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RESET

CHANGING THE WAY WE LOOK AT
VIDEO GAMES

An Excerpt From

Reset:
Changing the Way We Look At Video Games

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Chapter 1

DANGEROUS GAMES

"The disturbing material in Grand Theft Auto and other games like it is stealing the innocence of our children and it's making the difficult job of being a parent even harder." [1]

–Hillary Rodham Clinton, 2005

It is pleasant at times to play the madman.

–Seneca (5 BC–65 AD)

In 1982, the U.S. surgeon general, C. Everett Koop, sounded a national alarm. Stating that video games caused "aberrations in childhood behavior," he warned that kids were becoming addicted to video games "body and soul." He also said, "There is nothing constructive in the games. . . . Everything is eliminate, kill, destroy."[2] Koop later retracted that statement, claiming it was an off-the-cuff response to a question. Retracted or not, his opinion gave voice to common beliefs of the time. Also in 1982, National PTA president Ronnie Lamm stated, "We've taken away their guns and holsters and cowboys and Indians, and we're now giving them a cartridge with the same kind of violent themes."[3]

In the early 1990s, Senators Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Herb Kohl (D-Wisc.) conducted a campaign against video games. During one of the 1993 hearings, in a harsh attack on video game makers, their colleague, Senator Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), said, "Shame on the people who produce that trash. . . . It is child abuse in my judgment."[4]

In fact, for most of the first thirty years of video game history, the predominant messages in the press and from politicians were almost universally negative and fearful. At best, video games were seen as a colossal waste of time; at worst, a threat looming over our youth and society. In fact, one guest on the

MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour in 1982 stated, "It is my concern that 10, 20 years down the line we're going to get a group of children who then become adults who don't view people as human beings, but rather view them as other blips to be destroyed—as things."[5]

Based on such alarming statements and the fact that video games have become more and more popular over the past decades, we might expect our society to be overrun by soulless video game zombies. As far as I can tell, the first video game generation, now those predicted adults, are just like other citizens. For better or worse, they do not view people as "blips."

ONGOING CONTROVERSY

The controversy rages on, however, and predictions made a quarter of a century ago are long forgotten. New predictions and concerns arise every few years, and new sound bites fill the media. We can't help but worry: Are they correct this time? Are today's video games going too far?

The people who make video games play a part in the ongoing controversy, too. They have often demonstrated a talent for testing boundaries and violating social conventions, almost from the very beginning. Though certainly not the first time video games came under fire, one of the most pivotal events occurred in 1992, when Mortal Kombat broke new ground by depicting realistic human figures in one-on-one battles. The human realism concerned many critics, but the game didn't stop there. Blood flew as the blows landed, and the famous "fatality" moves depicted such horrors as someone pulling out the defeated enemy's heart or spine. Kids loved it. Parents didn't.

Another game, Night Trap, caused controversy around the same time for sexual themes and scantily clad actresses in what appeared to be a voyeuristic context. Although the actual context was for the player (as the hero) to watch over the characters and protect them from a killer, the game's sexual implications concerned many critics, despite the fact that, unlike Mortal Kombat, Night Trap was not wildly successful.

A few years after Mortal Kombat, a game called Doom popularized a type of entertainment that ultimately came to be called the "first-person shooter." First-person shooters occur from the point of view of the player, something like the clichéd "stalker" view used in movies to show a victim from the killer's perspective.

Doom was a sensation among video gamers, and once again a game raised a red flag of concern. What was behind this immensely popular game that seemed to immerse players in a world of intense and graphically realistic violence? What adverse effects would it have on the people, particularly young people, who played it?

Then came the tragic shootings at Columbine High School. This complex tragedy shocked the nation, and naturally people sought to understand what had happened and why. Doom turned up as part of the story, and for a while some people attempted to link the school shooting with the video game, but the links were fragile at best, and the causes of the tragedy far more complex. In the end, video games were not seen as the proximate cause but rather one of several symptoms of two young men's deepening obsessions, isolation, and alienation.

In time, the news media and the political rhetoric about video games seemed to taper off, as the world presumably got used to first-person shooter games like Doom. The relative peace, such as it was, did not last. Once again, a game burst on the scene that shattered boundaries and reignited controversy: Grand Theft Auto 3. In Grand Theft Auto 3 and its sequels, players have free reign over a huge 3D world. They can do virtually anything, but among the most commonly publicized activities are stealing cars, beating up and killing random people, participating in gang wars, shooting police, running a prostitution ring, engaging in sexual acts, and driving recklessly. Of course, there is a lot more to the game, but its most publicized activities have outraged a lot of people, in part because the game draws high praise from players and was the most sought-after game of 2001.

Senators Kohl and Lieberman hauled the industry over the carpet after Mortal Kombat and Night Trap, prompting the video game industry to create a voluntary independent rating system, managed by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB). Now printed on all retail game boxes, ESRB ratings are intended to help regulate the sale of "inappropriate" games to minors and at the same time inform parents and other buyers of the kinds of content included in the games. The ESRB ratings are intended to work like movie ratings, which inform parents about whether specific movies may be appropriate for younger viewers.

For a variety of reasons, the ESRB ratings have not quelled criticism of video games, which in any case tends to focus almost entirely on certain high-profile games such as the Grand Theft Auto series and a far less popular game called Postal 2, which allows players to engage in acts of brutal violence against innocent

victims. What we learn from politicians and from the news is still largely negative and disturbing. Unfortunately, we rarely hear the whole story.

Reporting on video games in general, and on highly visible ones in particular, is often sensationalistic and simplistic. For instance, it's generally easier to classify all video games under one label. Sound bites do not lend themselves to subtle distinctions. Meanwhile, many scientists and researchers present evidence to prove the effects of video games and establish causation between these games and later antisocial behavior. Other scientists and researchers dispute these assertions, but their findings are less often part of the public discourse.

