



Violent Video Games

ProCon.org

Do Violent Video Games Contribute to Youth Violence?

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97% of 12-17 year olds in the US played video games in 2008, thus fueling an \$11.7 billion domestic video game industry. In 2008, 10 of the top 20 best-selling video games in the US contained violence.

Violent video games have been blamed for school shootings, increases in bullying, and violence towards women. Critics argue that these games desensitize players to violence, reward players for simulating violence, and teach children that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts.

Video game advocates contend that a majority of the research on the topic is deeply flawed and that no causal relationship has been found between video games and social violence. They argue that violent video games may reduce violence by serving as a substitute for rough and tumble play and by providing a safe outlet for aggressive and angry feelings. **Read more...**

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Video Games ProCon.org is a nonpartisan, nonprofit website that presents research, studies, and pro and con statements on questions related to whether or not video games contribute to youth violence.

Did You Know?

1. Sales of video games have more than quadrupled from 1995-2008, while the arrest rate for juvenile murders fell 71.9% and the arrest rate for all juvenile violent crimes declined 49.3% in this same period.
2. The 2008 study *Grand Theft Childhood* reported that 60% of middle school boys that played at least one Mature-rated game hit or beat up someone, compared to 39% of boys that did not play Mature-rated games.
3. California passed a law in 2005 that would have required violent video games to include an "18" label and criminalized the sale of these games to minors. On June 27, 2011, the US Supreme Court ruled 7-2 in *Brown vs. Entertainment Merchants Association* that the law violated free speech rights. [22]
4. Following the controversy involving hidden sexually explicit content in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, then-Senator of New York Hillary Clinton introduced a bill in 2005 to criminalize selling "Mature" or "Adults Only" rated video games to minors, arguing that video games were a "silent epidemic of desensitization." The Family Entertainment Protection Act was referred to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and expired at the end of the 109th Congress without becoming law.
5. In 2008, 298.2 million video games were sold in the US, totaling \$11.7 billion in revenue. Six of the top ten best-selling video games included violence, with four of the games carrying a "Mature" rating recommended for persons aged 17 and older.

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Pro & Con Arguments: "Do Violent Video Games Contribute to Youth Violence?"

PRO Contribute to Youth Violence

1. Increasing reports of bullying can be partially attributed to the popularity of violent video games. The 2008 study *Grand Theft Childhood* reported that 60% of middle school boys who played at least one Mature-rated game hit or beat up someone, compared to 39% of boys that did not play Mature-rated games. [2]
2. Video games often reward players for simulating violence, and thus enhance the learning of violent behaviors. Studies suggest that when violence is rewarded in video games, players exhibit increased aggressive behavior compared to players of video games where violence is punished. [23]
3. Violent video games desensitize players to real-life violence. It is common for victims in video games to disappear off screen when they are killed or for players to have multiple lives. In a 2005 study, violent video game exposure has been linked to reduced P300 amplitudes in the brain, which is associated with desensitization to violence and increases in aggressive behavior. [24]
4. A 2000 FBI report includes playing violent video games in a list of behaviors associated with school shootings. [25]
5. Violent video games teach youth that violence is an acceptable conflict-solving strategy and an appropriate way to achieve one's goals. [26] A 2009 study found that youth who play violent video games have lower belief in the use of nonviolent strategies and are less forgiving than players of nonviolent video games.
6. Violent video games cause players to associate pleasure and happiness with the ability to cause pain in others. [3]
7. Young children are more likely to confuse fantasy violence with real world violence, and without a framework for ethical decision making, they may mimic the actions they see in violent video games. [4]
8. Violent video games require active participation, repetition, and identification with the violent character. With new game controllers allowing more physical interaction, the immersive and interactive characteristics of video games can increase the likelihood of youth violence. [5]
9. Playing violent video games increases aggressive behavior and arousal. [27] A 2009 study found that it takes up to four minutes for the level of aggressive thoughts and feelings in children to return to normal after playing violent video games. It takes five to ten minutes for heart rate and aggressive behavior to return to baseline. Video games that show the most blood generate more aggressive thoughts. When blood is present in video games, there is a measurable increase in arousal and hostility. [28]
10. Playing violent video games causes the development of aggressive behavioral scripts [29]. A behavioral script

