

Better Violence through Videogames

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Ever get the impression that advancement in technology might be outpacing advancement in ethics? I did, when I read this job posting on the videogame industry's most popular website:

This is the only Official U.S. Army game. Since its release in July 2002, critically acclaimed, *America's Army* continues to develop and push boundaries for a world wide audience with millions of downloads. Would you like to be a part of the high quality, high visibility game that has a unique position in the gaming industry?¹

The army is looking for a few good men—not to program a war engine, but—to program a game engine. As a U.S. Army veteran, I was left to wonder: Where in the history of military spending had the U.S. Army crossed the line from armed services to entertainment services?

As a game designer, I was left to wonder: What is the military doing to our kids? We are blitzed by news that blames entertainment for our tragedies: *Beavis & Butthead* caused a young boy to set his house on fire; *Doom* caused teenagers to gun down their classmates in Columbine. If these are reasonable accusations, then the following question is also legitimate: What tragedy will *America's Army* cause? As a veteran and a videogame designer, I consider it my duty to my country, and to our children, to answer that question.

Here, in this article, are the results of an investigation into videogames, violent behavior, and censorship. The article tackles these topics in four separate parts: *First*, the psychological experiments on the effects of violent videogames; *Second*, the myths about videogames and violent behavior; *Third*, an unconventional perspective on the institutions that routinely employ violent behavior; And *finally*, a discussion of the unspoken motivations behind videogame censorship. This survey is ambitious, so let's take it slow, one part at a time.

Part I: Science of Violence

Science often explains a sequence of events as a causal relationship. You've heard numerous explanations in popular science: air pollution causes acid rain; cigarette smoking causes cancer. Most of these explanations begin as a pointed question, such as: Does cigarette smoking cause cancer? In this case, the scientists reply: Yes, it does.

Within the last century, social scientists began asking the question: Does media cause violence? Within the last three decades, they began asking: Do videogames cause violence? These are good questions, so let's find out.

Hypothetical Hostility

Research in media violence has become the ammunition for censorship advocates in their fight for control of media content. Before we parrot the oft-cited statistics, let's take a closer look at how the research has been conducted.

Most research into media violence begins with a hypothesis, which is that *media violence* (images and sounds of violence) causes violent behavior. Any hypothesis, though, is nothing more than a conjecture without evidence, such as the conclusion of an experiment, to validate it. To get to a valid conclusion, the experimenter must employ a valid *methodology* (which is the procedure for conducting the experiment).

Although most advocates for censorship cite the conclusions of experiments on media violence, none of the advocates question the methods. This is a shame, because the validity of the methodology is more important than the conclusion. Without a valid methodology, no valid conclusion can be drawn. So (as Dr. Stuart Fischhoff addressed to the American Psychological Association), a flawed experiment means nothing, no matter how many flawed experiments confirm each other.² It doesn't matter how many experiments on media violence claim that media violence causes violent behavior if these experiments were flawed in design.

In experiments on media violence, the flaws are numerous. Even the most reputable condemnations of videogames are rife with erroneous methods. The most cited researcher into media violence, Craig Anderson (Chair of Psychology at Iowa State University) stated:

Recent work by Anderson and colleagues (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Anderson et al., 1995, 1996) has shown that acute situational variables such as pain, provocation, violent movie clips, and uncomfortably cold and hot temperatures increase State Hostility scores.³

(It may sound confusing, but yes, Anderson cites himself as his evidence—frequently.)

Regardless of self-reference, the methodology supporting this claim has a serious flaw. As Douglas Lowenstein (Chairman of the Entertainment Software Association) noted, the State Hostility score (despite its Capitalization) is not an objective measurement.⁴ It is a self-report; that is, a survey.

Self-reports differ from behavior. If self-reports were valid predictors of violent behavior, we could downsize the police to polltakers. We could replace patrols and investigations with surveys and self-reports. Imagine the absurdity of such a survey:

Are you going to kill someone today? Please circle: Yes or No.

[Respondent circles “No.”]

Good, citizen.

Are you going to steal from someone today? Please circle: Yes or No.

[Respondent circles “No.”]

Good, citizen. See you next week.

This self-report does not recall or predict violent behavior. It’s simply a survey—an absurd one at that. While we easily recognize its absurdity and laugh at anyone who uses it to predict violent behavior, why do we take surveys written with less humor so seriously? A subjective response to a survey question is not an act of violence, nor does it correlate to one. Hostile responses to a dozen questions on a survey does not predict murdering thirteen children in a schoolroom.

High Scores

If media violence could cause physical violence, then Anderson must be a brave researcher, because he exposes himself to the newest media technology for producing violence: the videogame. But Anderson should have little to fear, because he knows his way around a game of another sort: the laboratory experiment. Let's look at the last phrase in the previous quote more carefully:

... situational variables such as pain, provocation, violent movie clips, and uncomfortably cold and hot temperatures increase State Hostility scores (Anderson and Dill).

(Did Anderson just say "score?" If the lab conductor is keeping score, then who's playing games here: the lab participants or its conductor?) Sure, variables are commonplace in experiments, but does the State Hostility score reflect the experimental situation?

