The Violent Video Game Plague
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PARENTING

The Violent Video Game Plague

Is your child becoming a trained killer? A Former US Army Ranger explains how video games can eliminate our innate inhibition to not kill another human.

In 1998 in the United States, in several separate incidents, school boys shot their classmates at school, leaving nearly a dozen dead and many more wounded. The common denominator of these children was their deep immersion in violent television, movies and video games. As our nation sought to grapple with these horrendous events, one man we called upon was Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman, a trained psychologist and an expert in killing. Now retired after 25 years of service in the US Army, he is professor of military science at Arkansas State University. His is a unique perspective, and in this chilling interview, he explains exactly what violent video games do to children.

Media and video game violence are not like ordinary play, even if the play is "Bang, bang, I gotcha." That's the same kind of playing that every species does--tiger cubs, kittens, bear cubs, maul and roll and play at one another. This is normal behavior. But if I sit at a video game and, instead of reacting with another human being, I shoot and shoot and shoot and shoot endless thousands of rounds with no discipline, no

repercussions, just a simple set of conditioned responses to kill being built into me, something profoundly different is happening. Video games are so effective in training a person to kill, so economical, that the military and the law-enforcement community have begun to use them. The most common one used by the United States Army is made by Nintendo [a leading maker of violent video games]. It's really indistinguishable from the games that kids buy and play.

Why the games are so harmful

You cannot evaluate video games without understanding how destructive simple violent imagery is, the kind children are so receptive to. These visual images have enormous power. For young children, television violence is real. Up until the age of six or seven they cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality. They are riveted by violent television, movies and video games. Their heartbeat goes up, their respiration goes up. The media discovered very early on that when they included violence as the key ingredient in entertainment, the populace was riveted to it. It is the addicting ingredient, as nicotine is the addictive ingredient in tobacco. Now they're sincerely sorry about the side-effect, the terrible destructive side-effect, just as the tobacco industry is sure sorry about all of the deaths being caused by the nicotine, but they have no intention of changing the addictive ingredient, violence, until somebody makes them do it. In the 1980s the National Institute of Mental Health looked at 2,500 scientific studies on impact of violent visual imagery on children. They said, "The scientific debate is over," and concluded the visual images on TV and in movies are tremendously harmful. But now with violent video games you've entered in a realm where instead

of being the passive receivers of images of human death and suffering, you are now pushing the button that inflicts human death and suffering on another human being. And when you take that even another notch further, where you actually hold a weapon in your hand [as in arcade games and some home games], and point and shoot and learn the motor skills of killing another human being, making it an automatic reflexive response, like children in a fire drill or pilots in a flight simulator, now we've entered into a realm that is absolutely despicable.

The psychology of killing

Human beings have a powerful resistance to killing their own kind. At the moment they become angry, the forebrain [the advanced, reasoning part of the mind] shuts down, the midbrain [the instinctive part] takes over, and we slam head-on into a hard-wired resistance to killing our own kind. Trying to get people onto the battle field to kill one another is extraordinarily difficult. Until the Vietnam War, fewer than 20 percent of soldiers on the front lines would ever actually fire at the enemy. But with the same kind of conditioning caused by these games, the U.S. military raised that to 90 percent in Vietnam--we scientifically overcame the soldier's innate resistance to killing.

The murder trainers

If I give you a gun, I can take that gun back and lock it up. But if I give you the capacity to reflexively use that gun as a form

of "operant conditioning" [creating by repetition the reflex to actually use it], as we now do for our soliders, I cannot lock that up. I cannot take that away. Violent video games are the mental equivalent of putting an assault rifle in the hands of every child in America--a friend of mind refers to them as "murder trainers." By sitting and mindlessly killing countless thousands of fellow members of your own species without any ramification or repercussions, we are teaching skills and concepts and values that transfer immediately anytime they get a real weapon in their hand.

Motivation to oppose the games

The thing that motivates children to not play these games is not the fact that they might beat their kids, nor the fact that they might down the line shoot somebody. What motivates them is social censure. We need to create the kind of environment where people say, "That is sick." We should respond to toxic substance in our mental environment in the same way we respond to toxic substance in our water. Then we are on our way to creating the kind of world where people can react with indignation. Today we have the moral courage to tell someone, "Don't you dare get in that car in this drunken state. I am going to call you a taxi." We have achieved a moral outrage about drunken drivers, and drunks are now modifying their behavior because of this moral outrage.