CON Contribute to Youth Violence

1. Violent juvenile crime in the United States has been declining as violent video game popularity has increased. The arrest rate for juvenile murders has fallen 71.9% between 1995 and 2008. The arrest rate for all juvenile violent crimes has declined 49.3%. In this same period, video game sales have more than quadrupled. [7] [8]
2. A causal link between violent video games and violent behavior has not been proven. [34] Many studies suffer from design flaws and use unreliable measures of violence and aggression such as noise blast tests. Thoughts about aggression have been confused with aggressive behavior, and there is a lack of studies that follow children over long periods of time.
3. A 2004 US Secret Service review of previous school-based attacks found that one-eighth of attackers exhibited an interest in violent video games, less than the rate of interest attackers showed in violent movies, books, and violence in their own writings. The report did not find a relationship between playing violent video games and school shootings. [35]
4. The small correlations that have been found between video games and violence may be explained by violent youth being drawn to violent video games. Violent games do not cause youth to be violent. Instead, youth that are predisposed to be violent seek out violent entertainment such as video games.
5. Playing violent video games reduces violence in adolescent boys by serving as a substitute for rough and tumble play. [36] Playing violent video games allows adolescent boys to express aggression and establish status in the peer group without causing physical harm.
6. Video game players understand they are playing a game. Their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality prevents them from emulating video game violence in real life. [9]
7. Playing violent video games provides a safe outlet for aggressive and angry feelings. A 2007 study reported that 45% of boys played video games because "it helps me get my anger out" and 62% played because it "helps me relax." [37]
8. Violent video games provide healthy and safe opportunities for children to virtually explore rules and consequences of violent actions. Violent games also allow youth to experiment with issues such as war, violence and death without real world consequences. [38]
9. The level of control granted to video game players, especially in terms of pace and directing the actions of their character, allows youth to regulate their emotional state during play. [39] Research shows that a perception of being in control reduces emotional and stressful responses to events.

is developed from the repetition of actions and affects the subconscious mind. An example of a common behavioral script is a driving script that tells drivers to get in a vehicle, put on a seat belt, and turn on the ignition. Similarly, violent video games can lead to scripts that tell youth to respond aggressively in certain situations. Violence in video games may lead to real world violence when scripts are automatically triggered in daily life, such as being nudged in a school hallway.

11. A 1998 study found that 21% of games sampled involved violence against women [23]. Exposure to sexual violence in video games is linked to increases in violence towards women and false attitudes about rape such as that women incite men to rape or that women secretly desire rape. [30]
12. Several studies in both the United States and Japan have shown that, controlling for prior aggression, children who played more violent video games during the beginning of the school year showed more aggression than their peers later in the school year. [31]
13. Exposure to violent video games is linked to lower empathy in players. In a 2004 study of 150 fourth and fifth graders by Professor Jeanne Funk, violent video games were the only type of media associated with lower empathy. Empathy, the ability to understand and enter into another's feelings, plays an important role in the process of moral evaluation and is believed to inhibit aggressive behavior. [32]
14. When youth view violence in video games, they are more likely to fear becoming a victim of acts of violence. According to a 2000 joint statement by six leading national medical associations including the American Medical Association and American Psychological Association, this escalated fear results in youth not trusting others and taking violent self-protective measures. [33]
15. Violent video games can train youth to be killers. The US Marine Corps licensed *Doom II* in 1996 to create *Marine Doom* in order to train soldiers. In 2002, the US Army released first-person shooter *America's Army* to recruit soldiers and prepare recruits for the battlefield. [6]

Comment 

10. Alarmist claims similar to current arguments against violent video games have been made in the past when new media such as radio, movies, and television have been introduced. Claims that these various mediums would result in surges in youth violence also failed to materialize.
11. Violent video games may affect the form of violence, but does not cause the violence to occur. [40] Youth might model violent acts on what they have seen in video games, but the violence would still occur in the absence of video games.
12. Exposure to violent video games has not been shown to be predictive of violent behavior or crime. Any link found between video games and violence is best explained by other variables such as exposure to family violence and aggressive personality. [10]
13. When research does show that violent video games cause more arousal and aggression, it is because the comparative game is less exciting. [41] A short-term increase in arousal and aggression does not mean a child is going to leave his or her house and commit a violent act.
14. In 2005, the US had 2,279 murders committed by teenagers (27.9 per million residents) compared to 73 in Japan (3.1 per million). Per capita video game sales were \$5.20 in the US compared to \$47 in Japan. This example illustrates that there is no correlation between violent behavior and playing video games. [11] [12] [13]

Comment 

Background: "Do Violent Video Games Contribute to Youth Violence?"

