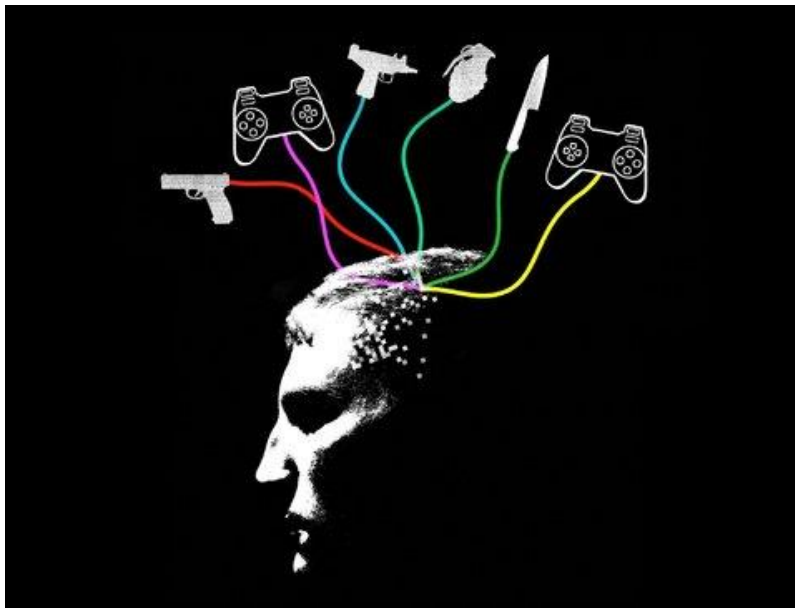# Focus on Effects of Violent Video Games in
MILITARISM AND CHILDREN

Collateral Damage? Researching a Connection Between Video Games and Violence

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Lesson Plan

Overview | Do violent video games promote aggressive or hostile behaviors among gamers? How have social scientists tried to answer this question? Is it answerable?

In this lesson, students read about studies exploring how video games affect gamers. They learn about the challenges in adequately exploring this question, critically evaluate the evidence that both supports and rejects the connection between violent video games and aggression, and discuss the issue in a class talk show or structured debate.

Materials | Computers with Internet access, projection equipment

Warm-Up | When students arrive, have them write one or two sentences in their notebooks answering the following question:

- What emotions do you feel right now?

Then, project the cute animal video of your choice at the front of the room. Ask students:

- What emotions did you feel after watching the video?
- How did the video make you feel physically — relaxed? Tense?
- Did watching the video make you feel any differently than you did upon coming to class?

Next, at your discretion, show the students the trailer for the **game** "Call Of Duty". [Note: in the interest of saving time, play the segment from 1:30 until the end.]

Ask the same three questions as above, and then ask:

- Based on this experience, can you make any generalizations about how observing different types of media can affect your mood? Why or why not?
- Do you think your response would change if we actually interacted with the videos in some way, instead of just watching?

As a segue into the main part of the lesson, take a quick poll by having students raise their hands to answer "yes":

- Do you ever play violent video games?   Click on the link to see the opinions of students who responded to a New York Times inquiry about whether or not video games should not be sold to minors.
- Have you played video games that are meant only for players over age 17?
- Is it hard for minors to **access these games?**
- Do you believe that violent video games should not be sold to minors? Finally, explain to the class that they will now jump into the current public discussion over purported connections between violence in video games and violent behaviour by assessing some of the current research in the field.

Related | In the article "Shooting in the Dark", Benedict Carey reports on conflicting studies about the role of violent video games in promoting aggression among gamers:

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 fuelled their urges.

But did it really?

Social scientists have been studying and debating the effects of media violence on behaviour 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 behaviour 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.)

Read the entire article.

Questions for discussion and reading comprehension:

1. For how long have social scientists studied the effects of violence in the media on behaviour? Why do you think the author calls the topic "especially relevant" today?

2. What are the three categories into which research on video games and aggression fall? What are correlation studies?

3. In one study referenced in the article, students played the game "Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance" and then measured out portions of hot sauce for students who, they were told, did not like hot sauce. What was the purpose of this study? What characteristic were the researchers trying to assess by having participants measure out servings of hot sauce?

4. What did the researchers conclude in the hot sauce experiment? How did they come to this conclusion?

5. According to the author, "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." In your own words, what does this mean? Given this information, do you think there should be tighter regulations on the level of violence permitted in video games played by children? Explain.

6. What other questions does this article raise? How might they be addressed?

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The Supreme Court ruled that video games like Grand Theft Auto IV are protected against a California law to bar youths from buying or renting them.