Or is this "score" more like the score in a videogame? In a videogame, the score usually reflects the skill of player. With experimenters playing games, the State Hostility score might indicate the hostility of a different kind of State: the State, which funds the experiments. After all, the greatest variable in any experiment is the bias of the experimenter. Gerard Jones, the child-psychologist who, in the course of investigating media violence, actually took the time to listen to children put it plainly: We see what we want to see.⁵

Other experiments have purportedly proven that media causes violence. There's just one problem in the proof: No violence occurred. Since no one was harmed or threatened, no

aggression occurred. If anyone behaved aggressively, it was the experiment designer, not the participant. In a common experiment, the participant is told that electrical shocks are being given to another participant. But this is a lie. No recipient of a shock was visible and no shock was given (except, perhaps, the shock to the public that swallows a conclusion without question). Freedman, an expert who reviewed the experiments, added in his book, *Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression*:

Moreover, the subject was given explicit permission to give the shocks—indeed, it was their job in the experiment to give them. The measure of aggression was how many shocks or how intense the shocks the subject chose to give.⁶

The supposed aggression was pressing a button—a button that did nothing but record a number. Pressing a button in a lab has no correlation to physical violence. These laboratory measurements have no correlation, except, paradoxically, in a videogame. In a computer role-playing game, pressing a button labeled “Strength” has no correlation to physical education. The experiments did not prove that videogames caused violence. If these experiments proved anything, it was that the experiment’s designer was willing to employ deception to yield a politically expedient result.

Another critical factor of the experiment’s design is the environment for the participants. The environmental context of the behavior delimits meaningful conclusions on what factors are influencing behavior. So a conclusion about experimental behavior, if taken out of context, is meaningless. Jib Fowles, a researcher at the University of Houston, commented that a child in a

media violence experiment is exposed to media in an environment nothing like the living room, and under the duress of an unfamiliar social setting.⁷ When these children are confined in a sterile lab and surrounded by strangers, it is no wonder that some of the children become upset. Such experiments go further toward proving that laboratory distress, rather than media content, causes violence.

Invisible Violence

A critical review of the experiments leads one to ask: Where is the violence? Apparently, it's invisible. You can't see it and can't even measure it, but if you make a living as a media violence researcher, you can find a way to detect it. Craig Anderson boldly claims in (an article with the misleading title) "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life," that videogames cause aggressive thoughts:

We know from related research that merely seeing a picture of a gun or other weapon can increase the accessibility of aggressive thoughts (e.g., Anderson et al., 1996; Anderson, Benjamin, & Bartholow, 1998).⁸

(Yes, Anderson cites himself yet again as his evidence.) Anyway, what is wrong is the deceptive phrase: "accessibility of aggressive thoughts." What does that mean? Are aggressive thoughts locked away in a pantry of the psyche with an id-proof device? No. All that "accessibility of aggressive thoughts" means is what advertisers, political campaigners, and students preparing for an exam already know: If you want to be able to recall a subject, then study the subject. It doesn't matter what the subject is.

Moreover, subject recall has no relationship to subject behavior. Reading a book about pop physics does not cast the reader's mind in the mold of Richard Feynman. Likewise, playing a videogame about manslaughter does not cast the player's mind in the mold of Charles Manson.

In his conclusion, Anderson has confused the subject of violence, the release of tension, and physical harm. Since he observed no violence in the laboratory, he "simulated" it.⁹ His method was to have the subject honk a horn that produces white noise. Douglas Lowenstein saw through this chimerical simulation, and submitted his testimony to Congress accordingly:

Some researchers do claim that they have established a link between playing a violent game and aggressive behavior, such as Anderson and Dill. But their measure of aggressive behavior is not evidence of an actual violent act or the actual intent to injure someone, but the intensity and duration of noise blasts initiated by their subjects.¹⁰

Anderson's claim that noise blasts correlate to violence approaches the absurd. If we took Anderson's measurement at face value, then the number of violent acts in America would have to be multiplied by more than a hundredfold just to catch up to Anderson's laboratory "evidence." Every time a horn is used, a doorbell pressed, or a friend is called on a cell phone, Anderson's research assistant should tally another *aggressive* noise blast. By Anderson's criteria of a noise blast, heavy metal bands, such as MegaDeth, would count as physical aggression. A live concert would be equivalent to a mass grave, and the loud chopping blades of a medical evacuation helicopter would be equivalent to the swathing blades of a war engine.

I Think, Therefore I am Violent

Since no violence can be observed, experimenters claim that violence is occurring but we just can't see it. It's occurring in the mind. (Where better for a psychologist to hide his or her missing evidence than in the mind?) Some politically expedient psychologists stoop to mental charades. For example, Craig Anderson uses big words to explain an oldwives' tale notion of media violence:

Furthermore, repeated exposure to graphic scenes of violence is likely to be desensitizing. In essence, the creation and automatization of these aggression-related knowledge structures and the desensitization effects change the individual's personality.¹¹

In brief, "the creation and automatization of ... knowledge structures" means: recall. So in essence, Anderson speculates that playing a videogame makes the player more likely to recall the subject of the videogame. Furthermore, he speculates that playing a videogame long enough causes the player to become familiar with the subject of the videogame. For such bold new science, William James would have been proud.

These "scientists," and their fans, mistake correlation and cause. Just because some violent children like to play videogames with violent themes does not mean that playing violent games causes violence. That is as absurd as claiming that reading romance novels causes romance.¹²

Hallucinating Hostility

One of the trademarks of an invalid experiment is the inability of any other scientist to replicate the experiment. Although some experimenters have concluded that there is a link between media and violence, their colleagues could not replicate the results. So, in short, “the findings on media violence and aggression have been weak, inconsistent, and non-replicable.”¹³

If no one else can replicate the results, then the experiment itself must be questioned. What most people forget is that: One of the variables of the experiment is the person *designing* the experiment. If the experiment cannot be replicated, then is the experimental designer effectively hallucinating? Is the experimenter projecting hostility where none exists?

There are bigger barriers for censorship-seeking researchers than results that cannot be replicated. Colleagues have already revealed evidence to the contrary: Media violence does *not* cause physical violence. In investigating what was then new media, Schramm (1961) found that the presence of violent television shows correlated to *sensitivity* to violence.¹⁴ Hartnagel et al (1975) surveyed high school students and found no correlation between exposure to media violence and the approval of violent behavior. If the hypothesis is that media violence induces physical violence, then these studies contradict the hypothesis, and instead conclude: Media violence does *not* induce violent behavior.

