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# Possible Effects of Playing Video Games With Explicit Violence on Player Aggression

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## **Abstract**

Video games have become the most significant phenomenon of popular culture, and one of the most widespread forms of entertainment in society of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. This prevalence corresponds with profitability, and the video game industry records the highest revenues in the cultural and entertainment industries. Simultaneously, the level of the scientific study of the phenomenon and its impact remains disproportionately small, while moral panic and the banalized and oversimplified accusation of video games for causing violence and evil in people are the dominant social attitude and reaction. That is why the influence of playing violent video games on the development of aggression and violent behavior in individuals has been thoroughly researched. While some studies indicate that gaming has no effect at all, or even a cathartic effect, others claim that playing violent video games is associated with increased aggression and antisocial behavior. The aim of this paper is to examine the effects of explicit violence in video games on the aggressiveness and violence of players of such games. Using various analytical methods, by exploring stereotypes, cultural factors, and the potential negative effects of playing violent video games, this comprehensive analysis challenges the incorrect preconception that video games inherently encourage real-world violence. While acknowledging certain negative effects like the promotion of a culture of competitive militarism and desensitization to violence in the real world, this paper recommends responsible gaming, parental control and guidance, and positive social influence as crucial factor in shaping moral attitudes and behavior.

*Keywords:* video games, violence, aggression, stereotypes, culture, behavior

## **Possible Effects of Playing Video Games With Explicit Violence on Player Aggression**

Playing video games has become a ubiquitous part of today's lifestyle, with hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide playing video games every day and hundreds of billions of USD generated by the gaming industry each year (see Turner, 2023). Considering that society and its science have not yet built an irreversible scientific approach to video games, a significant part of the space in the interpretation of video games is occupied by moral panic, stereotypes and myths (see Filipović, 2019). Video games are undeniably a very influential segment of ICT, but, as a sort of antipode, social institutions have expressed concerns regarding the potential destructive impact of violent video games on aggression and behavior of individuals. While some studies suggest that violent video games have no effect on aggression or even have a cathartic effect (Manis, 2022), others suggest that playing video games with violent content is associated with increased levels of aggression, antisocial behavior, and other negative outcomes (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Gentile et al., 2004).

Probably the most important stereotype is that video games are inherently harmful (see Filipović, 2022, pp. 109–125). Such a high level of criticism of video games corresponds with their popularity and immersiveness that no other media can compare. Video games allow users to satisfy their desires to play, win, compete, escape from reality, control and many others, as well as a gradual transition from simplicity to an increasingly complex virtual world (Filipović & Bjelajac, 2019b). However, video games are a medium, so the scientific approach insists that video games, like any medium, even violent ones, are inherently neutral. Numerous factors, such as parental or school supervision and the psychological and mental characteristics of the player himself determine the benefits or harms of games. No one should dispute the fact that certain video games with a huge amount of bestial violence and evil, presented in a particularly realistic form, can lead insufficiently developed personalities to deviant behaviors and must therefore be systemically unavailable

for certain age categories of players. Also, no one should dispute the fact that parents are the ones who should be concerned about what their children do in general, what games they play and how it all affects them and their social behavior (Matijašević-Obradović & Stefanović, 2017, p. 26). A person, with already formed moral and mental attitudes, playing a violent video game, will not perceive that game as a guide to violent and evil action – as it does not happen with books, movies and television. The task of forming moral attitudes lies with society and the family, and video games should not be used as a "horror story" that hides problems in the socialization of individuals, and especially not as an alibi for failures in monitoring, education, socialization and formation of children and young people made by parents, school and society in general.