Unfortunately, in politics and the media, it's easier to state such results in simple, absolute terms in support of a specific agenda than to deal with the fact that much of the research is unproven or, at best, disputed. Even statements by some of the most ardent video game critics are taken out of context, and their qualifications and disclaimers that these games do not represent the whole set of video games are ignored in favor of a more definitive and easily digestible message. Lost in the discussion is the fact that most video games do not feature excessive violence or glorify criminal and antisocial activities, as we will see in Chapter 2.

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS

Even though high-profile video games have grabbed much of the attention with their violence and antisocial themes, little by little people are beginning to recognize that these games do not tell the whole story. While concern over the effects of video games, especially on children, has not gone away, the ever-increasing number of articles exploring the positive aspects of video games reveals a slight shift in perception. Why is coverage of video games changing?

Perhaps attitudes are shifting because people are beginning to look past the obvious criticisms and concerns to recognize video games in a more complete context, a context that realizes their positive aspects and potential for good. Even some of the harshest critics of video games today see this potential. Dr. Elizabeth Carll, who chairs the Interactive Media Committee of the American Psychological Association's Media Division and is a former president of the Media Division, has been an expert witness at various governmental hearings and is concerned about the effects of some games on children. Yet in an interview she told me, "Many video games are positive and teach children important skills. However, it is the

groups which are violent, particularly those which reward violent and antisocial behavior and may teach violence as a means of resolving conflict, which are of concern."[6] She is not an opponent of video games but only of certain problematic content that she believes is not appropriate for children.

My focus in this book is on the positive side of games, not because there isn't a negative side and not because video game criticism is necessarily invalid. I choose to present the positive side because it is far more powerful and prevalent than most people think, and because it offers a tremendous gift to society if we decide to accept it. Despite my positive focus, I have not ignored the criticisms of games. In fact, I have immersed myself in those criticisms through books, articles, court cases, congressional testimony, and personal interviews with more than a dozen experts on different sides of the debate.

Among the most significant charges leveled against video games are that they promote antisocial behavior—most specifically violence and criminal activities—and that they are addicting. In addition, some people fear that video game playing can pose various health risks. Are these charges true? What kinds of effects are video games having on people who play them? Should the video game industry be "cleaned up"?

I can't answer all of these questions, but I can at least attempt to clarify the issues and present information that I hope will allow you to make up your own mind. Obtaining definite and universally accepted data and conclusions about media effects is almost impossible, as I have discovered in my research, and all we can do as reasonable and concerned people is look, listen, and decide for ourselves. We will each apply our own standards of decency, morality, and appropriateness to the media we and our children consume. Ultimately, we will weigh the positives and negatives of video games, as we do for every technology and entertainment medium, according to those standards.

The studies, the research, and the various testimonies of experts are, therefore, less important in the long run than our own sensibilities, especially where, as you will see, there is so much debate and so little universal agreement among experts.

DO VIDEO GAMES PROMOTE ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR?

Most people today believe that violent media contribute directly to real-world violence. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Playing violent video

games has been found to account for a 13% to 22% increase in adolescents' violent behavior."[7] According to Craig Anderson of Iowa State University, "high exposure to media violence is a major contributing cause of the high rate of violence in modern U.S. society."[8] Other people have called video games "murder simulators,"[9] while the players of these games have been labeled as "emotionally unhealthy and mentally unstable."[10]

What are the roots of these beliefs, and why are so many people absolutely certain that video games pose such a real danger, particularly to young people?

OUR TASTE FOR VIOLENCE

As easy as it might be to represent modern media, including video games, as the epitome of violence, the recent history of Western civilization reveals an uncomfortable truth: specifically, that people's prurient taste for violence is not only common but among our most compelling, if also disturbing, interests.

In *Savage Pastimes*, Harold Schechter offers an often grisly history of our fascination with violence and crime, asserting, with plenty of lurid examples, that what we have today is tame by comparison. He maintains that contemporary society and media are far less violent than in the past, even our most controversial programs and video games. "Those who deplore the current state of American society and accuse media of pandering to, if not actually creating, an unwholesome obsession with violence would do well to learn something about cultural history."[11]

Schechter points out that, in contrast to modern life, where most of our exposure to real violence, crime, and death is via news and entertainment fictions, past societies were far more accustomed to violence in their real-life worlds. Livestock was regularly slaughtered by family members, hangings and beheadings were social events, and corpses of criminals were often displayed publicly following execution. Yet, based on the evidence of more than a century of consistent and phenomenal sales of various dime novels, broadsides, periodicals, "penny dreadfuls," and paid admissions to wax museums full of horrors—not to mention grisly and violent fairy tales—our ancestors were also avid consumers of sensationalized horror, violence, and crime.

By no means is this necessarily a happy fact, but it is a fact nonetheless. Violence fascinates people, yet the question remains: Is it causing us to be more violent? Schechter points out that whereas people had thought television violence

would inevitably turn a generation into psychopaths, baby boomers, most of whose male children spent their early days with toy guns in their hands, "grew up to be the generation that preached (however sanctimoniously) peace, love, flower power, and believed we could end the Vietnam War by surrounding the Pentagon and chanting 'Om.'"[12]

Our attraction to violence—fantasy or real—seems to be a common human trait found in most "civilized" societies, but does the consumption of violent entertainment make people more violent? Putting aside our past cultural history, today's beliefs about video game violence hinge to a large extent on studies of television viewing. There is a widely accepted belief that watching violent television causes violent, even criminal, behavior. How did we come to this belief, and is it true? Does watching violent TV turn people violent and cause them to become criminals?

DOES WATCHING TELEVISION CREATE CRIMINALS?

One of the chief arguments against violence in video games is based on studies of television violence between 1960 and 1981 involving 856 third graders, many of whom were tracked at various points in their lives up to age thirty. Five years after the study concluded, L. Rowell Huesmann, one of the primary researchers in this study (with Leonard Eron), testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee, claiming that there was a "strong relationship between early violence viewing and later adult criminality."[13] He used a bar graph to demonstrate a correlation between children who had viewed a lot of violent television as eight-year-olds and subsequent violent criminal records.