Since the evidence contradicts the censors' faith, how does their pernicious faith in media violence persist?

Part II: Myths of Media Violence

The experiments in media violence are based on the abuse of psychological principles of human behavior. B.F. Skinner introduced psychologists to the experimental use of *operant conditioning*, in which an animal's behavior is molded by food or other physical rewards.

The U.S. military should recognize operant conditioning. David Grossman, a former Lieutenant Colonel, noted that the U.S. military employs operant conditioning to motivate soldiers to kill,¹⁵ and Vietnam veterans have corroborated this reasoning with their own subjective experiences.¹⁶

But for a videogame to employ operant conditioning, it must physically produce a reward for its player, and only when the player performs the conditional behavior. For a videogame to condition a player to commit violence, it must withhold rewards until the player actually hits, shoots, or murders. Not on screen, but in the physical world. Pressing a button and watching pixels move is not violence. Physically hacking at or shooting at someone and maiming or killing the person—that is violence. If, *and only if*, a videogame manufactured a twinkie for a player every time he or she murdered a classmate, then *that* would be operant conditioning.

Furthermore, the same B.F. Skinner noted that humans possess the ability to evaluate and criticize, which counteracts operant conditioning. As Gerard Jones, an expert on child-psychology, put it in his book *Killing Monsters*:

Just because shooter games remind us of real shooting and military training doesn't mean that kids experience them as such when they play, any more than they experience plastic army men or chess pieces as real warriors.¹⁷

But wait. It gets worse. The psychologist David Grossman even claimed that entertainment is equivalent to nicotine:

“The television industry has gained its market share through an addictive and toxic ingredient.” Grossman says he looks forward to the day when media companies are subject to the same criticism as tobacco companies.¹⁸

When investigators resort to equating media and chemicals, science evaporates. The supposed science has been vaporized into an inapplicable analogy.

Some scientists have responded slyly when their experiments were debunked. So what if their experiments detected no cause of violence? They counter that experiments on smoking have detected no cause of cancer.¹⁹ By such careless rejoinders, the honorable tradition of science is being sullied.

Smoking multiplies the risk of death by lung cancer 22 times. Quitting smoking reduces this risk, and the risk of lung cancer is correlated to the rate of cigarette smoking.²⁰ This is a *dose-response correlation*. Increase the dose (smoking), and the response (lung cancer) increases.

Decrease the dose, and the response decreases. Thus, through proving a dose-response correlation, we know that smoking causes cancer.

The evidence on a dose-response correlation between videogames and violence states: No effect. As Dr. Freedman put it: “Not one experiment has shown that exposure causes people to commit serious acts of violence. Most of the experiments do not involve real aggression, and none involve true violence.”²¹

Data-Proof Proponents

For some, the questions still seem open: Does media cause violence? Do videogames, as a form of media, cause violence? The question is not as open as opportunistic researchers would lead consumers of statistics to believe. After analyzing the experiments performed to date, Dr. Freedman has noted a strange pattern. Correlations in the experiments point the wrong way. The experiments that correlated a dose of media violence to a response of physical violence were *less stable* than the experiments that concluded no dose-response correlation.

As far as correlations go in experimental design, it is well-understood that the size of the sample (such as the number of children) increases the stability of the conclusion. So, if a scientist wants more accurate data, he or she performs the experiment on more participants. What is the correlation between the number of children in an experiment and the hypothesis of causality? Negative. Experiments with a larger number of children tended to return the conclusion that media with violent content does *not* cause violent behavior.²²

Censorship-enthusiasts love to hold up experimental results as if they were holy scripture. But when a censorship-enthusiast cites an experiment, the first question that should come to mind is: Which experiment? In actuality, proponents of videogame censorship choose their experiments carefully. They have to. Three out of four laboratory experiments state that media violence does not cause violent behavior or aggression.²³ Only one out of four agrees. Three out of four disagree. So, the next time you hear “proof” that media causes aggression, question the experiment.

Censors, being a hardy lot, look to other forms of experiments, such as longitudinal studies. A longitudinal study measures a variable (such as violent behavior) over a prolonged period. Yet, here again, the would-be censor has to be selective. Two out of three conclusive longitudinal studies return no relation between exposure to media with violent content and violent behavior.²⁴

There are readily available facts for the past three decades of videogames. Videogames are new media, but they are not that new. A generation of Americans has not lived without videogames. As columnist Haeri has asked, with all these videogames, where are all the mass murderers?²⁵ Indeed, during the 1990s, with the rise of first-person shooters (a title begging to be pounced on by political opportunists), violent crime in the U.S. dropped.²⁶

Again, where’s the violence? Sure, someone can begin with a hypothesis that media causes violence. But then: three out of four lab experiments disagree, two out of three longitudinal studies disagree, and history disagrees. In the face of this, what kind of fact-immune system can survive? Ask a senator. Some people, particularly some U.S. politicians, do not need scientific

validation. Witnessing a child pretending to hold a gun or feigning a karate kick is evidence enough.²⁷ Play-acting is violence, these politicians say. If that were so, then liquor stores could be held up by any five year old with a fully-loaded finger.

Citing children's playing behavior as a form of violence is circular. All young mammals play. Play does not indicate violence; it indicates playfulness. Play is a natural, mammalian instinct. Play occurs in puppy dogs as well as the human children. When all is said and done, there has been no act of violence. There has been an act of play.