97% of 12-17 year olds in the US played video games in 2008, thus fueling an \$11.7 billion domestic video game industry. In 2008, 10 of the top 20 best-selling video games in the US contained violence. [1]

Violent video games have been blamed for school shootings, increases in bullying, and violence towards women. Critics argue that these games desensitize players to violence, reward players for simulating violence, and teach children that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts.

Video game advocates contend that a majority of the research on the topic is deeply flawed and that no causal relationship has been found between video games and social violence. They argue that violent video games may reduce violence by serving as a substitute for rough and tumble play and by providing a



(Click to enlarge image)

Mature-rating assigned by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board
 Source: Deanne Fitzmaurice, "Video-game Ban Considered by Appeals Court," www.sfgate.com, Oct. 30, 2008

safe outlet for aggressive and angry feelings.

The debate over violent video games can be traced back to the 1976 release of the game *Death Race*. [40] The object of the game was to run over screaming "gremlins" with a car, at which point they would turn into tombstones. Controversy erupted because the "gremlins" resembled stick-figure humans, and it was reported that the working title of the game was *Pedestrian*. After protestors dragged *Death Race* machines out of arcades and burned them in parking lots, production of the game ceased.

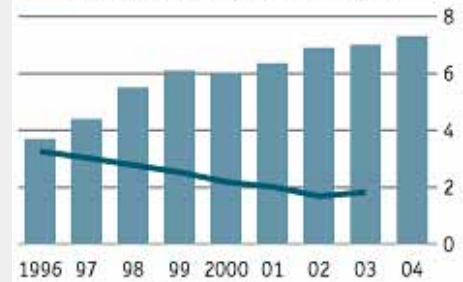
In 1993, public outcry following the release of violent video games *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* prompted Congress to hold hearings on regulating the sale of video games. During the hearings, California Attorney General Dan Lungren testified that violent video games have "a desensitizing impact on young, impressionable minds."

[14] Threatened with the creation of a federal regulatory commission, the video game industry voluntarily established the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) on Sep. 1, 1994 to create a ratings system. Based on the video game's content, the ESRB assigns one of the following ratings: "Early Childhood," "Everyone," "Everyone 10+," "Teen," "Mature," or "Adults Only." In a Pew Research Center 2008 survey, 50% of boys and 14% of girls aged 12-17 listed a game with a "Mature" or "Adults Only" rating in their current top three favorite games. [42]

What link?

US:

— Total violent crime offences, m
 — Computer and video-game sales, \$bn



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Entertainment Software Association

(Click to enlarge image)

Chart showing the decline in violent crime offenses and increases in video game sales from 1996-2004.

Source: "Chasing the Dream," www.economist.com, Aug. 4, 2005



(Click to enlarge image)

Political cartoon about video games and school shootings.

Source: Brian Fairrington, "School Shooting Influence," available on www.caglecartoons.com, Mar. 29, 2005

The controversy over violent video games resurfaced following the massacre of 13 people at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, CO on Apr. 20, 1999. The two teenage shooters were revealed to be avid players of weapon-based combat games *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*. Following the shooting, 176 newspaper articles across the country focused on the allegation that video games were the cause of the tragedy. [43]

A 2005 resolution by the American Psychological Association called for the reduction of violence in video games marketed to youth because of possible links between video games and aggression towards women. [30] In response to the discovery of disabled but accessible sexual content in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, then-Senator of New York Hillary Clinton introduced a bill in 2005 to criminalize selling "Mature" or "Adults Only" rated video games to minors, arguing that video games were a "silent epidemic of desensitization." [15] The bill died in committee at the end of the 109th Congress.

