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Video games are part of the everyday lives of many people of different age groups and cultures. Some contain violent content, which has worried parents and social science researchers about the effects of playing violent video games (VVG) on players. In this paper, I will describe and summarize the current scientific literature on the issue of VVGs. Some researchers have argued that there is a causal link between playing VVGs and player aggression in real life. Others have criticized this causal link hypothesis and have argued that there is no serious negative effect. The lack of consensus makes it difficult for video game programmers and designers to know what ethical obligations they have and what to do with such obligations. I have proposed that the most practical solution is to apply a strict and accurate rating system that includes descriptions of that content present and a medical warning against the potential harmful effects of playing VVGs.

Effects of Violent Video Games

CSC480: Social & Prof. Issues in Comp.

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## Introduction

Video games have become part of the everyday life of many 21st century children, teenagers, and adults. But like any innovation, video games have been associated with a lot of controversies over the years. One of the most well known areas of controversy in video games is the effects and ethics of violence in video games. There has been a long-standing debate about whether violence should be allowed in video games and what the consequences would be. Some groups of researchers, parents, and politicians have argued that any level of violence in video games is dangerous and can corrupt the minds of players. Other groups have simply said that just as violence in life is natural then its appearance in video games causes no serious harm. People have been continuously debating whether violent video games or VVGs can make a player in real life more aggressive, violent, selfish, anti-social. The First Amendment protects video games from legal restrictions. What ethical and social issues particularly follow? In this paper, no final solution to the issue will be provided. Instead, in this paper I will first objectively review some of the main literature on the issue of VVGs. I will then provide a summary of an interview I had with a psychotherapist who works with youths. She had provided some basic practical advice on how to handle the issue of VVGs. Keeping both the conclusions of the literature review and the interview in mind, I will then discuss the ethical position of the video game designers and players. I will suggest a few simple conclusions that can be applied to this ethical solution which will respect the rights of both the coder and the player.

## Background, description, and/or history of the issue

Following the release of Mortal Kombat and other video games in the early 1990s, there has been a visible public fear that violent video games create violent players. Many video games have been banned and censored because of this fear. In order to prevent young minds from being exposed to extremely violent games, a rating system for games had been put in place (Crossly, 2014). However, the social scientific research on the actual effects of violent video games (VVG) has been controversial and inconclusive. Some sources and organizations have argued that VVG cause long-term harm to youth in the form of increased hostility and aggression. This group is often called the “causationist” group in the literature because they argue for a causal link between VVGs and player violence. Critics of the causationists have replied to this and argued that the effects are non-existent, potentially positive, or minimal except to those who already have violent inclinations (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2010, p. 6). Both groups have continuously criticized each other for being methodologically flawed, having too small samples, or simply being too stubborn in their own preconceptions (Huesmann, 2010, p.1).

## Issues, various points of view

Scientific consensus in the academic literature could not be reached with regards to the possible long-term harmful effect of the level of violence in video games. There are two main groups of video game scholars. One group, the *causationists*, argues that playing VVGs cause violent behaviors for players both on the short-run and long-run. This is accompanied by other harmful effects such as increased aggression and a desensitization to real-life violence. The other group criticizes the causal hypothesis by finding flaws in their methodology and equates their argument as a moral panic and an exaggerated attempt to find a scapegoat for youth crimes. What follows is a detailed discussion of both these groups’ publications and what kind of mutual agreements could be reached.