Without play, a child would not develop a healthy mind.²⁸ Would these censors seriously prefer to cripple their child's intellectual development just to forego a feigned karate kick? Even play fighting is a natural mammalian activity, which promotes the development of healthy children and adults among many species.

Perhaps it is ironic that the same politicians who want to convince you that media causes violence believe that playful behavior is violent behavior. Psychologically, the kids are better off than these politicians. At least the kids know they are playing. The politicians are hallucinating.

So, these censors who hallucinate violence are data-proof.²⁹ They select their data carefully, and then, when the facts fail to support them, they abandon the facts. I can't blame them. Who needs facts when you have an old, reliable excuse?

New Media, the Old Excuse

No correlation. No evidence. Yet videogames are to blame. They must be, because videogames are a new medium of entertainment. New directions in entertainment have been the traditional scapegoat of societal failures. In the 1960s, Charles Manson claimed a Beatles song inspired his murders.³⁰ Was rock & roll to blame? Before that, in the 1920s, two young men, Leopold and Loeb, murdered a boy. Who was to blame then? Their generation pointed their fingers at “movies, jazz, and liberal education.”³¹ Since the inception of the videogame *Death Race* in 1976, critics have pointed their crooked fingers at videogames.³²

Fear of new entertainment requires no evidence, only judicious rumors and intellectual laziness. In 1992, an eight-year-old boy burnt down the home in which his sister was trapped. Major newspapers and broadcasters took no delay in blaming *Beavis & Butthead* for inspiring this kid to play with matches. The evidence was clear. Two days earlier in an episode of *Beavis & Butthead* those two animated retards played with matches. Then this kid did, too. Therefore, this kid learned to play with matches from *Beavis & Butthead*. Wrong. This kid had been playing with matches long before the show aired; he had a history of pyromania. Furthermore, the home he lived in didn't have cable, so *he never saw the show*.³³

What better to blame than an invisible source, which can't contradict you. In the 1600s, the excuse of Salem children was, “The Devil made me do it.” Today, according to the Christian Science Monitor, the Devil is in the violence of a videogame.³⁴

The Columbine murders are the favorite citation of videogame censors. The murderers had played *Doom* and even created a mod for the game, so censors want you to believe that the game had some influence. Again, it is a case of the censors picking and choosing their evidence. During this same period, there were sixteen separate mass murders by minors. Out of sixteen, fifteen had murderers whose play of videogames was insignificant.³⁵

The consistent correlation between these murders was not exposure to entertainment media of any kind, but exposure to the news media. The murderers were imitating previous murderers before them, which came to their attention through the news and through history books.³⁶ Ironic. The same news media that blames videogames probably has more to do with underage mass murder than the videogames that the news is attacking. Imagine that headline: “This just in—Watching the News May Cause Violence!” I wonder why that headline has never aired.

Let’s set the record straight: Games are a form of entertainment. People play them to release stress, let off steam, and have fun in a safe environment.³⁷ Adults seem to have forgotten what it means to be a kid. For some boys, the appeal of a game depicting blood, gore, or other repugnance, is just that: repugnance. Part of the fun is watching a sister, or a parent, squirm.³⁸ Sure it’s juvenile. But that’s what kids are: juvenile.

Rather than looking at mythical sources for violence, parents should use research constructively. The best results of the experiments *have* concluded something remarkable. When children study, their grades improve. When they do not, they do not. It doesn’t matter if the game was violent

or not, but simply what the kid was doing.³⁹ Want to help the children? Support loving parents, not legal censors.

The Nature of Violence

So, having discovered that videogames don't cause violence, what does cause violence? It is not simple. Each incident has unique facets, and there are a number of causes at work. However, there are three plausible roots of violence: human nature, poverty, and politics.

Let us turn to evolutionary psychology to start our explanation of human nature. Psychology is the study of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in a single human. This field of science attempts to answer questions such as what causes certain emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in an individual human. Recently, evolutionary psychology has been supplying more and more satisfactory answers.

That's nice, but what is evolutionary about evolutionary psychology? In short, *evolutionary psychology* applies theories of evolution to psychology. An evolutionary approach generally tries to explain an emotion, thought, or behavior as an adaptation, which increases the likelihood that a lineage survives, generation after generation. Specific explanations take patience to comprehend, but that is a reasonable investment, because evolution is millions, or even billions, of years old.

What does evolutionary psychology tell us about violence? Robert Wright, author of *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*, said, "From an evolutionary point of view,

the leading cause of violence is maleness.”⁴⁰ This sounds odd or even sexist, but the evidence is illuminating. In every human culture, and in some chimpanzee cultures, males perpetrate almost all of the violent acts.

But why? Evolutionary psychologists say: Aggression is a strategy. Animals use aggression to coopt (i.e. steal) resources, such as food, territory, or sexual access. Just the threat of violence is an effective method for coopting resources from a potential victim.⁴¹

The evolutionary argument goes that females are less prone to violence. The original division of labor was sexist: male humans hunt, female humans gather.⁴² It seems like the slate of the human mind wasn't so blank to begin with.

Reproductively, males and females have two different strategies. Even the most politically correct have to agree that male and female bodies are different when it comes to reproduction. On a physiological level, male humans invest very little of their bodies into the creation of a child. Sperm is cheap and in no short supply. However, female humans invest nine months and enormous amounts of care and calories to create a child. So the difference is: a man invests at least a few minutes, the woman at least a nine months.

The math for genetic propagation is obvious: Access to females is the bottleneck. If you're a gene, and you want to make more copies of yourself, then you'll always be in short supply of mothers. So, females have little to gain by going to war, as finding a willing male is relatively

easy. Whereas, through violence, a male can attempt to coopt a mate. Or, so the evolutionary psychologists speculate.