Huesmann's testimony and his bar graph convinced both the U.S. Senate and the media that television violence was dangerous and that it was a serious contributor to a later life of crime. This view and the study that promoted it have been treated by researchers, politicians, and social agencies as incontrovertibly factual ever since, and both are repeatedly cited in literature that argues against violence in video games.

The problem is that these studies were not as clear as Huesmann's testimony might have suggested. In his book *The Case for Television Violence*, Jib Fowles examines the published results of the long-term study and reveals that the researchers in fact ignored many findings that did nothing to prove their point and only relied on weak correlations in one out of six criteria. Moreover, he states,

their final published paper never mentions the word *television* once. "Instead of highlighting the learning of aggression from television, the authors pointed to other instigators of aggression—familial, neurological, genetic—and in doing so undermined their previously exclusive focus on television violence."[14] In fact, Fowles goes even further, stating in an interview, "It's quite clear when reading their 1984 publication, they are shying away from their own previous explicit statement about television violence."[15]

In the November 23, 2000, issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, Pulitzer Prize–winning author Richard Rhodes revisited the case against media violence and through correspondence with Huesmann was able to ascertain that the famous bar graph displayed in the Senate hearing represented only three individual cases out of a sample of 145 boys. I also spoke with Huesmann, and he confirmed this fact. He defended his position by noting that he had conducted two different long-term studies and had obtained results from the second, which confirmed his theory of the effect of television violence on people's later tendencies toward violence. However, he admonished in the interview, "No social scientist would say that even these two studies together are by themselves a convincing picture without further evidence."[16] He believes that, when combined with laboratory studies, in which the variables of the situation can be more controlled and which show short-term effects of aggression in people who watch violent television, the long-term studies are meaningful.

Jonathan Freedman, author of *Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression: Assessing the Scientific Evidence*, also questions the research on television violence. Freedman has examined all of the available studies of media violence for both television and video games. In the case of the long-term television studies, he has no problem with the methodology. "This is not bogus science. It is well done," he told me. "What is debatable is the interpretation of results."[17]

The problem with these long-term studies, Freedman says, is that they do not take into account the many factors that could influence the results, such as the fact that perhaps more aggressive kids might have fewer friends, or the friends they do have might exert poor influences on them or reinforce aggressive tendencies. We know little about their neighborhoods or how their parents treat them. In short, without knowing a lot more about these kids and the lives they have led for thirty years, the end result of these studies leaves more questions than it answers. In addition, Freedman told me, the results of such studies are

not consistent, and where they do show the kinds of positive correlations the researchers claim, the effects are very weak.[18]

Huesmann defends the research by mentioning the results of controlled laboratory studies, but Freedman, Fowles, and other researchers have criticized those studies as well. Fowles mentions one particular study in which "viewing *Sesame Street* or *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* produced a threefold increase in aggression among preschoolers who initially measured low in aggressiveness."[19] Overall, he claims, laboratory studies fail to show the effects the researchers claim with any consistency, and he raises serious questions about how we currently view media violence based on the current literature.

If Huesmann and other researchers who come to similar conclusions are correct, then there is a link between violence viewing and future behavior. If Fowles, Freedman, and others are correct, the established beliefs about media violence are at best inconclusive. Going even further, Fowles states that many studies show the opposite effects, indicating that people can use violent media to help release violent impulses "in a harmless way."[20]

What we don't know in the case of media violence seems to outweigh what we know with any certainty. In the end, I think it's fair to say that people's responses to violence in media are far more complex than sociological studies can fully uncover. The myriad factors pervasive in our culture, not to mention the constant changes in technology and society decade by decade, suggest that no one source of media influences people significantly, though it might have some effect. If television studies are less conclusive than we had thought they were, what about video games? Can a stronger case be made to support video game links to violence and crime, as some would suggest?

What Do Video Game Studies Tell Us?

Almost all of the research on video game violence so far has taken place in laboratory settings and has attempted to prove short-term correlations between violent game play and increased aggression. Craig Anderson, chair of the Department of Psychology at Iowa State University, is one of the few and most prominent researchers involved in such studies, and he regularly gives testimony before Congress and in major court cases. Like most video game researchers today, he relies on the long-term studies of television violence to validate the prob-

able long-term effects of video game violence. However, he believes that video games, in contrast with television, are likely to produce stronger associations because they are interactive.

Anderson's assertion about the increased effects of interactivity is based on the idea that players play the part of and identify with the aggressor. Due to the interactive nature of video games, they actively participate in the acts of aggression. In addition, they "rehearse" the choices that repeatedly lead to aggression, and that very repetition creates a learning environment in which "their lessons will be taught repeatedly."[21]

As apparently clear and convincing as Anderson's conclusions seem, many equally competent researchers disagree with his studies and with his conclusions. Dmitri Williams, assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Department of Speech Communication, disagrees that the results of television studies, even if valid, lead to the same conclusions when applied to video games. Researchers, he contends, need to know their medium. "Video games are fundamentally different from TV."[22]

Social factors are among the significant omissions in existing video game research. Williams views most video game playing as a social phenomenon, and testing in laboratory settings with solo players leaves out a big part of the picture. For instance, can peer pressure have positive or negative effects on players, causing them to act violently or antisocially? Peer pressure and social influences do affect people's behavior, but no data exist to show whether video gamers' reactions to peer pressure and other social influences result in any noticeably negative effects. Even if there are peer pressure effects, could they reinforce positive as well as negative behaviors? If negative, are they more or less severe than what we find in better-known social settings, such as schoolyards, families, street gangs, or college fraternities?

Also missing from the research, according to Williams, is the fact that video games today can be competitive or collaborative, or both at the same time. In a month-long study of video game players, Williams found no link between violent video game play and aggression. He thinks that more long-term study is needed, and he criticizes the methods of other researchers as being out of touch with the important factors that make video games unique. He believes more studies should be "carried out by people who understand games as well as scientific research methods."