When it comes to the causationist group, many psychologists and psychological organizations have issued statements where they explicitly say that violent video games only cause long-term damage to the people who use them. The most well-known of these condemnations is from the American Psychological Association which released a report in 2005 that was based on decades of research and publications on the issue. The statements said that there was overwhelming evidence that video game violence increases feelings of hostility, aggression, mistrust, anger, excitement, selfishness, and sexism (when the video game violence is aimed at women). Based on this, APA recommended that all violent content in video games be reduced, that developers of video games be aware of the danger that their codes cause, that the public be made aware of the dangers of VVGs, and that a strict and accurate rating system be applied to classify the different levels of violence in video games (American Psychological Association, 2005, p.1-2). Alongside the APA’s condemnation, a prominent team of social scientists (Anderson et al, 2010a) released a state-of-the-art meta-analysis of video games where they cross-analyzed around a hundred publications and case studies on the issue. This meta-analysis is often called the pinnacle of social scientific research in the field of VVGs (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2010, p. 42) because it included almost 130,000 participants, crossed multiple cultures and societies, included both published and unpublished work, tried to control for certain third variables (mostly gender), and tried to use a common measure of violence. They arrived at the same conclusion as the APA and concluded that video game violence was a dangerous tool that could cause a significant amount of harm to the youth who play such games. Specifically, “[the] evidence strongly suggested that exposure to violent video games was a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive effect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior” (Anderson et al, 2010a, p. 1).

However, none of the APA’s and Anderson et al’s statements had been without critics. Following the APA’s official statement release, a group of around 200 hundred media scholars published an open letter to the APA in response to the official statement (Constitution of Scholars, 2013). They asked the APA to retract their official statement because it was too ideological and also citing evidence that was mixed or weak. They also criticized the APA for ignoring the research publication showing that video game violence could potentially have a minimal effect, positive effect, or an effect controlled by third variables. They called for a new Task Force to be formed so that it can publish a new statement taking into consideration the multiple research publications which had been made since the APA’s official statement.

As for Anderson et al’s meta-analysis, Ferguson and Kilburn directly criticized it for being methodologically flawed because the authors mostly included anti-video game violence research that they or their colleagues had published and ignored pro-video game publications (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010, p.1). Another main criticism is that causationists do not use a clinically well-established measure of violence and aggression (Ferguson, 2010, p.24). This means that in Anderson et al’s meta-analysis, the numbers and statistical significances they had come up with to test player aggression and hostility were not concrete enough to truly know how violent they actually became. Other meta-analyses had showed that research on video game violence suggested that video games either had no or minimal weak effect on their players, when taking into account other factors such as poverty, family situation, mental history, etc. (Ferguson, 2010, p.74). There has also been work suggesting that violence in video games is natural because humans are naturally violent and that violence has potential positive benefits. Some potential benefits include psychological catharsis, whereby a player expresses any frustrations or anger he has in real life by expressing them out through video games (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2010, p.29). Thus, allowing the player to commit illusory violent acts in video games would hypothetically prevent him from committing violent acts in real life. Other positive benefits include improved visual perception or alert, and improved social bonds. The former is because of how violent video games often encourage the player to examine his surroundings well. The latter is because of how many violent games are interactive in the sense that multiple players must work together to violently take down an enemy (Ferguson, 2010, p.76-7). There has also been work suggesting that it is not the mere existence of violence in a video game that can cause harmful effects but it is the type of violence therein. For example, there is a difference in psychological effect when a player plays a game where he just shoots and kills random civilians vs. a game where he has to create a tactical solution or strategy to defeat an enemy like in many strategic war games. (Australian Government, Attorney General' s Department, 2010, p.17-8). Anderson et al later replied to this criticism by saying that their methodology was not flawed, that they did not have publication bias, and that their meta-analysis conformed to standard guidelines (Bushman et al, 2010b). They reaffirmed their main conclusion: “[Their] results suggest that violent video games increase aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and aggressive behaviors and decrease empathic feelings and pro-social behaviors. Moreover, [they] obtained similar effects in Western and Eastern countries. Violent video game exposure is a causal risk factor for later aggression” (Bushman et al, 2010b, p. 5),

In response to the controversy *about* the controversy, the Attorney Generals’ Office of Australia issued a literature review on many research publications on VVGs since 2000. The goal of the review was to determine what effects were proven to exist from VVGs and then enact the appropriate public policies to handle, distribute, control, rate, or ban violent video games. They concluded that the presence of any long-term harmful effects from video games violence was not definitely proven or disproven but was inconclusive (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2010, p. 5). They cited multiple factors which made the controversy difficult to solve: lack of consensus on tools and definitions by researchers, the political and social pressures against violent video games, the attention given to third variables, etc. (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2010, p. 5).

