Duty in a manifesto. Patrick claimed that “we’ve always had guns. We’ve always had evil. But what’s changed where we see this rash of shooting? I see a video game industry that teaches young people to kill” (Snider, 2019). In response to the Parkland shooting, Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin claims “guns are not the problem” and video games “celebrate the slaughtering of people” (Hudson, 2018).

### **Video Games and Mental Health**

Critics are concerned that games distort the brain mentally and psychologically, making people fail to notice consequences behind actions. Regarding Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter, Laura Davies believes that “there needs to be more mental health oversight.” Davies continues, “they say this kid had issues before and if you see a kid is living too much in the fantasy side, that needs to be addressed” (Gardner, 2012). Diane Franklin, a Representative of Missouri, sponsored a state bill in 2013 that levied a 1 percent sales tax on “violent video games.” The revenues would go toward “the treatment of mental-health conditions associated with exposure to violent video games” (Tach, 2013). Around the same time, former President Barack Obama also called for Congress to provide \$10 million for the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) to “research into the effects that violent video games have on young minds” (Crecente, 2013). In response to the Parkland shooting, President Trump claimed he is “hearing more and more people say the level of violence on video games is really shaping young people’s thoughts” (Ducharme, 2018).

Paula Beckenstein, a clinical social worker, strongly believes in the “correlation between violent video games and lack of not only empathy but lack of an emotional and cognitive distinction between fantasy and reality” (Bilton, 2014). Bajovic (2013), an assistant professor at

Brock University, analyzed adolescents and their playing habits and stage of moral reasoning, concluding that “spending too much time within the virtual world of violence may prevent gamers from getting involved in different positive social experiences in real life, and in developing a positive sense of what is right and wrong.” Jay Hull, a social psychologist at Dartmouth College, speculates games help kids become more comfortable taking risks and engaging in abnormal behavior, saying “their sense of right and wrong is being warped.”

### **Awarding Gamers for Antisocial Acts**

Critics claim that games award people “points” for committing crimes, incentivizing them to do more. The American Academy of Pediatrics warned that video games “should not use human or other living targets or award points for killing,” because this teaches children to “associate pleasure and success with their ability to cause pain and suffering to others.” (Scutti, 2018). Dr. Laura Davies, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, believes that “a huge part of discipline and development is understanding consequences” and “letting kids know that their actions have consequences.” Davies believes that “video games like Grand Theft Auto turn the consequences into positives,” with an example from the game how players are rewarded with points for killing a prostitute (Gardner, 2012).

The Parents Television Council, an advocacy group, campaigns “in today’s video game world, children can ‘role-play’ as murderers, cop-killers, gang members, auto thieves or any number of human-like characters carrying out mind-altering tasks with realistic graphics. These games reward killing and encourage violent criminal conduct” (PTC, n.d.). Tim Winter, the president of the PTC, says “when it comes to violent video games, you’re actually the

perpetrator. ... You're instigating the violence. You getting points or advancing through the gameplay by successfully slaughtering other human beings" (Warren, 2019).

### **Antisocial Behavior from Video Games**

Critics claim violent video games exhibit sexism and make people less empathetic to victims. Jay Hull says games might "dampen sympathy toward their virtual victims, with consequences for their values and behavior outside the game" (Moyer, 2018). Dr. Jeanne Brockmyer, a clinical child psychologist and professor at the University of Toledo, says "the research is getting clearer that over the long term, people with more exposure to violent video games have demonstrated things like lower empathy to violence" (Bilton, 2014). The American Psychological Association released a policy statement, stating "a direct association between violent video game use and aggressive outcomes" as well as "decreases in socially desirable behavior such as prosocial behavior, empathy, and moral engagement" (APA, 2015).

Writer Carolyn Petit wrote a review on Grand Theft Auto V on news site GameSpot, saying the game "has little room for women except to portray them as strippers, prostitutes, long-suffering wives" (Petit, 2014). In a study of the same franchise, Gabbiadini et al. (2014) of University of Milano Bicocca studied young male gamers playing sexist, violent video games and found that they show less empathy than others toward female violence victims.

### **Benefits**

Defenders believe that games bring positivity to their lives. Tim Olson, another professional gamer, says that he has "a really good work ethic from video games" and gaming has "done nothing but bring positivity." He also says that he met friends through video games



(Austin, 2019). Johnny Chiodini, a video game producer, states that “for pretty much my whole life I’ve used video games as a support tool to help me deal with difficult times” (Judge, 2018). The TIGA list some benefits of video games, including “therapeutic advantages” and “raises players’ self-esteem” (TIGA, n.d.). Susanna Pollack is the president of Games for Change, a non-profit group that uses games for social activism. In response to Trump’s criticism, Pollack claims that the “organization is built on the belief that video games can affect positive change by educating people, building awareness around an issue or bringing people together” (Kuchera, 2018). Aaron Sampson, a senior producer at GameSpot, has “played ‘violent’ video games” his “entire life” and owns a gun. Sampson believes that “anger is what causes violence and a violent video game has never made me feel anger. Often they have relieved those types of feelings rather than encouraged them” (Sampson, 2013).