At the social level, there is another evolutionary argument for the cause of violence. Out of all the species that employ violence, only humans and chimpanzees form male coalitions.⁴³ These coalitions, generically called *gangs*, commit acts of organized violence. Yet the gangs are almost invariably limited to males. The feminist movement hasn't taken root in gang warfare. Maybe that's a good thing.

Beyond genetic history and into human history, there has been a correlation between poverty and violence.⁴⁴ As if material misfortune were not bad enough, there appears to be a correlation to being poor, exposure to violence, and the probability of committing violence. It's a shameful fact, but denying the evidence won't make the problem disappear. There is something sinister about a "War on Poverty," when the poor are the casualties.

Politicians are quick to point their crooked fingers toward any source of violence. Except, of course, at themselves. A lot of violence is traceable to politics, especially to big governments. Interestingly enough, political violence does use media. Political movements do not use media to instigate its members to commit acts violence. Instead, political engines of violence use media as a cultural insignia. Who deserves to die? The historical targets have been cultural: The Jews, the Christians, the Muslims. Next time you meet a media analyst who believes that violence in media is the ammunition for violence in behavior, ask him do us all a favor. Turn the

experimental apparatus toward two products of media that have been suspected of killing the most people, ever: the Koran and the Holy Bible.

Part III: Engines of Violence

The world is becoming a strange place. On the one hand, Congress is hot on the heels of violent videogames. On the other hand, the U.S. Army is taking violence to a new level with their debut videogame, *America's Army*. It leaves a taxpayer left to wonder: Is the U.S. government schizophrenic? As we shall see, the answer is: No. The U.S. government is consistent. It is consistently protecting a monopoly on violence. If there were a Bible for the U.S. Government, it would have written in it: Thou Shalt Have No Violence Before Me.

To avoid confusion, *America's Army* is the title of a federally funded videogame. Perhaps it is fitting that the title of a videogame for the U.S. Army is easily confused with the Army itself. The purpose of the videogame is easily confused with the purpose of the U.S. Army, too.

The military is no latecomer to games, as the "Pentagon spends more than \$4 billion a year on simulation equipment and war games."⁴⁵ But *America's Army* is invading a new world. This is no longer in the domain of simulation and training. Instead *America's Army* is conquering the living room of teenage boys across the country. Just what does the U.S. Army mean, when it delivers a conference to NATO, entitled, "Exploiting Commercial Games for Military Use?" According to Michael Macedonia at the U.S. Army's Office of Simulation, Training and Instrumentation, it means exactly what it sounds like.⁴⁶ The U.S. Army is teaching kids about violence. And who better to instruct our kids about violence than the masters?

By media critics' own standards, *America's Army* is dangerous. Despite the fact that it touts a friendly-sounding "Teen" rating, Lieutenant Colonel Grossman rated games in *America's Army's* category of realism as *borderline violence-enabling*.⁴⁷ This is a game that is funded by Federal Tax dollars? Our tax dollars are enabling violence for children. Any child anywhere can download *America's Army*. No proof of ID, no credit card, no nothing. Just download for free (at your expense).

Our children, then, are exposed to an unprecedented form of media violence. *America's Army* is funded from each taxpayer's pocket, to deploy in any living room. The worldwide leader in violence is now delivering online, on demand. Although the Office of Simulation, Training and Instrumentation motto might be, "All but war is simulation,"⁴⁸ it should now consider the alternate motto, "Violence, On Demand."

Gaming to Kill

Because of the nature of the subject, it's hard to say if U.S. soldiers today are having more or less fun murdering people than previous generations of soldiers. It seems to be an age-old pastime, perhaps as old as the species. In any case, the federal government is doing its best to make it more fun.

The Federal Bureau of Investigator's training zones are so fun that they have spawned videogames based on the same shoot/no-shoot principle.⁴⁹ Have you ever seen those videogames that have pop-up aliens or crooks that you shoot at? Guess where they came from: F.B.I. training

schools. And why did the F.B.I. create the shoot/no-shoot zones? Because the F.B.I. field agents weren't shooting people fast enough.⁵⁰

The U.S. Army has already made its weapons a joy to use. In a Marine travelogue, *Generation Kill*, Evan Wright catches the killing fever: “‘Yeah. Game on!’ Trombly says excitedly from the turret. It's his first time on the Mark-19, and he's eager for the chance to blow stuff up with it.”⁵¹ As far as the operators, like Trombly are concerned, our killing machines have evolved into killing toys.

The evolutionary push toward killing toys is not new. At least since the invention of gunpowder, weapons were designed for psychological effect as well as physical harm. Guns, which make a thunderous clap, are psychologically intimidating. And this psychological impact is a major factor in winning battles.⁵²

Since *America's Army* features realistic weapons, it is hypocritical that the game is not wearing the “Mature” or “Adults Only” rating. Instead, the U.S. Army's videogame shares the same rating as games that feature knights and fairies. On the one hand, fantasy games are inconceivably fictional. But on the other hand, *America's Army* is all too conceivably real. And deadly. *America's Army* is a first-person shooter, the same genre that advocates against videogame violence have railed against. This videogame glorifies killing. Instead of a tutorial, there is Basic Combat Training, complete with a (notably watered down) drill instructor.

Senator Joe Lieberman, who participated in Congressional hearings on videogame violence, said that parents, “feel they are competing with the entertainment industry to teach their kids values.”⁵³ Is entertainment competing with parents, or the military? Games of all sorts have had warlike elements,⁵⁴ and military themes are especially common in videogames.⁵⁵ Lieberman wants to send a message to the parents. Clearly. But his message is a lie.