However because of public pressure against these potential dangers, a rating system has been in place that monitors the level of violence and other *mature* content in games. In the United States, the dominant rating system is the Entertaining Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating system. It assigns rating labels for games that suggest the appropriate minimum age of a player for that game, e.g. 3+, 10+, 15+. The labels are accompanied by content descriptors that simply describe what types of content in the games (violence, nudity, plot, etc.) were used to set its rating label. Parents then decide what games they should purchase for their children and teenagers based on the rating systems. Furthermore, depending on what laws are in place in a specific state, a person (especially a child) is not legally allowed to purchase a game that is rated to be inappropriate for his age. But of course, nothing prevents an adult from buying the most violent of games for himself or for his children. Another imperfection with rating systems is that they are at times inaccurate. Sometimes the rating label and content descriptors that a game is given, don’t match the content of the actual game. This could be to oversight by the raters or because the game contains secret levels or hidden *mature* material (Dang et al, 2007, p. 139-141).

## Results of interviews

Dr. Norma Moussally, a certified counselor and psychologist who works at the counseling center at the Lebanese American University in Beirut was interviewed. Her professional opinion on the issue coincided with the causationist group that argues that violent video games “do influence children, adolescents and young adults by increasing aggressive behavior and desensitization to violence”. (Norma Mousally, see appendix).

I was not able to go in depth with her because of the time constraints. However, she did give practical and realistic guidelines about VVGs and parental control. In order to solve or to better handle this issue, I asked her what she would recommend to parents of children and teenagers who requested such games. Her response was simply that parents should use their right to control their children’s media exposure and (if they could) prohibit them from playing violent games in the first place, or at the very least, purchase ‘not-too-violent’ games. For her, the use of rating systems is a useful but imperfect tool that helps parents decide what sorts of games are safe enough for their children and teenagers to play. They are imperfect though because the current rating systems are not accurate or specific enough to label what types of violence are present (realistic, cartoonish, bloody, plot-based, excessive, etc.). Furthermore, she warned that age is not a significant enough variable when it comes to predicting how severe the effects of VVGs can be. That is, even if a person is a mature adult, he could be affected the same way as a teenager playing a game rated for older players.

## Your comments or evaluation

The potential effects of violent video games are complex, multi-variable, indefinite, and difficult to persuasively prove or disprove. It is possible that VVGs can cause serious mental harm to young players by making them more violent, more aggressive, and less sociable. But it is also possible that VVGs have only trivial effects, positive effects, or no effects on players. To put it simple words, it is not definitely known what harm VVGs can do.

Because the social consequences of VVGs are not definitively shown, it is difficult to ethically judge the situation of the VVG designer or coder and propose solutions. If VVGs do not have negative long-term effects, then designers do not face an ethical issue; but if games do have harmful effects, then designers have a moral obligation not to publish *dangerous* VVG. Since it is not definitely known what the real long-term effects of VVGs are, coders are thus in an ethical dead-end.

Solutions such as censorship or banning are not a feasible or ethical option. It is not ethical because it would violate the coder’s right to code what he wants to code (analogous to freedom of expression). And it is impractical or unfeasible because banned or censored versions of video games can be easily found with a quick search query online. If a consumer wants to play a VVG with all its included bloodshed or violence, regardless of its potential harmful effects, he will find a way to play it. However, I think with such a situation, the best ethical action would be to simply play it safe (as my interviewee suggested) and enforce a strict and comprehensive rating system that can classify the different levels of violence a game has. These ratings should be significantly more accurate and detailed than the existing rating system applied by the ESRB. That is, an efficient rating system has to include accurate description of the content with all its details: does it have cartoonish or realistic violence, is the violence random or part of an actual plot, is the violence against human-like creatures or animals or inanimate objects, is there bloodshed or crime, is violence seen as a positive aspect of the plot of the game or does it have negative consequences in the game, etc.