On Oct. 7, 2005, California passed a law that required violent video games to include an "18" label and criminalized the sale of these games to minors. The law was blocked by the US District Court for the Northern District of California and was struck down in Feb. 2009 by the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals citing First Amendment protections and the inability of the state to demonstrate a link between violence in video games and real-world violence. As of Dec. 2008, six other state statutes and two city ordinances concerning the sale of violent



(Click to enlarge image)

Screenshot of controversial violent video game *Death Race*. The object of this 1976

video games to minors have been stricken down on similar grounds. [44] On June 27, 2011, the US Supreme Court ruled 7-2 in *Brown vs. Entertainment Merchants*

Association that the California law banning the sale of violent video games to minors violated free speech rights. In the majority opinion, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote, "A state possesses legitimate power to protect children from harm... but that does not include a free-floating power to restrict the ideas to which children may be exposed." [22]

game was to run over "gremlins" with your car.
 Source: "Death Race Remake Recalls First Violent Game Controversy," *kotaku.com*, Aug. 2, 2008

Within hours of the Virginia Tech shooting on Apr. 16, 2007, attorney and anti-game activist Jack Thompson appeared on *Fox News* to blame the tragedy on the violent game *Counter-Strike*. Other high-profile figures such as television host Dr. Phil McGraw and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney argued that video games were to blame for the shooting. However, it was later revealed by the Virginia Tech Review Panel that the shooter did not play video games. [45]



(Click to enlarge image)

Image from 2008's *Grand Theft Auto IV*.
 Source: "Grand Theft Auto IV: The Lost and Damned," *www.ign.com*, Feb. 12, 2009

Critics of violent video games argue that playing violent games desensitizes players to real-life violence and is responsible for the increasing rates of bullying. In 2007, 32% of students aged 12-18 reported being bullied at school, compared to 5% in 1999. [46] [47] Some researchers are concerned that violent video games teach children that violence is an acceptable approach to solving conflicts and achieving goals.

Defenders of violent video games argue that the research has failed to show a causal link between video games and real-world violence. They argue that correlations between video games and violent behavior can be explained by youth predisposed to violence being attracted to violent entertainment. Additionally, if video games do cause youth to be violent, then one would expect juvenile violent crime to increase as more youth play violent video games. Instead, the arrest rate for juvenile violent crimes has fallen 49.3% between 1995 and 2008, while video game sales have quadrupled in the same period. [16]

Several games have garnered significant media attention, including 2004's JFK assassination reenactment *JFK Reloaded*, 2005's Columbine shooting reenactment *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, and 2006's *RapeLay*, a Japanese video game where the player stalks and rapes a mother and her two daughters. Prior to the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, which went on to gross \$550 million in the first five days after its Nov. 10, 2009 release, leaked footage of the game stirred enough controversy that publisher Activision issued a response defending the game's violent imagery. [17] [18]

In 2008, 298.2 million video games were sold in the US alone, totaling \$11.7 billion in revenue. [48] Six of the top ten best-selling video games in 2008 included violence, with four of the games carrying a "Mature" rating recommended for persons aged 17 and older. [1]

CBS News reported on Feb. 18, 2013 that the shooter at the Dec. 14, 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre "was motivated by violent video games and a strong desire to kill more people than another infamous mass murderer," citing law enforcement sources. CBS also cited unnamed sources saying that the shooter was "likely acting out the fantasies of a video game as he killed 20 first graders and six adults at the school." [20] Connecticut State Police spokesman Lt. Paul Vance called those reports "mere speculation" and said it was too early to know the killer's motivation. [21]

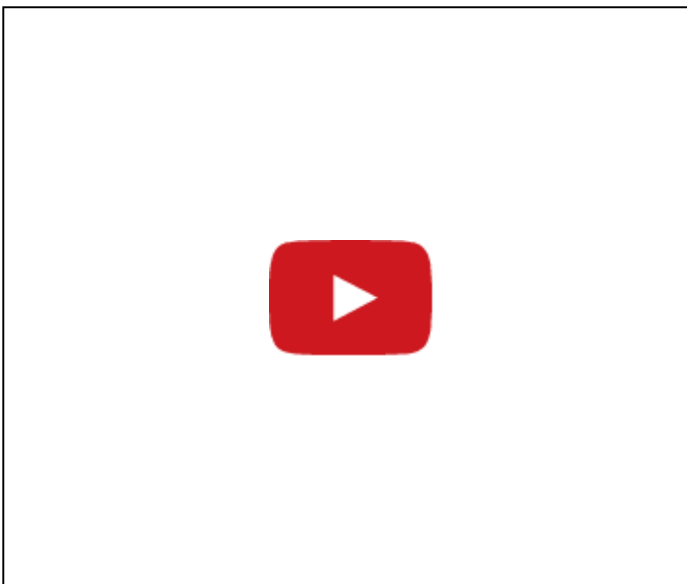
Worldwide sales of video games are predicted to reach \$73.5 billion by 2013. [19] As games get more sophisticated and realistic, the debate over whether or not children should be exposed to violent video games continues.