Another important factor often overlooked in all the argument about video games and other media is the influence parents can have. Even with the TV research, Williams says that when kids watched violent TV with their parents, the effects were radically different. "Viewing 'negative' content with parental guidance," he suggests, "can have the opposite effects and can reduce the likelihood of long-term negative effects."

Why, then, are people so ready to jump on any research that suggests a correlation between video games and violence? Williams, Schechter, and others cite the history of media, where every new innovation was met with fear and resistance, from the birth of the modern novel to the early nickelodeons, newspapers, radio, TV, rock and roll, pinball, and so forth. Even such universally accepted non-media technologies as automobiles and telephones were seen as dangers to society when they were first introduced.

In summary, Williams suggests that we "fix the research before we begin fixing policy and messing with the First Amendment. Let's understand the medium."

Williams is only one of many researchers who disagree with current beliefs about video games. The arguments, for and against, have found their way into our court system, where laws attempting to regulate video game sales are tested in legal proceedings.

In 2002, a distinguished group of thirty-three researchers from universities all over the United States, as well as England and Australia, filed a friend-of-the-court brief to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit. The brief supported an appeal of the lower court decision that had, among other things, declared video games were not protected by the First Amendment. The same lower court decision had relied heavily on research by Anderson and his colleagues as primary proof of the link between violent behavior and video games.

Citing numerous articles and studies, the brief not only states that most studies failed to demonstrate a clear link between video game violence and violent behavior, but also that some studies were showing a positive release of emotion (catharsis) from such play. In addition, it criticizes the laboratory studies that rely on methods, such as word recognition tests and others, that produce positive results based on small pools of statistical data, out of context and without clear correlations with behaviors outside the laboratory.

In their brief to the Court of Appeals, these researchers also note studies of previous media, such as movies and comic books, which mistakenly associated

media violence with real-world violence, including the Eron/Huesmann study of television violence. The thirty-seven-page brief cites studies and experiments that show either no direct correlation between video game violence and real-world violence, or even positive effects where the video game experience appeared to reduce violence. In this case—as in every other case where courts have looked at the research—the court found that there was no credible evidence of harm from violent content in video games.[23]

Contrasted with the Court of Appeals brief is the "Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children," presented in July 2000 at the Congressional Public Health Summit. It was endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Family Physicians, and American Psychiatric Association. The statement asserts, first, "Television, movies, music and interactive games are powerful learning tools, and highly influential media."[24] It then makes conclusions about what is being learned—in short, that viewing violence is likely to lead to violence as a way of settling conflicts. In addition, viewing violence in media can lead to "emotional desensitization" and reduce the likelihood of someone taking action on behalf of a victim of violence. The statement also concludes that entertainment violence leads people to see the world as a violent and "mean" place, increasing people's mistrust of others. Finally, it asserts that young people exposed to violent programming "have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children who are not so exposed."[25]

Although the Joint Statement makes very strong claims, it mentions no specific studies. In other writing and testimony by the principals in this statement, most of the research focuses on other media, not video games, and there seems to be an untested and unsupported conclusion that video games must be worse because they are interactive.

Respected researchers . . . respected psychologists . . . contradictory opinions—is there really a right answer? Henry Jenkins of MIT, one of the chief video game researchers in the country, offers a different perspective. He states that video game players clearly distinguish between video game playing and reality. "I don't believe that the media in and of itself will turn a kid into a psychokiller. I believe that media is most powerful in our lives when it reinforces our existing values and least powerful when it contradicts them."[26] Jenkins con-

tends that, rather than becoming killers, video gamers are learning to be more critical and discerning thinkers.

Once again, in place of real and conclusive data, we have statistics and voices making authoritative but unproven statements. Perhaps more study would be worthwhile, but what do we study? If we seek only the negative connections, perhaps we can convince ourselves that they exist and find statistics to support that belief. Perhaps, if we can ever factor out the rest of the issues, we may one day find that clear connection. In the meantime, our own observation of a society that is clearly not overrun with emotionally desensitized zombies leaves us with a great opportunity. Instead of focusing on the negative—on the fears and the predictions—we can explore the medium of video games more carefully and find out how it differs from other entertainment media and how, in its differences, it also offers great new possibilities.

FANTASY LIVES

Statistical analysis and studies of aggression don't tell the whole story, in any case. What purpose does fantasy, including fantasy violence, serve? Clearly fantasy is prevalent throughout much of human history. Is it somehow necessary?

In his book *Killing Monsters*, Gerard Jones takes a look at the role of fantasy violence in the lives of children. Based on years of research and personal work with children, he concludes that fantasy violence is often not only beneficial but also necessary in a child's development. Children overly deprived of opportunities to express their deeper and darker fantasies often start to act out and show increased aggressiveness. Given an outlet for their fantasies, such as a toy sword or a video game, they calm down.

Not all children are blessed with healthy home lives or safe environments. For children growing up at risk, video games may offer a chance to find a level of control. Not surprisingly, they may gravitate toward violent games, but this does not necessarily mean they are reinforcing violent behavior. For instance, studies of soldiers returning from the Iraq war suggest that playing violent video games may actually help reduce the trauma associated with violence.[27] This discovery, though untested, suggests the possibility that some children growing up in violent worlds are actually unconsciously treating their own trauma through their choice of entertainment. To my knowledge, there is no area of research studying this possibility, but perhaps there should be.

Jones also talks about the rage that builds up in many children growing up as virtual prisoners (by their own description) of the school system, their parents' expectations and control, and what they perceive of as an uncaring society. For them, edgy entertainment actually expresses their pent-up rage and frustration. Jones writes, "When young people feel that the official world is hostile, indifferent, or irrelevant, the feelings of recognition and belonging that entertainment brings them can be transformative."[28] Jenkins also refers to what he calls a "fantasy of transgression"[29] that allows teenagers, in particular, to test the limits of their parents' culture. This ability to "transgress," along with the ability to take control in a video game, to master and excel—in essence, to beat the system—provides very powerful outlets for such youths.