Furthermore, in order to make sure that consumers and players know what they are getting into, these ratings should be accompanied by warnings that VVGs *could* cause negative effects that are not definitively known. A simple age label or content description is not enough; a potential player has the right to know what potential side effects are there when playing violent video games. The presence of this explicit warning on VVGs would help protect the rights of players. This argument is similar to the one given for the need to have health warnings be posted on cigarette cartons. A player ignorant of the current state-of-the-art psychological health research has the right to know what his consumption could possibly do to him.

When it comes to the rights, freedoms, and obligations of VVG designers and coders, although they have right to code up or create whatever they want, they are ethically required to publish their games with the appropriate rating label, content descriptors, and health warning. Children will not be legally allowed to purchase VVGs that are not suitable for their age based on the rating system. It would then be up to parents if they want to let their youth play these games based on their ratings. The existence of the rating label, content descriptor, and health warning will allow the parent to make an informed and educated decision about what s/he should or should not purchase for children and teenagers. As for adult gamers, they are mature enough to choose for themselves if they want to avoid the risk of becoming potentially more aggressive.

## Summary

Video games are a part of the 21st century, whether it’s Grand Theft Auto, Call of Duty, Assassin's Creed, or Mortal Kombat. At their core, video games are a collection of codes, algorithms, and graphics that have been consciously designed by game production companies for the sake of entertainment and/or profit. In many ways, the freedom to code in whatever way you want is the freedom to express yourself in whatever way you want. But that does not mean that your codes or expression do not have consequences that are beyond the coder. Violent video games are an example of an expression or code that has potential consequences for the people who play them. It is clear that there is no persuasive proof that shows VVGs are destructive and harmful, but there is likewise no persuasive proof that they are not. Even though there is not enough proof to persuade the psychological community one way or another, it remains an ethical obligation for the coders to be aware that their codes can potentially cause harm. VVGs may cause an increase in a player’s aggression, hostility, violence, sexism, selfishness, anti-socialness, and hyperactivity. Although the evidence is not conclusive, game designers are morally required to design their codes with the appropriate warnings that explicitly tell players and users the potential side-effects of their games both on the short-run and long-run. Age-based rating labels must accompany these warnings that help parents decide what games they should or should not purchase for their children. But they must also be accompanied by content descriptors so that mature audiences and players can predict what content the games have and how they might affect them.

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## Appendix

Interviewees:



**Name:** Dr. Norma Moussally.

**Position:** Senior Counselor.

**University:** Lebanese American University.

**Educational Level:** PhD.

**Location:** Beirut – Lebanon.

**Experience:** 10 years.

**LinkedIn account:** https://www.linkedin.com/pub/norma-moussally/15/799/692

**Interview type:** By email

**Questions:**

*a) Do you think violent video games are actually dangerous?*

The most compelling evidence says that indeed violent video games do influence children’s, adolescents’ and young adults’ by increasing aggressive behavior and desensitization to violence.

*b) What do you recommend for parents whose kids want such games?*

I recommend that parents, if they are unable to prohibit such games, but limit the exposure time as well as choose a game that least violent (rated lower than others).

*c) Do you think there is a age after which violent video games are safe to play, e.g. preteens vs. teens?*

Violence in video games has been shown to influence kids from a young age up to early adulthood. In fact Anderson et al. have shown that people in their early 20s who play violent video games tend to be more aggressive with their peers.

*d) What are your thoughts of using ratings for video games? Are they actually useful?*

Ratings are useful gage for parents to compare the violence in each game, however they are not a solution for violence as violence is more complicated than just having one source for it.