Another stereotype is that games that contain explicit violence not only necessarily encourage violent behavior in the real world, but are also the main driver of terrible crimes that are sometimes committed by young people or even children. In addition to being inaccurate, this stereotype is harmful, not so much to the video game industry - driven by huge profits and even through moral panic – but to society itself. The American Psychological Association (APA) in its March 2020 Resolution opined that:

There is insufficient scientific evidence to support a causal relationship between violent video games and violent behavior... Based on a review of the current literature, a new task force report reaffirms that there is little, a reliable link between playing violent video games and aggressive outcomes, such as yelling and pushing. However, these research findings are difficult to extend to more violent outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Sandra L. Shullman, the president of the American Psychological Association, asserts that:

Violent behavior and violence are complex social problems that are caused by many factors and require the attention of researchers, politicians, and the public. Determining human violence as a consequence of playing video games is, firstly, unscientific, and secondly, it diverts attention from other factors, such as the history of violence, i.e. the presence of violent crimes committed in the past, which, as we know from research, is the main predictor of future violence (Mills, 2020).

Furthermore, we would like to bring attention to certain ontological aspects of violent video games and the potential consequences of young players spending excessive and unregulated time in the harsh and malevolent realms depicted in these games. Video games are the most elaborate and imaginative digital world, and due to this characteristic, they offer unparalleled opportunities for deep immersion and exploration within the space of a digital world (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020). Regardless of the limited scope of virtual violence in which young players immerse themselves for extended periods without supervision, concerns and evidence suggest that such uncontrolled exposure may contribute to the development of despicable acts and mass atrocities. These acts are often initially simulated and executed virtually within the violent and malevolent worlds of militaristic or violent video games, before being replicated in reality against innocent victims.

### **Culture as a Reflection of Social Trends: Video Games and Promotion of Militarism**

The player engaging in violent video games should not be the primary target of blame when considering the potential societal harm caused by such games. They are simply participating in a game created, marketed, and made available for purchase by large game software manufacturers. These manufacturers are fully aware of the

documented and established destructive consequences associated with playing violent games, yet they persistently develop improved and more captivating violent games. Why do they continue to do so? The answer may be straightforward: these games are highly sought after and frequently played. According to a 2015 resolution by the American Psychological Association (APA), over 85% of video games on the market incorporate some form of violence, causing understandable concern about the impact of violent video game usage on individuals, particularly children and adolescents (American Psychological Association, 2015). Consequently, the production and sale of such games yield substantial profits. Once again, the question arises: why do gamers predominantly seek out, purchase, and play violent games? What underlying mechanisms within human consciousness, whether innate or acquired, lead individuals to partake in or witness violence against others while deriving enjoyment, even in a virtual context? Can we find the answer in the fact that as a biological species, people possess an inherent inclination toward violence and frequently resort to it as a means of problem-solving whenever the opportunity arises? Bertrand Russell wrote:

I think that ordinary people cannot be happy without competition, because competition has been, since the beginning of man, the inspiration for most serious activities. Therefore, one should not try to abolish competition, but one should try to practice it in forms that are not too dangerous. The primitive contest consisted in who would first slaughter his rival, his wife and children; modern competition in the form of war still boils down to that. But in sport, in literary and artistic rivalry, as well as in constitutional politics, it takes on a form that is not so harmful, and which, again, provides a fairly sufficient outlet for our fighting instincts. The problem is not that these forms of competition are bad, but that they are too little present in the lives of ordinary

people. Outside of wars, modern civilization has increasingly tried to increase security, but I'm not entirely sure that eliminating all danger would produce happiness (Russell, 2009).

In relation to the previous statement, a contemporary trend exists in defining the purpose, goal, and significance of human life that, if left unaddressed, could lead the global human community toward a dystopian outcome. This trend aligns with the inherent and unchanging impulses deeply ingrained in the essence of human existence. The current ideology surrounding life on Earth portrays human society not as a cooperative community of contented individuals, united by a minimum sense of empathy, compassion, and mercy (a "gens una sumus"), but rather as a collection of increasingly isolated individuals who perceive themselves as competing rivals. This pervasive ideology fosters a culture where everyone competes against one another, often resulting in conflicts and fights, sometimes even for survival, with the desired outcome being the subjugation or destruction of others. This competitive mentality begins early in life. A study conducted by UNICEF reveals that parents either encourage or show indifference towards their children's early engagement in a competitive lifestyle. The study highlights that competitiveness starts with peer violence, indicating that approximately 150 million students aged 13 to 15 worldwide, or half of that demographic, report experiencing peer violence in and around school (UNICEF, 2018). Consequently, the ideology of competitiveness fuels an alarming promotion of militarism. This militarism is evident in violent video games, where the gameplay typically involves shooting and killing opponents as the primary objective. Violent video games' militaristic nature predominantly targets children and young people, serving as an alternative or supplementary educational framework outside the official educational system (Lukić, 2006).