While court judges are not video game experts, and what they say about video games should perhaps not be read as the ultimate authority, in one case a judge did deliver a very clear statement that I take to be instructive and thought-provoking. In 2002, Federal Court of Appeals Judge Richard Posner commented, "Violence has always been and remains a central interest of humankind and a recurrent, even an obsessive theme of culture both high and low. It engages the interest of children from an early age, as anyone familiar with the classic fairy tales collected by Grimm, Andersen, and Perrault are aware." Cautioning against undue restriction, Posner continued, "To shield children right up to the age of 18 from exposure to violent descriptions and images would not only be quixotic, but deforming; it would leave them unequipped to cope with the world as we know it."[30]

JUDGING THE EVIDENCE AND GOING FORWARD

So far, in all major court cases, the judges have weighed in against the critics, stating that the evidence is not convincing or conclusive. Despite an abundance of arguments on both sides of the scientific aisle, no conclusive results have been established.

Early studies predicted that exposure to media violence would lead to criminal activity. Some researchers have also suggested that the effect would be stronger with video games. However, national youth violence statistics fail to confirm any increase in youth violence that corresponds to the increasing graphic realism and violence of video games. In fact, violence statistics in the United States have fallen considerably during the years when video games have become more graphically violent and complex, and the gaming audience overall has been rising (see

Figure 1.1). While the real cause for the reduction in youth violent crime may have nothing at all to do with video games, the crime statistics, along with rising numbers of players, at the very least weaken the dire predictions of the most ardent critics and lend a little more credibility to those who question those predictions.
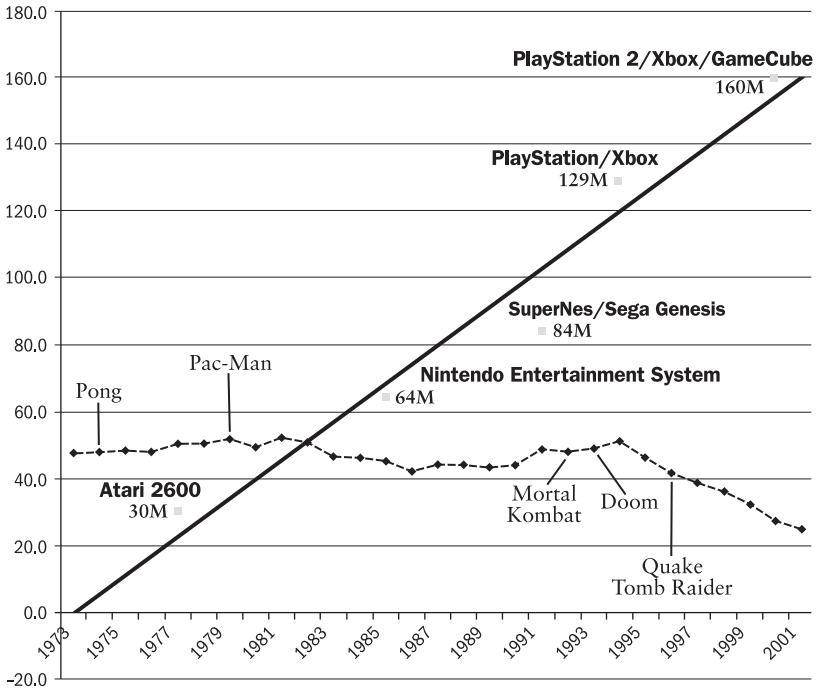

Figure 1.1 Youth violent crime in the video game era. Note that crime (dotted line) falls dramatically during the period in which the most realistically violent games were introduced and gamer populations increased, as measured by game console sales (straight line, in millions of units sold).[31]

   Many people sincerely believe in the link between media violence and real-world violence. Have they found that link? Peter Vorderer is coeditor of *Playing Video Games*, a comprehensive book on video game violence research published in 2006. He told me in an interview, "I think there is enough evidence to state that playing violent video games can result in increased short-term aggression, but we know very little about mid- to long-term effects at this time. This is an important area of research, but there is no current evidence that suggests a direct link between violence in video games and how people will respond later in their lives."[32] Vorderer's statement falls in the middle—somewhere between the

strongest critics and the strongest supporters of video games—but he fails to find convincing evidence of long-term negative effects.

Putting aside science and statistics, I believe that not all video game content is appropriate for all ages of players. Because the most controversial titles test the boundaries of social conventions, I recommend discretion and parental involvement with young players. I don't believe video games will turn them into killers and criminals, but I do think some of the content of some games is inappropriate for very young players, and plenty of games are perfectly fine for any age group.

While video games have not been definitively proven to lead to violence and crime, they have been universally hailed as learning environments. Anderson says, "Basically a well-designed video game is an excellent teaching tool, and a well-designed game will teach regardless of whether the designer intended to teach or the player intends to learn. I would love to see games that teach social skills useful for some subpopulation of children and adolescents who don't know how to treat others and how to interact."[33] Huesmann is also a believer in the positive potential of video games. "I think video games have the potential to be one of the most powerful teaching tools there could ever be," he says, "to teach skills that are important, to teach attitudes and behaviors that are important. You know they are very powerful teaching devices. The question comes down to, for any specific game, what is it teaching?"[34]

The fundamental question is, What are video games teaching? If they have not been shown to be teaching violence and mayhem, then perhaps they are teaching something else. As unsure as we are about the negative effects of video games, there is almost universal agreement that they are powerful learning tools, which is a primary focus of this book. On the other hand, while they are clearly teaching something, video games also come under fire for being too successful in this role and causing players to become addicts—which leads us to our next question.

CAN VIDEO GAMERS BECOME ADDICTS?

In 2002, the Associated Press reported the death of a young man in South Korea.[35] He had been playing computer games for eighty-six hours straight. That same year, a thirty-year-old man had seizures and died, and his death was thought to be related to his forty-eight-hour-a-week video game habit. In 2005, as reported in the *Washington Post*, ten deaths among young people in South Korea were linked

in some way with excessive video game playing.[36] Both South Korea and China are now offering Internet addiction treatment to combat an epidemic of what appears to be addictive Internet and video game use, and another such center has opened in Amsterdam. Do these stark and disturbing facts represent a new and dangerous trend among video game players?