If Lieberman were interested in the truth, he might have asked Dr. Helen Smith or Dr. Freedman. Dr. Helen Smith, a forensic psychologist, who wrote *The Scarred Heart: Understanding and Identifying Kids Who Kill*, has not found any child who was influenced to commit an act of violence by media.⁵⁶ Dr. Freedman countered the oft-cited Joint Statement by the American Medical Association, which had stated that 1000 experiments have proven a link between media and violence.⁵⁷ What Freedman discovered is that the AMA often did not understand the findings, that there were only 200 valid studies, and most of the studies concluded that there was *not* a causal link.

So videogames don't cause violence. That's okay, because the U.S. Army doesn't need a videogame to cause violence. It has its own time-honored tradition of operant conditioning to control human behavior. All the U.S. Army needs is fresh bodies willing to enter its training program. According to media researcher Provenzo, that's where videogames come in.⁵⁸

America's Army website has two methods for a child to receive the game: 1) by download over any Internet connection, or 2) by contacting a local recruiter.⁵⁹ What else might a local recruiter mention while discussing the child's gaming interests? For an MOS (military occupational

specialty) whose promotion depends on bamboozling young citizens, ethical rhetoric doesn't make the list of a recruiter's enabling virtues. Ask anyone who has ever been a member of any branch of Armed Services. They'll tell you: Military recruiters lie for a living. Now, they distribute videogames to children, too. Just think of the videogame as a free sample.

New Feature Added: Fascism

The psychologist Craig Anderson was enthusiastic about linking media violence to positive attitudes about violence in general.⁶⁰ The greater threat, however, is the linkage between media fascism and a positive attitude about fascism in general. Fascism is a political ideology in which government power is glorified, militarism is rampant, and imperialism is encouraged.⁶¹

Controlling violence is an imperative for any fascist state. So, by Anderson's reasoning, media fascism, or the depiction of fascism in the media, is a worthwhile method for promoting positive attitudes about fascism in general.

The same psychological tactics used to condemn videogames on fictional subjects would do more good applied to factual subjects. There are several scientific questions that remain open, such as: To what extent is *America's Army* desensitizing and habituating U.S. citizens' opinion of fascist behavior? Surely, the U.S. Army, and hopefully, the U.S. citizens, are more interested in the answer to this question, than whether *Super Mario Brothers* should, or should not, be a considered a violent game.⁶²

Applying the psychological terms we mentioned earlier, the desensitization hypothesis suggests that exposure to greater degrees of fascism in videogames opens the door for acceptance of

greater degrees of fascism in society. The U.S. Army has already launched a second, extreme version, titled *America's Army: Special Forces*. In the future, will there be *America's Army: Psychological Operations*, *America's Army: Urban Assault*, or even *America's Army: Civil Affairs*? Instead of chasing *Pac-Man*, researchers like Anderson should apply the habituation hypothesis to *America's Army*. By that hypothesis, players of videogames that feature U.S. violence would come to expect actual U.S. violence. Anyone up for a game of *America's Army: Imperial Invasion*?

These kinds of studies into media fascism are more important than media violence. After all, fascism is the most deadly kind of violence: organized violence. The improvement of our children's quality of life during the 21st Century depends on the disentanglement of federally funded fascist videogames. In the 18th Century Americans knew that freedom demands a separation of Church and State. In the 21st Century, freedom depends just as much on a separation Entertainment and State.

Department of Violence

Why did the U.S. government grow its scope to include the production of violent videogames? It might have something to do with the nature of government. Any modern government is a strange collection of goods and services. For many branches of the government, such as the Department of Defense and the Internal Revenue Service, a good or service is not delivered. Instead, the citizen pays to *not* receive their services. U.S. citizens pay the Department of Defense to ensure that violence is *not* delivered to their doorstep. Likewise, U.S. citizens pay the Internal Revenue Service to ensure that violence is *not* delivered to the individual taxpayer. So,

whereas a church might feed the poor in its community as a community service, the DOD and IRS, among others, extorts, steals, and murders, as its service. Citizens pay to *avoid* receiving their *armed* services.

The United States is not necessarily worse than any other government. For centuries, critical thinkers have recognized that organized violence, indeed, is the fundamental definition of government. Government backs up every demand with violence. From a traffic ticket to a tax return, all government demands are ultimately underwritten in blood. Due to its size, appetite for destruction, and pernicious presence, Hobbes dubbed this monstrous collection of governmental disservices *Leviathan*.⁶³

If government is like a mythical monster, leviathan, then the U.S. Army is the belly upon which leviathan crawls.⁶⁴ Any military, by definition alone, is the organization of resources for the sole purpose of violence—mass murder to be exact. But the U.S. military points their guns away from the U.S., thankfully. Militaries, as a matter of course, are exporters of violence. The U.S. Army is not the worst of militaries; far from it. It is just the biggest the planet has ever witnessed.

For the Army, MegaDeth's album from the 1980s might as well have been: Violence is Our Business, and Business is Good. When a military is especially productive, it is a sign of imperialism, which John Thomas Flynn anticipated in the U.S. over a half a century ago, "Imperialism is an institution under which one nation asserts the right to seize the land or at least to control the government or resources of another people. It is an assertion of stark, bold

aggression.”⁶⁵ It’s comforting that the institution making a violent videogame knows its subject so well.

If a military is the exporting department of violence, then law enforcement is the domestic department. Just think of it as your friendly, neighborhood violence service provider (or VSP for short). Some critics of violence have gone so far as to claim that the branch of law enforcement, especially when brutal, amounts to an occupying army.⁶⁶ But that is an overstatement. Just pay your local, state, and federal VSP bills, and you won’t receive its service. These days a VSP in the U.S. operates fairly (... these days at least ... for most of citizens ... unless one has an unpopular lifestyle).