The impact of the militarization of society on various aspects such as culture and industry is a multifaceted subject. It forms only a fraction of the broader reflection of societal trends on culture and

necessitates additional research. The outcomes of such research may present another dilemma: do violent video games serve as the cause of adolescent violence, or are they a consequence of the prevalent culture of aggressive and competitive militarism, which suppresses inherent impulses that have influenced human behavior since the Pleistocene era? These impulses, whether accepted or not, periodically give rise to intense and horrific episodes of violent outbursts, resulting in mass murder and an unimaginable amount of evil and suffering inflicted upon entirely innocent individuals. This paper uses quantitative and qualitative analysis, media content analysis, and comparative analysis to research the correlation between explicit violence in video games and the development and display of aggression in gamers who play such games.

### **Possible Negative Effects of Playing Violent Video Games**

When studying video games, it is challenging to avoid examining the potential negative effects they can have. These effects primarily focus on the physical and psychological consequences of gaming on the development of children and adolescents, rather than solely on violence and its influence on the development of aggressive behavior in players. However, due to lay interpretations in public discourse and the resulting moral panic, there has been a heightened sense of urgency in investigating the potential correlation between playing violent video games and real-world violence. It is crucial for society to prioritize researching this correlation, as attributing the causes of violent behavior solely to playing violent video games risks oversimplifying the issue. The true causes of such behavior are far more intricate and profound than the mere time spent in the virtual world of video games, and it is essential to uncover these underlying factors. In earlier research of the phenomenon of evil in video games, we argued that:

While engaged in playing a video game, the player is incapable of displaying cruelty or violence towards the entities within the game's virtual world. Within this digital realm, conscious

beings do not exist, therefore there is no experience of pain or suffering. Additionally, since the characters within the video game are not real, moral considerations do not apply. The player, positioned on the side of the monitor, cannot be deemed evil or violent towards the video game characters. Any actions performed by the player towards these characters are not inherently evil. If there were to be any entity capable of exhibiting evil, it would be the player's avatar situated within the virtual world on the other side of the monitor. The rules governing the video game world are applicable solely to the avatar. They possess the potential for violence and malevolence within the confines of the game, but the regulations of this world do not extend to the player. The player is held accountable for their actions by some other virtual authority established within the virtual meta realms of the video game (Filipović, 2022).

However, the discourse surrounding evil within video games and the inherent impossibility of declaring a video game itself as evil from the player's perspective is far from being simplistic. The notion that the characters within the game, situated on the other side of the monitor, are inherently innocent and sinless, although seemingly correct, should be subject to careful scrutiny and analysis. This examination aims to explore the potential destructive effects of playing violent games on the player's own being on this side of the monitor. Unlike an avatar confined to a video game's virtual world, a player can step away from the monitor and interact with other individuals, potentially perpetrating heinous acts of violence, evil, or causing immense suffering to numerous innocent people. Engaging in evil actions could become habitual. Therefore, significant attention should be directed towards the potentially devastating

phenomenon of habituation to evil, considering the risk or possibility of becoming accustomed to committing evil acts and the gradual desensitization to inflicting harm upon others in real life. In this regard, the danger of violence in video games lies in the potential hindrance of rational thinking and assessment when confronted with real-world evil. It involves the normalization of engaging in violent and evil behaviors, which can be highly detrimental. Routinized, desensitized evil is generally one of the most destructive forms of evil, as it deviates from the conventional expectations of evil originating from monsters, psychopaths, sociopaths, and other marginalized individuals. Instead, it emanates from seemingly ordinary people, often innocent and unsuspecting children. In a given situation, these individuals may more easily succumb to their internal pressures, committing outrageous evil against others, particularly when compared to those not habituated to such evil acts.