Fortunately, deaths attributed to video game playing are extremely rare, and cases like the ones mentioned represent very unusual cases of extreme behavior among literally millions of players. At the same time, although the more moderate habits of the majority of video gamers may be less deadly, they can pose real risks as well. Whereas death may not be a concern in most cases, loss of productivity, decreasing school performance, damaged family relationships, and declining physical health are, researchers suggest, among the prices some people pay by playing regularly.

One of the foremost authorities on video game addiction, Maressa Orzack, puts it simply. "It's about costs."[37] Like any activity, she says, some people may play video games in healthy ways and benefit from the experience. Others, however, may play excessively, to the detriment of their lives; in such case, game playing undeniably poses a problem.

People escape into reading, television, sex, Internet chatting, sports and exercise, shopping, gambling, and work. Such escapes can be temporary reactions to stressful conditions, or, according to Orzack, when they become constant or repetitive over time, they can be seen as a symptom. Like better-known problems such as eating disorders, compulsive shopping, gambling, and sexual obsessions, the long-term and detrimental effects of game playing can reflect deep problems, eroding the quality of the person's life until those problems are addressed and resolved.

Researchers are concerned that some people have become addicted to the Internet, to computers in general, and to video games. To Orzack, it's all part of the same problem. In place of the word *addiction*, which is typically associated with substance abuse and physical addictions, she prefers to call it "Internet usage disorder" or, more generically, a form of impulse control disorder. "These terms don't suggest that it is an addiction as such, but it's still something where people lose control," she told me. "Control is the biggest thing."[38] Like eating disorders or gambling problems, she suggests that therapy most often involves normalizing behavior to bring the person's life into balance.

Most people seem able to surf the Internet or play video games while maintaining productive lives and relationships. Why do some people seem to lose control while others do not? Nick Yee, a researcher at Stanford University, notes that therapists involved in online addiction research and treatment consistently find that clients being treated for Internet or video game playing disorders almost always also have depression or other mood disorders. Orzack agrees, stressing that this sort of response isn't isolated but often comes hand in hand with other symptoms, such as depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Yee wonders, "How did depression get rebranded as a technological problem?" His recommendation is to treat people for depression or mood disorders and not for what he calls "another symptom."[39]

Yee contends that many people feel unhappy or uninspired in their lives, in school, at home, or at work. "Is it pathological to prefer being where you have social status and respect?" he asked an audience at the Palo Alto Research Center in 2006.[40] Video games level the playing field, and just about anybody can succeed if they want to, gaining respect, friendships, and status in a world, albeit a virtual one. For instance, a fifteen-year-old can compete successfully against a wealthy business executive or even a U.S. Army general. In fact, the fifteen-year-old would probably win if he or she is a practiced gamer.

Whatever the cause, however, any problem that seriously impacts people's lives must be taken seriously. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of real data to show how many people are having problems or how severe those problems may be. Research is ongoing in the area of video game addiction specifically and Internet addiction generally, but so far no definitive statistics have emerged. Researchers are even still defining terms. Yee suggests, for instance, that the meaning of the word addiction often used in user surveys may be interpreted rather loosely, in a colloquial rather than a clinical sense. "How many golfers would fill out a survey saying they were addicted to golf?" he asks.[41]

Various Web sites (see Resources at the end of the book) offer useful links and checklists of symptoms to help determine whether someone is computer, Internet, or video game addicted, and various support groups are also available online. Meanwhile, Orzack offers some hope to people concerned with these issues. She suggests that people can deal with these problems with a little discipline and sometimes outside help. She adds that most of the people she sees in her

therapy practice are brought in by someone else—typically a parent or spouse—because the gamer doesn't see any problem. However, once players are determined to make changes, they can do so.

As serious as video game addiction is, I caution parents not to overreact just because their children seem to be playing video games a lot. If the kids are doing their homework, getting a good night's sleep, and staying active, then there's little to worry about in terms of compulsive behavior. Even if they are having some problems managing their video game play, other factors are likely the cause. Before jumping quickly to the conclusion that video game playing is at fault, parents and spouses should always examine other aspects of the person's life. Did something traumatic happen recently? Have new stresses or pressure popped up in their lives? Is there tension arising from another area—fighting with friends or problems at work or school, for instance? Excessive video game playing might be a problem in itself, but it more often appears to be associated with other, more serious problems.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Is someone in your family particularly vulnerable to the video game lure? Although it may not be possible to predict with certainty, some characteristics do appear more commonly among those whose video game experience becomes obsessive.

Orzack typifies the clients she has seen in therapy for video game addiction as "very bright." "They are so bright," she adds, "that they are bored with school and what is presented, or they are disturbed at something that is going on in their lives. They are so bright that they neglect homework because it's not worth it."[42]

According to Yee, the game players most at risk are what he calls the "achievers" and the "escapists." Achievers, he says, respond to the way games stack overlaying goals and rewards, so that "even completing one task and receiving the reward does not remove the impulse to keep playing. There are always other rewards ahead."[43] For the escapists, personal empowerment is the key factor. "They are playing because the gaming environment empowers them in a way that real life does not."[44]

What is apparent is that individuals with certain tendencies may be more susceptible to the allure of video games. At the same time, these individuals, because of those same tendencies, might become involved in other types of activities that

match their personalities—workaholics, shopaholics, sexaholics, and so forth. People, especially Yee's achievers and escapists, do respond well to the way games motivate players, because video games are designed, for both artistic and commercial reasons, to keep players involved. Imagine a game that quickly became boring. Who would want to spend their money on it?