Similarly we now say, "I'd rather you didn't light up a cigarette, please. This is a nonsmoking area." When we have the moral courage to get up and say so, then we have achieved a moral indignation that truly modifies a smoker's behavior. In the

same way, we need to say to kids about violent games, "That's sick." We need to pass a law that point-and-shoot video games are for adults only, because that's an indication of just how disgusting we think this behavior is. Any municipality, any county, any state anywhere across the nation, has the authority to say these things are for adults only. When you make a law, you are indicating your moral outrage. That law represents social censure and agreement across the society that says this is a bad thing, and people who do this are "bad people." That has a far greater effect on the behavior of teens than some kind of distant possibility of their ending up in jail. And once they stop, the conditioned reflex to kill brought about by the games will wear off on its own in a couple of years.

How might we control the industry?

The video game manufacturers and the arcades or businesses that sell the video games are incredibly vulnerable to law suits. If you have a video arcade or if you have a store with a video game out front, or if you are manufacturing or marketing these products, then in the very near future the probability is extraordinarily high that you are going to find yourself on the wrong end of a lawsuit.

The long-term impact of violence

We did a longitudinal study of 875 kids and media violence across 21 years. Those kids at age eight who were high-level viewers of media violence were five times more likely to be

violent criminals than those who were low-level viewers of violence. But what really stunned us was the fact that even a greater correlation existed between those that were high level viewers of violence and those who were physically abusive to their own children. Video games are likely to lead to even more extreme consequences, because they deal with real actions, not visual images.

Screen violence leads to real violence

Every single nation with a marked increase in violence, according to Interpol [the international police agency], has been a Western nation. There is one exception: India. There the violent crime rate has gone up in just 15 years from 1983 to 1997. The murder rate has gone from 2.9 per hundred thousand, to around 4.6 per hundred thousand. This corresponds almost directly to the introduction of violent television in India. The American Medical Association stated in 1992 that just about anywhere in the world that television appears, 15 years later the murder rate doubles. All the other variables--availability of guns, family structure, etc.--remain stable. The AMA concluded that half of all the murders in America would not have occurred if not for the impact of television. Ten thousand murders a year, 70,000 rapes, and 700,000 assaults would not have occurred in America alone if not for the influence of television. [--and consider that the compounding impact of violent video games on the crime rate is only now being felt.] 1Ã□21Ã□4

RESOURCES: ON KILLING BY LT. COL DAVID

GROSSMAN, BACK BAY BOOKS, LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, 1271 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10020 USA. ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE RATING BOARD (ESRB) www.esrb.com/. CHILDRENS SOFTWARE www.childrenssoftware.com/; THE GAMES PROJECT: www.gamesproject.org/

Home Schooling With a Vengeance

Video games are very effective teaching tools, and before you put one in the hands of your child, you need to find out just what the game is going to teach. There are games, such as Myst and Riven, which are educational in a nonviolent way. Unfortunately, most of the millions sold each year aren't. The four pictured here are typical of the standard violent genres--mythical adventure (Dark Vengeance), war (Total Annihilation) and "point and shoot"--the

most dehumanizing kind--(Damage Incorporated and Blood Bath). There is a rating system, akin to the one for movies, maintained by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (www.esrb.com/parent.html). Dark Vengeance and Total Annihilation are "Teen 13+" for animated violence; Blood Bath is "Mature, 17+" for realistic blood and violence. Damage Incorporated isn't rated.

Of these, Dark Vengeance is by far the most advanced graphically, and gives a glimpse of future games that will be so realistic as to be interactive movies. Entire plot lines, scenes and characters will develop before your eyes as you control your character. According to Lt.

Grossman, such realism will result in the game players being even more likely to actually commit violence, just as the most realistic flight simulators actually train people to fly planes, even the first time they step into a real one. The growing threat to our children--and their parents--from violent video games is not just an extension of violent television and movies, it is a whole new world, and a quantum leap in danger.

And Don't Forget Driver's Education

Carmageddon is a racing game with the objective not to win by driving

skillfully, but to destroy all opponents and run down every pedestrian in sight. The top-selling game's UK creators, Stainless Software, revel in--not to mention profit from--the game's notoriety, and freely admit to a "contagious desire to make things ...more mentally disturbing than ever before." Carmageddon II, just released for the PC, features pedestrians who beg for mercy before being run over, animals to kill and more. If the same logic hold true to this teacher of mahem as to point-and-shoot video games, then players will tend toward very aggressive driving habits, and real roadways of the future may

become even more lethal than they are today.