

Game on

Violent video games aren't hurting kids, and in some ways may be helping them

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Rock and roll music? Bad for you. Comic books? They promote deviant behavior. Rap music? Dangerous.

Ditto for the Internet, heavy metal and role-playing games. All were feared when they first arrived. Each in its own way was supposed to corrupt the youth of America.

It's hard to believe today, but way back in the late 19th century, even the widespread use of the telephone was deemed a social threat. The telephone would encourage unhealthy gossip, critics said. It would disrupt and distract us. In one of the more inventive fears, the telephone would burst our private bubbles of happiness by bringing bad news.

Suffice it to say, a cloud of mistrust tends to hang over any new and misunderstood cultural phenomena. We often demonize that which the younger generation embraces, especially if it's gory or sexual, or seems to glorify violence.

The cycle has repeated again with video games. A five-year legal battle over whether violent video games are protected as "free speech" reached the Supreme Court earlier this month, when the justices heard arguments in *Schwarzenegger v. Entertainment Merchants*.

Back in 2005, the state of California passed a law that forbade the sale of violent video games to those younger than 18. In particular, the law objected to games "in which the range of options available to a player includes killing, maiming, dismembering or sexually assaulting an image of a human being" in a "patently offensive way" — as opposed to games that depict death or violence more abstractly.

But that law was deemed un-

constitutional, and now arguments pro and con have made their way to the biggest, baddest court in the land.

In addition to the First Amendment free speech question, the justices are considering whether the state must prove "a direct causal link between violent video games and physical and psychological harm to minors" before it prohibits their sale to those under 18.

So now we get the amusing scene of Justice Samuel Alito wondering "what James Madison [would have] thought about video games," and Chief Justice John Roberts describing the nitty-gritty of *Postal 2*, one of the more extreme first-person shooter games. Among other depravities, *Postal 2* allows the player to "go postal" and kill and humiliate in-game characters in a variety of creative ways: by setting them on fire, by urinating on them once they've been immobilized by a stun gun, or by using their heads to play "fetch" with dogs. You get the idea.

This is undoubtedly a gross-out experience. The game is offensive to many. I'm not particularly inclined to play it. But it is, after all, only a game.

Like with comic books, like with rap music, 99.9 percent of kids — and adults, for that matter — understand what is real violence and what is a representation of violence. According to a report issued by the Minister of Public Works and Government Services in Canada, by the time kids reach elementary school they can recognize motivations and consequences of characters' actions. Kids aren't going around chucking pitchforks at babies just because we see this in a realistic game.

And a strong argument can

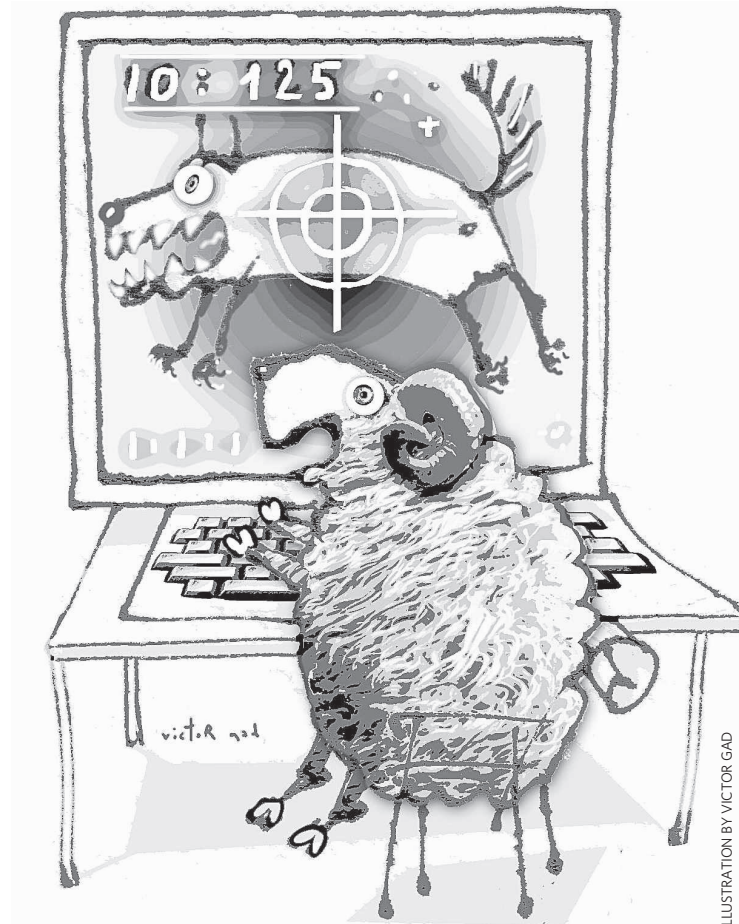


ILLUSTRATION BY VICTOR GAD

be made that watching, playing and participating in activities that depict cruelty or bloodshed are therapeutic. We see the violence on the page or screen and this helps us understand death. We can face what it might mean to do evil deeds. But we don't become evil ourselves. As Gerard Jones, author of *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*," writes, "Through immersion in imaginary combat and identification with a violent protagonist, children engage the rage they've stifled . . . and become more capable of utilizing it against life's challenges."

Sadly, this doesn't prevent lazy journalists from often including in their news reports the detail that suspected killers played a game like *Grand Theft Auto*. Because the graphic violence of some games is objectionable to many, it's easy to imagine a cause and effect. As it turns out, a U.S. Secret Ser-

vice study found that only one in eight of Columbine/Virginia Tech-type school shooters showed any interest in violent video games. And a U.S. surgeon general's report found that mental stability and the quality of home life — not media exposure — were the relevant factors in violent acts committed by kids.

Besides, so-called dangerous influences have always been with us. As Justice Antonin Scalia rightly noted during the debate, Grimm's *Fairy Tales* are extremely graphic in their depiction of brutality. How many huntsmen cut out the hearts of boars or princes, which were then eaten by wicked queens? How many children were nearly burned alive? Disney whitewashed Grimm, but take a read of the original, nastier stories. They pulled no punches.

Because gamers take an active role in the carnage — they hold the gun, so to speak —

some might argue that video games might be more affecting or disturbing than literature (or music or television). Yet, told around the fire, gruesome folk tales probably had the same imaginative impact on the minds of innocent 18th century German kiddies as today's youth playing gore-fests like *Left 4 Dead*. Which is to say, stories were exciting, scary and got the adrenaline flowing.

Another reason to doubt the gaming industry's power to corrupt: More than one generation, mine included, has now been raised on violent video games. But there's no credible proof that a higher proportion of sociopaths or snipers roams the streets than at any previous time in modern history. In fact, according to Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olson, founders of the Center for Mental Health and Media (a division of the Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Psychiatry), and members of the psychiatry faculty at Harvard Medical School,

as video game usage has skyrocketed in the past two decades, the rate of juvenile crime has actually fallen.

Children have always been drawn to the disgusting. Even if the ban on violent games is eventually deemed lawful and enforced in California, the games will still find their way into the hot little hands of minors. So do online porn, and cigarettes and beer. But these vices haven't toppled Western civilization. Not yet, anyway — although a zombie invasion or hurtling meteor might. Luckily, if you're a good enough gamer, you'll probably save the day.



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