The tentacles of the U.S. government extort (tax), enslave (conscript), and murder (enforce) citizens under the authority of the best laws that Congress can write. The purpose of law enforcement isn’t just to prevent violence. It is to control violence, and ensure that dosages of violence are administered as prescribed by law. Therefore, one of the chief purposes of law enforcement is to thwart the unauthorized use of violence. Instances of unauthorized violence populate some of the entries in the docket at the courthouse: extortion, mugging, and murder. Unauthorized violence must be curbed, because violence is a strategy. And the government holds an umbrella patent on all violence. Just ask them. They’ll tell you.

All Your Violence Belongs to US

To gangs, armed services, and the Congress that authorizes them, violence is a strategy for coopting resources. The greatest dangers to a government is violence that is uncontrolled or

directed back at itself (namely riot and rebellion). Uncontrolled violence is a challenge to the monopoly of coercion, which a government works hard to maintain. So an effective government channels the violent behavior of its citizens.

Nonetheless, an efficient government understands the subtlety of compliance. The threat of violence is enough to make most citizens comply. The Internal Revenue Service extorts trillions of dollars, and only rarely fires a gun. Through a national ritual every April 15th, U.S. taxpayers have been conditioned to comply. Since compliance is cheaper than enforcement, during the last century, the U.S. Government shifted from tax enforcement to tax persuasion.⁶⁷

This shift enables coopting higher percentages of resources at a lower cost. Today the average U.S. citizen works for twice the hours in a week: once to pay his own bills during the day, and an equal amount to keep Uncle Sam from dropping in unexpectedly in the middle of the night.⁶⁸

Most people become uncomfortable when drug enforcement, military, tax enforcement, and other armed and dangerous branches of government are treated as a business—with good reason. The commodity of their trade is brutality. For these mercenaries, the slogan applies: Violence is our Business, and Business is Good. But it's easier on everybody if citizens are conditioned to comply in the first place. Just hand us half your money and no one gets hurt.

Part IV: Violence of Silence

There is one more disservice that the United States government has offered to its citizens: censorship. Censorship, of course, is more than mere disapproval of media content. *Censorship*

is disapproval with a gun in your hand. When a censor says, I don't approve of this work, the censor is covertly threatening to employ violence to ensure that his or her disapproval is translated into content elimination. Not random or universal elimination. Selective filtering. Filtering by force, if necessary.

Why does a censor care about media content? It didn't take modern psychology for laymen to realize that media has an influence on public perception. If messages may be selectively eliminated, then consideration of the messages is all but eliminated as well. Every political dissenter or unpopular spokesperson knows this. If dissent is silenced, then the public is never aware that there is dissent.

In order to understand censorship, it is necessary to be clear on what media is. *Media* is a replicable transmission of culture through the senses. Media may take the form of a song, an image, a book, a movie, and most recently, a videogame.

Every advertiser, member of a public relations department, and politician knows that content has *some kind* of influence. An advertisement reminds the consumer that this good or service can meet a conscious or subconscious need. So advertising influences public perception. Other messages also influence public perception. Depending on whose talking, it may be called propaganda or agitprop.

In all of these forms media, there is a unifying principle. At least for some media consumers, what is seen and heard has an influence on what is conceived. The associations made within a

book, radio broadcast, television, movie, or a videogame (for some consumers some of the time) encourages associations.

Now that we agree on what media is, we can say what media violence is. *Media violence* is the portrayal of violence in the media. Is media violence a form of violence? No. Violence is a sentient being causing physical harm to another sentient being. When Dick hits Jane, that's violence. But when Lisa hits Bart in *The Simpsons*, that's media violence. Media violence is only the description, depiction, and/or the sounds that emulate some form of violence. Media violence is only communication on the subject of violence.

Like a wily self-fulfilling prophet, a censor cites media violence as the excuse for delegating physical violence against the media producer. So, who's getting hurt here?

The Silent Minority

It's easier to see the faults of censorship from afar, such as in China. There, censors shut down gaming rooms and block transmission of information.⁶⁹ China's Ministry of Culture said this blackout was intended to protect the kids, partly from violence. But who are they kidding? It's to protect the Chinese government.

In the U.S., although would-be videogame censors put a young child on display to speak the voice of the children, the only voice the censors care about is their own. In 2000, Danielle Shimotakahara testified before Congress on violent videogames.⁷⁰ Her honest concern was converted into a sideshow in a Congressional circus, whose main attraction is yet to come.

Craig Anderson noted that children are most susceptible to influence.⁷¹ They have are young, impressionable minds. Precisely for this reason, Judge Posner argued that it is important to *not* censor videogames. Otherwise, children would be unequipped to deal with tough issues in adulthood.⁷² But children will be equipped for *America's Army*, where your team is *always* the good team. The enlistment rosters are open. Their website advertises for children to sign up for adventure. And, according to War College polls of soldiers in Iraq, many soldiers are signing up for adventure.⁷³

Congress has a message, and it is clear: Violence must be harnessed. For censorship proponents, the Ten Commandments would have to be altered from the usual, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," to read: "Thou Shalt Not Kill the United States." Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman is not critical of all violence, just of unharnessed violence:

The important distinction between the killing-enabling process that occurs in video arcades and that of the military is that the military's is focused on the enemy soldier, with particular emphasis on ensuring that the U.S. soldier acts only under authority.⁷⁴

Authority. That is the unstated goal of censorship and the lesson that censors wish to teach to young, impressionable minds: Authority. It's okay to kill, but only the enemies that the authorities identify. So, the Ten Commandment would have to be amended: "Thou Shalt Kill Only Under Authority."