Here we summarize the most common negative effects of playing violent video games on people's behavior:

- Desensitization (routinization) of doing evil to other people;
- Formation of awareness that personal problems can be solved with aggression more easily than with peaceful means;
- The realization that an individual, equipped with powerful weapons and proper training, can attain a significant advantage over a more formidable adversary, thereby acquiring divine or diabolical abilities and asserting dominance in their surroundings;
- Fostering a mindset that promotes resorting to killing as a means of addressing personal frustrations.

Why do video games with elements of violence, personally enacted by each computer gamer, hold such allure? How does the aggression and violence portrayed in these games impact young players? At what point does a video game, originally intended as a form of entertainment, cease to be classified as a game (akin to the fictional game "Rollerball" depicted in the movie of the same name)? Is it possible that video game companies deliberately and intentionally

create games that deviate from the conventional definition of a game? Should they be viewed as a distinct form of entertainment, akin to real-life hunting or gladiator fights, warranting a different perspective rather than just being labeled as games?

Children's reactions to violent video games have been a subject of concern since the early days of their existence. The highly realistic portrayal of violence in the most popular and widely played games raises questions about its impact on young players. In a study conducted by psychologists Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman in 2001, they examined 35 different studies on violent video games and highlighted several significant findings:

- 79% of American youth play video games regularly.
- On average, youth between the ages of 7 and 17 play video games for eight hours each week.
- Violent video games account for about 80% of the video game industry's revenue.
- In a sample of 33 popular video games from two major manufacturers, 80% had violent content (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).

Judging by research, it can be concluded that children favor violence in video games. In one study of seventh and eighth graders, 50 percent of their favorite video games were violent, and only 2 percent were educational (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Many researchers have concluded that violent video games have a more negative effect on young players than violence on television. In the aforementioned 2001 analysis, Anderson and Bushman also concluded

that there was a consistent pattern of results across the five domains. Exposure to violent computer games (1) increases the desire for physical confrontation; (2) increases violent thoughts; (3) increases aggressive emotions; (4) increases aggressive actions; and (5) diminishes positive actions (Anderson

& Bushman, 2001).

The society and social dynamics depicted in violent video games bear no resemblance to the real-world society in which video game players reside. It is an entirely fictional realm that does not exist in any tangible form. In this virtual world, actions that would be considered immoral or criminal in reality are not only permissible but even rewarded. Committing heinous acts or engaging in beastly crimes often leads to earning reward points, advancing to higher levels, or unlocking key elements necessary to progress in the game. However, it is crucial to recognize that these game-based rewards and consequences are divorced from the rules and norms of real life. The stark contrast between the game world and reality underscores the clear distinction between the consequences of actions in the virtual realm and those in the real world.

### **The Appeal of Violence as an Inherent Tendency of Humans**

Why do individuals engage in evil actions, and what is the underlying cause of evil? There are various explanations put forth to address this question, and we can identify three main groups of answers. One of the more popular answers is that it is a genetic cause. The violence we commit as a human race comes from our animal nature. That human unconscious genotypic aggressiveness is universal and strong enough to, when combined with advanced technology, destroy us completely (see Lorenz, 1966).

The behaviorist view denies the genetic explanation of the nature of human aggressiveness by shifting the responsibility to the environment. Human behavior is determined by the environment in which a person lives. Whether you will be aggressive and evil is determined by family, friends, peers, institutional and cultural environment. The crucial position of this doctrine is that evil is produced by society and not by the individual (Skinner, 1948, 1971).

The third approach to the problem of evil is humanistic psychology, represented by Erich Fromm, Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Neumann.

Fromm (1989) completely rejects both the nature argument and the nurture argument as catalysts of evil. He distinguishes between "biologically adaptive aggression" and "destructive ferocity" in which we should look for the causes of the satisfaction of players of violent computer games. In play, they can satisfy their drive for "destructive ferocity" without risking moral or criminal condemnation, without opposing education. We witness, probably in our own house, that our little ones or adolescents "kill" dozens of people or creatures every day, but they are still perfectly educated and socialized members of the family and society.