### **No Significance in Negative Emotion**

While critics point that games may arouse some negative emotion, defenders claim that it is not enough to stimulate real-life violence. Mike Rufail, a professional gamer and currently the CEO of esports squad Envy Gaming, claims he has played Call of Duty eight hours a day on average for six years. After the El Paso and Dayton shootings, in response to accusations that gaming influenced the shootings, Rufail said that he has “never felt the need to enact any kind of violence” from playing a violent game (Austin, 2019). Chris Grady, a survivor of the Parkland shooting, says that he “grew up playing video games” like first-person shooter games, but “would never, ever dream of taking the lives of any of my peers” (Scutti, 2018). Cypherofityr, a gaming critic, routinely plays violent games like Call of Duty and stressed that she is “not out here trying to murder people” (Romano, 2019).

Mark Coulson, an associate professor of psychology at Middlesex University, acknowledges that playing “three hours of Call of Duty” might make someone “feel a little bit pumped,” but would not make someone “go out and mug someone” (Kleinman, 2015). Benjamin Burroughs, a professor of emerging media at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, claims “certainly, there is no linkage to gun violence” and says “plenty of gamers get upset when they lose or feel the game was ‘cheating,’ but it doesn’t lead to violent outputs” (Anderson, 2019). Patrick Markey, a psychology professor at Villanova University, believes that people who play video games “might be a little hopped up and jerk but it doesn’t fundamentally alter who they are” (Anderson, 2019).

### **No Link to Aggression**

Organizations and interest groups reject the link between games and real-life violence. The Entertainment Software Association, a major trade association, states that “video games do not cause real-world violence or aggression” and “blaming video games for real-world violence is no more productive than blaming other forms of media for the content they depict” (ESA, 2019). In a message to President Trump, they argued “the same video games played in the US are played worldwide; however, the level of gun violence is exponentially higher in the US than in other countries,” and that “numerous authorities have examined the scientific record and found there is no link between media content and real-life violence” (Klepek, 2018). The Entertainment Consumers Association, a non-profit membership organization, states that “there has never been a causal link established between real-life violence and video game violence in any verifiable scientific study” and “despite this, politicians continue to attempt to link videogames and violence” (ECA, n.d.). The Independent Game Developers’ Association, another trade

association, claims that “recent research shows violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents’ aggressive behavior” (TIGA, n.d.). The Video Game Voters Network defends video games by “debunking myths about video games and violence” (VGVN, n.d.).

### **Cognitive and Psychological Benefits**

Some people defend that playing video games can help develop the brain in different ways. The ESA’s survey data in 2019 highlights the majority of Americans believe that video games can develop teamwork and problem-solving skills (ESA, 2020). Laura Kate Dale, a video game journalist for Kotaku, believes that “if you can experience what someone experiences rather than being shown, it makes you more able to empathize with their situation” (Judge, 2018). Video game writer and designer Zak Garriss says that games “craft experiences that help people relax, detox after a day, bond with friends” (Romano, 2019).

Grizzard et al. (2014) concluded that “contrary to popular belief, engaging in heinous behaviors in virtual environments can lead to an increased sensitivity to moral issues.” Judy Willis, M.D., a neurologist and member of the American Academy of Neurology (AAN), expresses that video games can “feed information to the brain in a way that maximizes learning.” Willis states that action video games enhance visual capabilities like tracking multiple objects and mentally rotating objects. Willis adds that players may be “better equipped to switch between tasks easily, adapt to new information, and modify their strategy as new input comes in” (Paturel, 2014).

## **Prevailing Gun Culture**

Many believe gun control is an issue unaddressed that raises more concern, not video games. Katherine Cross, a gaming sociologist, states that the “scapegoat of video gaming has never been more nakedly exposed for what it is – a way of avoiding addressing our nation’s permissive and freewheeling gun culture (Romano, 2019). Cypherofityr believes that “it’s far too easy to scapegoat video games as low-hanging fruit instead of addressing the real issues, like the ease with which we can get weapons in this country” (Romano, 2019). Naomi Clark, an independent game developer and co-chair of New York University’s Game Center program, states that she finds it “more plausible that America’s long-standing culture of gun violence has affected video games, as a form of culture, than the other way around” and how “this nation’s cultural traditions and attachments around guns are far older than video games” (Romano, 2019). Susanna Pollack thinks that blaming games “for the current trend of gun violence in America is simply a scapegoat for the real conversation we should be having” (Kuchera, 2018).

Several politicians went to Twitter to address the issue. In response to the El Paso shooting, Eric Swalwell, a Representative of California, tweeted “most countries have violent video games & films, persons (with) mental health illness, and extremists. But no country has the mass shooting carnage of America. What makes us so different? Unrestricted weaponry” (Swalwell, 2019). Around the same time, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tweeted “people suffer from mental illness in every other country on earth; people play video games in virtually every other country on earth. The difference is the guns” (Clinton, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

The video game violence debate started not because people instinctively linked violent crimes to games, but because politicians popularized that idea by demonizing video games and making it credible.

Since the Columbine massacre, people scapegoated violent games for material and political interests, mainly gun control. The negative light shed onto video game players and the industry motivated them and other groups to debunk this “myth.” Games like Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty gained significant attention because they were labeled as “murder simulators.” Video game violence has been a concern for decades because gun control continues to be unaddressed and games are believed to simulate violence, making them easy to blame for real-life violence. Popular beliefs reflect our preferences. With issues unresolved, they will continue to be scapegoated to avoid discussion of bigger concerns.

Research can be extended to look at how other concerns like movies and music gained notoriety. Research can also be developed in areas where interests are driven by material or political motives and blame is put to credible ideas. One case is where Coca-Cola shifted blame for obesity away from its beverages by putting it to physical inactivity. Physical inactivity, like video games, is a big and credible concern, making it easy to blame.

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