It's Not What You Kill, but Who You Kill

Censors have criticized *Grand Theft Auto* for allowing children to play recklessly.⁷⁵ Play recklessly, that is, in a living room that their parents either approve of or have not sufficiently supervised. Play recklessly with a computer, which is not harmed. Play recklessly on screen, instead of in the street. Play recklessly in the safety of a home.

Censors are selective about who is being portrayed, and who is not being portrayed, in media violence. While in utopia, perhaps no one should be depicted as being killed, the censors are particular about who is being killed. The censors haven't said anything about the victims of police brutality that are killed in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Take a break from carjacking to walk the streets, senators, and you will see random acts of police chasing down pedestrians.

The censors carefully cite the portrayal of violence against police officers. It must be nice to have a job that is protected from criticism. It must be nice to belong to an organization that can outlaw embarrassment of its employees. Especially when that organization is the largest on the planet with the greatest arsenal of weapons of mass destruction ever known to mankind.

Morality, shmorality. The message that censors are sending to children is spelled out: R-E-S-P-E-C-T ... Authority.

Grand Theft Auto is on the hit list in a number of states. Washington state attempted to ban the game. The judges that still remember what freedom means, overturned it. California has been attempting to ban *GTA* as well. It's tough to be recklessly critical.

I have no interest in killing (reckless or authorized), but the hypocrisy is killing me. Even on violence in videogames, the censors are select. There has been no mention of censoring military games, or games like *Medal of Honor*, where law enforcement officials are killed. Because those are German law enforcers. Games that portray killing other nation's police? Fine. Games that portray killing U.S. police? Watch it, buddy.

Sinsorship: The Selfish Meme

Why would censors want to shape the thoughts of our children? Like advertisers, censors know that a child cannot think about what the child does not know about. Unlike advertisers, censors are able to employ violence to place selective blinders on public perception. Although there is no dose-response correlation between media violence and violent behavior, there is a dose-response correlation between political advertisements and voting behavior.⁷⁶

Censors, by definition, filter the messages that are publicly communicated. Yet, since media violence does not cause violent behavior, censorship is not preventing violent behavior. Instead, censors are eliminating potentially competitive associations, such as criticism of current policies and enforcement agencies. Whether the criticism is reckless (such as *Grand Theft Auto*) or not (such as *September 12th*), the censors are filtering public perception of their tragic subjects. Tragic subjects, which above all else, are the failures of the U.S. government to fulfill its charter to improve the lives of its citizens. Hey, what is a country supposed to do about bad publicity? China knows the drill.

The U.S. censors have their own filtered glasses on, and the filter is green. See, censorship imposes a hidden tax on media. Whenever a videogame comes under questionable status, a censor has gained the opportunity to negotiate. There's money at stake. The publisher wants to distribute in order to make a profit. Who does a publisher have to pay off to get his product on the shelf?

And Congress monitors how profitable videogames are. The Congressmen almost have to wipe the drool off their mouths every time they quote the volume of videogames: 9.4 billions of dollars per year. Just think: Billions of dollars a year is enough to transform one bureaucrat into a Bill Gates every year. To have a finger in that pie would make a senator rich, powerful, or both. With that kind of money up for grabs, it's no wonder why Congressional collars are getting hot.

This is not to imply that all proponents of videogame censorship are motivated by the financial and political advantages such censorship provides. There are many honest puritans, like young Danielle, which leaves the power in the hands of the dishonest. Since U.S. censors stand to control billions of dollars, their motivations cannot be trusted.

Freedom of Play

Would-be censors work the public into a frenzy, attempting to sway the minds of the masses through deception, and emotional manipulation. During the Congressional hearing of 2000, ultraviolent video clips were blasted, and Danielle, a twelve-year old girl was asked to give a heart-ringing testimony (all prepared in advance).⁷⁷ The Congressional circus sunk to a banality

on par with the video clips that they've dredged up. Why do the censors need to employ these cheap psychological tricks? Is Congress trying to make us forget something?

Like the First Amendment to the *Bill of Rights*. There were no videogames, movies, or radios when the words were penned: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Clearly by speech and press, what is intended is all forms of public communication. Just as the printing press was a new form of communication, so now are movies and videogames. All media falls under this umbrella. The judges, who interpret of the Constitution for a living, agree. Judge Richard Posner struck down a censorship law in Indiana when it appeared in 2000.⁷⁸ And judges are continuing to do so, just as fast as Congress can write the unconstitutional laws.

Freedom of speech has deep-seated importance for the health of a society. When anyone gains the authority to employ violence in censoring another person's communication, a wedge of corruption is being driven into the root of society. At the most private level, speech includes the internal monologue that we call consciousness. Each of our effable thoughts is a prototype for speech. Thus, the ability to speak freely requires the ability to think freely.

Thinking, in itself, is an act of considering alternative modes or methods—either seriously or in play. The ability to think freely must, therefore, include the ability to consider and play.

Without the ability to play freely, then freedom of speech has been violated as well. If free play is not protected, then free thought is not protected.

21st Century Sinsorship

The 21st Century is going to be the century of the interactive revolution. Our technology of play is rapidly evolving, but our ethical calculus is lagging far behind. Instead, fascism is at the frontline, attempting to grip the wild reigns of change as quickly and tightly as possible.

The usual line of an article on violence in videogames is: “What are videogames doing to our children?” Or: “When is it time to pull the plug on videogame violence?” These questions are misguided or deceitful. More honestly, the question is not whether videogames cause violence, but whether Congress harnesses violence through censorship. And whether military propaganda, in the guise of a videogame, will further desensitize our children to fascism.

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⁷⁷ "Prepared Statement of Miss Danielle Shimotakahara, Student, North Bend, Oregon." *The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*. S. Hrg. 106-1096. March 21, 2000. Available online at:
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