Fromm further claims that human destructiveness is rooted in the very personality of man and that it cannot be influenced. Genetic traits and environmental problems can encourage destructiveness, but not cause it. There are basic human needs that a person can satisfy in a positive or negative way by free will. The need for an object of worship can be satisfied by imitating Nikola Tesla or Adolf Hitler, the need for intimacy can be satisfied by love or sadism, the need for stimulation and excitement can be satisfied either by creativity or by mindless indulgence (see Fromm, 1989).

There is a distinction between committing virtual and actual acts of evil. It would be incorrect to assume that someone who readily engages in virtual evil would also be inclined to commit real acts of evil with ease and happiness. The two are fundamentally different experiences. However, it can be valuable to examine the mechanisms that lead individuals to derive enjoyment from engaging in virtual evil. To comprehend the underlying motives behind the desire to commit violence and harm others, even in virtual contexts, the perspective of "depth psychology" offers an intriguing viewpoint. According to the ideas put forth by Carl Jung, the psychic process is a journey of individualization. At the outset, individuals possess only a chaotic and undifferentiated understanding of themselves. As they progress in their development, their personality's positive and negative aspects become more distinct. Usually, individuals tend to suppress the darker aspects, leading to the growth of their unconscious shadow. If the mechanisms of suppression are overly strong, the shadow may

become monstrous and eventually break free, overwhelming the individual. However, in psychologically healthy individuals, there comes a stage of integration where they recognize and acknowledge both the good and evil aspects of themselves. These elements are then consciously reintegrated, allowing for a harmonious and integrated sense of self (see Rasel, 1982).

## **Utilizing Interactive Violence for Professional Training Purposes**

Humans have an innate biological resistance to killing their own kind. This protective mechanism is embedded in the ontological being of man at the level of innate impulses and it is difficult to break it. Even large social groups whose *raison d'être* is to kill other people, such as the army or special police units, know how difficult it is and how much practice it takes to break and undo that impulse. Throughout history it has been shown that trained soldiers easily enter the fight, they are ready to die, but most of them found it difficult to kill. One such traumatic case is described in the documentary novel from the First World War, "Serbian Trilogy" by Stevan Jakovljević.

Military psychologist Dave Grossman, a former lecturer at West Point Military Academy, shifted his focus to studying the act of killing following his military service in 1998. He strongly emphasizes that:

To kill, three things are necessary: to have a weapon, to know how to use it, and to have the will to kill. Two of the three conditions listed can be trained in video games. It's training and will. Killing simulators were created for training, which saves ammunition and evokes the image of the battlefield, where the enemy is killed virtually. Killing-training video games originate from the US Army Professional Program. Shooting technique, precision and automatic reaction are practiced here. Soldiers

are thus desensitized and their reluctance to kill is broken down (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

Video games specifically designed for military and police training, aimed at desensitizing individuals to acts of murder, should not be accessible to children. It is crucial for parents to understand that these games serve the sole purpose of cultivating the capacity and inclination to kill over time. This behavior can become ingrained and instinctive, particularly in high-pressure circumstances (see Bjelajac & Filipović, 2019a).

The warnings issued by experts regarding the potential consequences of playing violent video games are often not taken seriously by most social institutions accountable for the safety and proper care of children and young people, including parents. Unfortunately, this disregard occasionally leads to horrific crimes committed by children, further confirming the potential impacts of engaging in violent video games. In a study titled "New Study on Shooting Accuracy: How Does Your Agency Stack Up?", researchers examined the shooting accuracy of professional police officers in real-life situations. The analysis focused on 149 incidents involving the Dallas Police Department in Texas, USA. During these actions, the officers discharged a total of 354 bullets at suspects. Shockingly, half of the officers demonstrated complete inaccuracy, with one officer even missing their target 23 times. Only approximately one-third (35%) of all police bullets successfully hit the intended suspect (Daigle Law Group, 2018).

In contrast, there are cases where even a thirteen-year-old boy, armed with a stolen gun, exhibits astonishing accuracy in shooting at his peers within a school setting. Out of the eight shots fired, five targeted the victims' heads, while the remaining three hit the upper body. Such precision is not easily achieved by highly trained elite fighters who spend years practicing at shooting ranges. Playing violent video games can mold our young individuals into adept killers, despite the absence of real weapons in their hands. Simultaneously, they develop a mental framework, a code of ethics,

and ethical restraints that resemble those observed among child soldiers in conflicts like Sierra Leone.