Activity: Students prepare to take part in a discussion focused on the argument that video games make people act violently or aggressively in other settings.

The discussion can be structured in a variety of formats, like a talk show or debate. No matter which format you choose, our Debatable Issues handout (PDF) can be useful.

Either to get started or after you have finished the activity, you might invite students to post thoughts on our related Student Opinion question also inspired by this article, Do violent video games make people more violent in real life?

Then, lead a brainstorming session, asking students what kinds of questions the public may want to know about video games and violence. Jot all student ideas on the board.

The list below provides additional questions that students may want to consider. You might decide to share some or all of these questions with students.

RELATED RESOURCES

FROM THE LEARNING NETWORK
- Student Opinion: Should Stores Sell Violent Video Games To Minors?
- Student Opinion: Do You Play Violent Video Games?
- Student Opinion: When Should You Feel Guilty For Killing Zombies?

FROM NYTIMES.COM

- [Makers Of Violent Video Games Marshal Support To Fend Off Regulation](#)
- [Video Games](#)

AROUND THE WEB

- [PBS: The Video Game Revolution](#)
- [Sandy Hook Shooting: Video Games Blamed, Again](#)
- [Do Violent Video Games Contribute To Youth Violence?](#)

1. What evidence is there to suggest that [violent video games increase aggression and violence in gamers](#)?

2. What evidence is there to [contradict this finding](#)?

3. How should parents, gamers, or others interested in this topic answer the question, "Do violent video games promote violent behaviour" when studies appear to give mixed results? What about the notion that playing violent games allows people to [act out aggression in a safe space](#) — namely, on a video screen?

4. What should the standard be in terms of declaring someone an authority on the topic of violence in video games? For example, a recent study indicates that [those who say violent video games are harmful to teenagers](#) have provided much more evidence to support their claims than those who argue the opposite?

5. How are the studies that explore the relationship between violence in video games and behaviour designed? What do they control for, and what should they control for?

6. Are there standard methods for exploring a behavioural trait like aggression or hostility? What are they?

7. What evidence did the Supreme Court cite in its ruling [overturning a California ban](#) on the sale of violent video games to children? Why did some of the justices disagree with this ruling?

8. Does research showing that [playing relaxing video games increases measures of kindness](#) strengthen the argument that the content of video games does affect player behaviours?

9. How do public perceptions about violence in video games affect politicians' [willingness to take action](#)? How do [industry leaders respond](#) to these actions?

Have students research one or more of the research questions they generated, or that were suggested in the list above. Students should do their research in

teams, pairs or individually — depending on which grouping works best for the discussion format you selected.

Students might want to start by combing through Times reporting on the link between video games and violence, or by consulting ProCon.org for its collection of arguments supporting both sides of the issue.

The PBS Web site "The Impact of Gaming" hosts a number of essays on the topic, and NPR has a story that offers a good introduction by focusing on the question: Why do we like violent games, anyway?

Allow ample time for students to research questions and prepare answers. Then, hold the talk show, debate or discussion.

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NOTE: If students will be performing in their own class talk show, you can make the activity even more realistic by assigning groups a real persona who holds a position on the issue of video games and violence. Students can use their own research to support these positions, and then one person in the group can represent that individual in the talk show. Here are five possible roles:

- Brad Bushman, a communications and psychology professor at Ohio State University, who wrote a study showing that violent video games contributed to long-term aggression

- Christopher J. Ferguson, associate professor of psychology and criminal justice at Texas A&M International University, who has not found a direct relationship between video games and violence in his research

- Justice Antonin Scalia, who ruled in a Supreme Court case that regulating violent video games was unconstitutional

- Justice Stephen G. Breyer, who disagreed with this ruling on the grounds that research sufficiently demonstrated that video games can harm children, and were therefore not protected by the First Amendment

- Justice Clarence Thomas, who also disagreed with this ruling in a separate dissent, asserting that parents have the right to decide what video games their children can play.

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To wrap up, you may want to ask students to write a reflection. What do they believe now about the link between video games and violence? What is their

evidence? Did their research influence their position? What about the class discussion? What further questions do they still have?

Going Further: Students can explore whether violent video games bring on violent behaviour by designing surveys or experiments (PDF) of their own. They might survey fellow students or members of their families, recreate one of the studies described in The Times article, or design an experiment meant to address a question that came up while participating in the class activity.

Alternatively, students might write an argumentative essay about the topic of video games and violence. They should take a position, support it with evidence, and address counter-claims.