Gaining control over any sort of impulse control disorder is difficult, whether it involves eating, gambling, shopping, or video gaming. Unlike overcoming drug addictions, however, quitting an addictive game experience does not have to be long and painful. Depending on the person, simply leaving the game for a while breaks the goal/reward cycle that Yee mentions. Once the player has "normalized," to use Orzack's term, he or she may even be able to return to the game with some self-imposed limits and better self-assessment, recognizing when the game gets too compelling or when the player is not taking care of himself or herself. In other cases, more consistent measures may be necessary, as not everyone will respond with the same amount of self-control.

In summary, video game addiction is really a form of impulse control disorder. Like compulsive eating, gambling, or shopping, video games can affect some players, particularly those who are already depressed or dealing with emotional issues, as well as very bright but disengaged individuals. In those cases where video game playing becomes a problem, outside intervention may be necessary because, according to Orzack, some players don't see a problem until it is presented to them in a therapeutic environment.

Ultimately, video games aren't like heroin or even cigarettes. The fact that a disorder can be associated with video games doesn't make them addicting. Even so, some people's lives can be adversely affected by their experience of video games, and for those people, the video game habit may be a symptom of other problems that need attention. For otherwise healthy people, video games can be entertaining and beneficial.

WHAT DO VIDEO GAMES SAY ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN?

Video games have often been criticized as being primarily male dominated. One statistic from 1991 claimed that men were depicted in video games thirteen times

more often than women.[45] The audience for video games has been predominantly male as well, though more and more women are playing today, with some studies showing female players comprising nearly 40 percent of the overall market.[46]

In their depiction of women, who are often portrayed as either helpless victims or excessively curvaceous sex objects, video games have for the most part been justifiably criticized. However, where some critics also proclaim that video games are full of sex and even rape, such charges are untrue and misleading. Only one game released in the United States contained any rape, and it was a silly, marginal, and very rare game for the Nintendo Entertainment System called Custer's Revenge. Sexual acts in games, though somewhat increasingly common in recent years, are still mild, cartoonlike, and rare in video games compared with their preponderance in movies and television.

Some criticisms of gender issues in video games are more valid, however. Until the mid-1990s, women were generally victims who needed to be saved. In most American video games, the hero was generally an overmuscled aggressive he-man, although many very popular Japanese games tended to show more diverse body types among male characters and often had children as their protagonists.

In 1996, a particularly well-endowed protagonist hit the scene. Lara Croft, the main character of the Tomb Raider series, became a pop icon, a sex symbol over time (especially when played by Angelina Jolie in two movies), and a catalyst for changing views on the roles of women in games. Although she was definitely designed to appeal to male players, she was also a highly skilled, independent, strong-willed female character, and, more important, she was the character that the player controlled. For the first time, male gamers were controlling a female protagonist/heroine in a high-profile mainstream video game. The Tomb Raider series and Lara Croft's character are still popular today.

The prevalence of sexy women in video games is nothing surprising, and there are too many examples to list them here. In many ways, video games reflect our culture, and in sexual stereotypes, dominated by images of female pulchritude and unrealistic body image messages, video games, with their early appeal to male players, naturally followed suit. Although some games go out of their way to depict sexuality, the majority do not make it a theme. I would like to see games depict a more diverse environment that, among other things, treats women less consistently as sex objects and men less consistently as aggressive supermacho types.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH VIDEO GAME CRITICISM?

The rhetoric against games is often very strongly stated. People believe passionately that video games cause violence, antisocial behavior, crime, and addiction—among other things. The problem with some of these critics is that they often do not do their homework, relying instead on strong phrases and unsupported attacks. One Web site (www.mavav.org), which claims to be authoritative on the problems of video games, calls players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) "emotionally unhealthy and mentally unstable people" and "social outcasts." One politician claimed, "You score points for how many women you rape."[47] Such absurd and inaccurate statements cast doubt on other incendiary and absolute condemnations of video games and the people who play them.

The facts are inconclusive, and the experts clearly don't agree. Video games are not lily white. They are often intentionally controversial and jarring. They are also powerful. They attract millions of players all over the world. They represent an opportunity that we might miss if we focus only on what's wrong with them. As researcher James Ivory of Virginia Tech told me, "If you just look at the negative versus nothing at all, you don't get a very good picture. If you looked at food only in the context of negative outcomes, food would seem very dangerous."[48]

When people narrow their focus, they get a narrow view. If people open their minds, they may see a larger landscape. To see the whole picture, look for the positives and the negatives. They both exist.

Ultimately, the media we consume may be linked to deeper elements of human consciousness, and, if people like Harold Schechter and Gerard Jones are correct, violence and antisocial fantasy are not only inherent in our individual and collective psyches but quite possibly necessary. Socrates once said, "I only wish that ordinary people had an unlimited capacity for doing harm; then they might have an unlimited power for doing good." If video games somehow allow us that "unlimited capacity for doing harm" in fantasy, can they also provide us with "an unlimited power for doing good"? I think they can.

The Video Game Player's Perspective

Having been a video game player for nearly forty years, I'll let you in on a little secret: Most video game players don't see the violence the way outside observers do. They understand that violence is an element of play that serves specific purposes.

Games are about challenges. For avid gamers, having to pit their skills against one or a horde of virtual enemies is fun. It's why they buy the game. In many ways, it's like a NASCAR racer or a poker player who likes to test his or her skills against other competitors. In fact, it's like anybody who plays a competitive game, whether it is tennis or bridge or Monopoly.

As a player, I generally don't see the enemies in the games as people. I see them as challenges. In real-world warfare, the enemy is often depersonalized, no longer treated as human but rather as "the enemy." This desensitization to the "other" is one of the criticisms that have been leveled at video games; however, from the gamer's perspective, the correlation is missing. In the case of video game enemies, I am keenly aware that they are graphical representations of computer programs. People who worry about game players transferring actions from games to real life often miss the fact that, absent other sociological problems, game players know they are actually playing a computer program that generates graphical images resembling creatures and approximating (generally poorly) intelligent or purposeful actions.