## **Conclusion**

While it is important to acknowledge the potential adverse impacts of violent video games, it is equally important to recognize that not all video games fall into this category. Moreover, video games can also yield positive effects. Several studies have demonstrated that playing video games can enhance cognitive abilities, including spatial reasoning and problem-solving skills (Green & Bavelier, 2012).

In light of the evidence pointing to the potential negative impacts of violent video games, it is essential to establish guidelines that assist parents, educators, and policy makers in making informed decisions regarding their usage. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) cautions against exposing children and adolescents to violent video games, emphasizing the importance of parental limitations on gaming time (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). To aid consumers in selecting appropriate video games, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) assesses content and provides descriptors that offer guidance on which games to purchase and play.

While there may be variations in how individuals respond to violent video games, research findings remain consistent across experimental and longitudinal studies. The precise mechanisms underlying the link between violent video games and increased aggression are not completely understood. However, studies indicate that exposure to violent video games can potentially elevate aggressive thoughts, emotions, and actions. It's important to note that while such effects can occur, they are not guaranteed and may vary from person to person.

On the other hand, "playing video games will not turn children into bloodthirsty killers" is the basic conclusion of a book published by two researchers from Harvard (Kutner & Olson, 2008). The intention of the two researchers was to reframe the existing debate about the effects of playing video games on children.

It is essential to acknowledge that while violent video games can contribute to aggression, they are just one of several factors involved. Additional factors, including real-life exposure to violence and individual differences in personality traits, can also play a role in aggression. Further research is necessary to comprehensively grasp the intricate interaction between these factors, better understand the mechanisms through which violent video games may heighten aggression, and identify potential moderating variables.

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## **Mogući uticaj igranja video igara sa eksplicitnim nasiljem na agresivnosti igrača**

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### **Sažetak**

Video igre su postale najznačajniji fenomen popularne kulture, i jedan od najrasprostranjenijih vidova zabave u društvu u trenutku kada ono prolazi kroz Industrijsku revoluciju 4.0. Ta rasprostranjenost korespondira sa lukrativnošću, i industrija video igara beleži najveće prihode u sektoru kulturnih industrija i industrija zabave, približivši se i prihodima najvećih tradicionalnih industrija. Istovremeno, stepen naučne izučenosti fenomena video igre i njegovog uticaja na različita polja ostaje neproporcionalno mali, dok su moralna panika i banalizovano i presimplifikovano optuživanje video igara za izazivanje nasilja i zla u ljudima, naročito mladim, dominantni društveni stav i reakcija. Upravo zato, uticaj igranja nasilnih video igara na razvoj agresije i nasilnog ponašanja kod pojedinaca je temeljno istraživan. Dok neke studije ukazuju da igranje igara nema nikakav efekat ili čak ima katarzičan efekat, druge tvrde da je igranje nasilnih video igara povezano sa povećanom agresijom i antisocijalnim ponašanjem. Cilj ovog rada je da ispita efekte eksplicitnog nasilja u video igrama na agresivnost i nasilnost igrača takvih igara. Koristeći različite analitičke metode, istraživanjem stereotipa, kulturnih faktora i potencijalnih negativnih efekata igranja nasilnih video igara, ova sveobuhvatna analiza dovodi u pitanje netačnu prekonceptiju da video igre inherentno podstiču nasilje u stvarnom svetu. Uz uvažavanje određenih negativnih efekata kao što je promocija kulture kompetitivnog militarizma i desenzibilacije nasilja u stvarnom svetu, ovaj rad daje preporuke ka odgovornom igranju igara, roditeljskoj kontroli i usmeravanju i pozitivnom društvenom uticaju kao krucijalnom faktoru u oblikovanju moralnih stavova i ponašanja.

*Ključne reči:* video igre, nasilje, agresivnost, stereotipi, kultura, ponašanje