10 Most Frequently Played Games	
What are your current top three favorite games?	
Game Title	Number of mentions
Guitar Hero	158
Halo 3	104
Madden NFL (no specific version)	77
Solitaire	65
Dance Dance Revolution	60
Madden NFL 08	59
Tetris	59
Grand Theft Auto (no specific version)	58
Halo (no specific version)	57
The Sims (no specific version)	54

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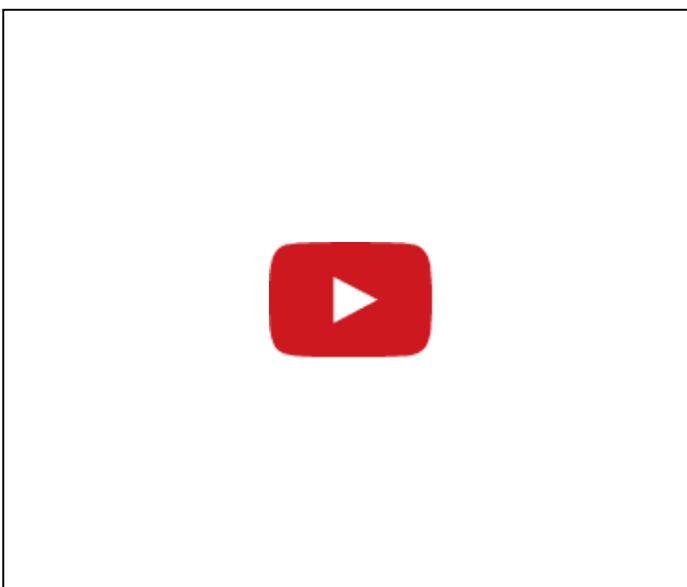
Results of a 2008 Pew survey on the favorite video games of teens
 Source: "Teens, Video Games, and Civics," *Pew Internet and American Life Project website*, Sep. 16, 2008

Video Gallery



NOT CLEARLY PRO OR CON G4 interviews Grand Theft Childhood authors Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson about their research on the link between violent video games and violence.
Source: "Face Time: Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson," www.g4tv.com, Apr. 16, 2008

NOT CLEARLY PRO OR CON Trailer for the documentary Playing Columbine: A True Story of Videogame Controversy, which examines the role of violent video games in our society and traces the history of controversial game Super Columbine Massacre RPG.
Source: "Playing Columbine - Trailer," www.youtube.com (Oct. 21, 2008)



PRO ABC News reports on Vice President Biden meeting with video game industry officials to talk about gun control laws.
Source: "Obama Task Force Target Violent Video Games Following School Shooting," abcnews.go.com, Jan. 12, 2013

CON Host Cameron Robinson and Experimental Psychologist Mark Coulson, PhD, weigh the impact of violence in video games and conclude there is no proof that it causes violent behavior.
Source: Game Spot, "Violence in Video Games - The What If Machine," www.youtube.com, Nov. 19, 2012

Notices for Video Games and Other ProCon.org Information (archived after 30 days)

3/4/2015 - **US Department of Labor Cites ProCon.org for Its 'Up-to-Date Information' on Same-Sex Marriage** - Another example of the utility and credibility of ProCon.org at the highest levels of government. To date, 24 international governments, 30 US state governments, and 10 federal agencies have referenced ProCon.org research.

3/3/2015 - **20 Lesson Plan Ideas with Common Core Correlations** – Free curricula to help teach counterargument, distinguish fact from opinion, analyze primary sources, build research speed, and other thoughtful lessons related to critical thinking. Lessons are listed by grade level and include adaptations and Common Core standards met.

[Archived Notices](#) (archived after 30 days)

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