The fact that enemy characters in video games sometimes look like human beings adds to the context of the action, making it more interesting and increasing the challenge. Even knowing that they are generated by a computer, I find it more satisfying to succeed against a dangerous opponent who can "kill" my character than against something that represents little or no challenge. I do not suffer any real harm when my character in the game is "killed," nor is there any harm done to other characters I "kill" in the game. More harm comes to the basket in basketball than to the characters in video games. Both represent the goals of the game, and if you think of the enemies you see depicted on a video screen as similar to the basket in basketball, you won't be too far wrong.

In the real world, I find the word *kill* a difficult, often disturbing, and very final concept. Like most video gamers, I fear death in real life and have no desire to see or participate in anybody's demise. In fact, I am far more squeamish than my ancestors who, in previous generations, viewed and participated in events that would morally outrage me or make me sick to my stomach.

As a gamer, however, I apply a completely different meaning to the word kill, based on the context of video games versus the real world. This context defines kill in colloquial terms, no more related to real-life violence than is the stockbroker who issues a "kill" order, the politician who "kills" a bill, the newspaper editor who "kills a story," or the stand-up comedian whose performance "killed" the audience.

How is it that we gamers don't see the violence the way nongamers see it? Part of the explanation can perhaps be found in Johan Huizinga's 1938 classic book *Homo Ludens*,[49] in which he describes the "Magic Circle" of play. In the Magic Circle, people clearly distinguish between play and reality, or nonplay. In play, inhibitions and rules are relaxed, and people perform acts that they would not perform in other moments of their lives. Game expert Henry Jenkins offers the example of apes, which clearly distinguish between play and nonplay. "In some circumstances, they seem to take pleasure from wrestling and tousling with each other. In others, they might rip each other apart in mortal combat."[50]

Taking the concept of the Magic Circle and applying it to digital technology, it's fair to say that there's a special Digital Magic Circle that didn't exist in 1938 when the term was first introduced. The basic concept is the same, however, and is perhaps even more powerful when we consider the fact that video games are so clearly and unequivocally not real in the physical sense of the word.

I want to mention one point with regard to violence and antisocial content: most people receive certain very strong moral and ethical messages from society and, in some cases, from personal experience. For instance, the essence of the Golden Rule is probably more powerful in society than any message contained within a video game.

We all know what it feels like to be hurt, physically or emotionally, and we all have some built-in empathy and moral code. Although outside influences can, and often do, override or corrupt this kind of inner knowledge, we still know right from wrong, helping from harming, and kindness from meanness. Like Henry Jenkins, I believe "media is most powerful in our lives when it reinforces our existing values and least powerful when it contradicts them." The messages of our humanity are stronger and clearer inside emotionally healthy people than the messages of video games, which rarely set out to promote a point of view or a morality (with some extreme fringe exceptions). In the commercial game world, the primary ideology is fun, freedom, and making choices, and if there is a moral message, with few exceptions it reinforces the notions that good triumphs over evil and that helping others is rewarding.

What about those games that appear to glorify lawlessness, random violence, and antisocial actions? I am personally uncomfortable with some of those games, which I think push the envelope to be sensationalistic, but I don't want this point to be taken out of context. I still think there's a good chance that such video games help people by allowing them to explore their Jungian "shadow selves" in a harmless environment. Over the coming years, we may see research that either reinforces or refutes that belief. In the meantime, I continue to believe in the freedom of expression that video games represent and in their ultimate positive potential—which is the subject of this book.

VIDEO GAME ADDICTION: A GAMER'S VIEW

Many game players are probably paying a price for their game-playing experience. They are certainly losing out on opportunities to do something other than play a game. Likewise, people all over the world are paying a price for watching television instead of reading a great novel or spending time volunteering at the local hospital. Even reading a great novel involves a loss of other options. Life is always about trade-offs, and playing a video game is another choice people make.

For me, as a gamer, playing a game represents many things at once: fun, intrigue, challenge, empowerment, escapism, social interaction, and, atypically, professional work. I have been accused many times of having the greatest of jobs: I get to play video games for a living. It's true that I enjoy playing games. It's also true that I played video games before I got paid to do so, and I would have played them if I never got paid, though possibly somewhat less than I have.

After all these years of playing video games, I still enjoy them and look forward to some of the most innovative among them. I admit that I have had to overcome a tendency to play too much. While I don't believe I am a video game addict because I maintain a healthy and balanced life and family, I have had to struggle at times against a tendency to play when there was something more important to do.

Among the people I have met while playing video games are practicing medical doctors, wealthy and successful business owners, quadriplegics for whom the game world is like a new lease on life, stay-at-home housewives with small children, university students, grade school children, dozens of video game designers, and many others from all walks of life. Most of them were intelligent, thoughtful, and generous. I have found the community of game players anything but the

"mentally unstable" individuals some people would like you to think they are. Some of them are, in fact, among the most brilliant, creative, and humanitarian people I have known. It is my hope that as you continue to read this book, you will look past stereotypes and think in terms of new options.

In the end, controversial or not, what I think is most important is not whether a game contains violent or antisocial content, but whether playing that game has some tangible positive impact on the players. Perhaps not all games are suitable for all players. Perhaps some games we think are unsuitable actually fulfill a role, as Gerard Jones suggests. Video games offer much that is positive and empowering, and they can offer even more.

In this chapter, I have done my best to look at the most prevalent controversies surrounding video games. Not everybody will agree with my conclusion—namely, that much of what people have believed about video games is mythical or misinterpreted and that most criticisms are at best unproven. Even if you don't completely agree with my assessment of the controversies, I think the arguments only matter in the context that takes the negative view of video games. The positive context leaves little doubt that video games represent a new and powerful technology—a tool that can be wielded for entertainment and learning, both at the same time.

This book will describe some of the valuable contributions video games are already making to our education, our workplaces, our health, and our social awareness. I will look at how and why video games are so effective, and how they can realize their inherent potential for, in Socrates' words, "doing good."

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Reset:
Changing the Way We Look At Video Games

by Rusel De Maria
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