

1-1-2016

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### Recommended Citation

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Video Games and Its Effect on Crime

Northern Illinois University

Video Games and Its Effect on Crime

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors

Department of

Sociology

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May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016

# Video Games and Its Effect on Crime

## Abstract

For over three decades, the media has blamed violent video games as one of the main reasons why today's youth commits violent crimes. The research that has been conducted does not support the media's allegations. This project aims to highlight some of the flaws in the research that has been done in this field of study. Also, this project proposes the idea that one should look at how video games may help reduce crime. This is done by looking at the inverse correlation between the violent crime rate in the United States and the rate of violent video game sales. Also, the author conducted a qualitative study that aims to find how playing video games online may help reduce crime. The study included six interviews with members of an eSports club at a public university. The author found evidence of informal social control and how that may help reduce violent crime. There are limitations to the study, but overall this is a huge step into researching an area of study that has not been tapped to before.

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Violent video games and the people who play them are no strangers to controversy. Arguably, since the 1990s, violent video games have been in the crosshairs of the media and politicians. One of the reasons is because it is easier to blame violent video games for the deviant and sometimes criminal behavior of young adults. Whenever there is a school shooting, it does not take long before the media or pundits to suggest that violent video games might have played an important role. The media perceives it as playing violent video games and committing violent crimes go hand in hand. This ultimately results in researchers conducting studies on how playing violent video games make young adults more violent. The results of the studies contradict what the media portrays. In a report from the American Psychological Association, researchers found that there is evidence showing that violent video games increase aggression, but not enough to demonstrate that playing violent video games lead to criminal behavior or delinquency (Casey, 2015). In other words, playing violent video games can make one more aggressive at the moment they are playing the game, but there is no direct link between playing violent video games and committing a violent crime. Unfortunately, researchers continue to conduct studies in order to find a non-existent link between playing violent video games and committing a violent crime. The current article takes a glimpse at the history between violent video games and the media. Also, one will look at the rise of popularity of video games. Then, one will address a couple of the issues with the research that the media uses to support their claims. Lastly, one will look at the inverse correlation between the violent crime rate in the United States and the violent video game sales, as well as, how playing video games may help prevent crime. This will be explained by using three sociological theories. The main argument that stems from this research is that playing video games online increases informal social control. As a result, the increase in informal social control leads to a decrease in crime.

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### *Literature Review*

In 1992, the popular fighting game *Mortal Kombat* was released in the United States. The game was at the center of controversy the moment it hit store shelves. One of the reasons was due to the amount and nature of graphic violence it displayed. Parents and politicians were concerned that the youth was exposed to such violence. Attaining a copy of the game was as simple as buying a candy bar at the grocery store. This resulted in one of the most important political events that occurred in the 1990s. The 1993 hearing on video game violence led by Senator Joseph Lieberman, resulted in the creation of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, or ESRB (Markey, Markey, and French, 2014). The ESRB is a self-regulatory body whose purpose is to assign ratings for video games, so parents can make informed choices when purchasing a game for minors. The ratings help distinguish the games that are appropriate for a certain age group, similar to how movie ratings help parents chose a movie that is appropriate for their children to see. It is important to note that the ESRB or any retailers cannot prevent anyone from purchasing a video game that is not appropriate for them. They can set limitations, but they cannot refuse someone from purchasing a video game. This was the result of multiple attempts from politicians who were trying to ban the sale of violent video games to minors. The fight to stop the sale of violent video games to minors did not end in the 1990s. One attempt made by the State of California went up to the United States Supreme Court as recently as 2011. That year the United States Supreme Court struck down a California law prohibiting the sale of violent video games to minors. As a result, video games were afforded the same first-amendment protection as films, music, and other artistic works (Markey et al., 2014). Despite the ruling, policy makers and the media suggest that violent video games should not be in the hands of young individuals because they are a threat to the youth of the United States. In one instance, Senator Lamar

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Alexander argued that “video games [are] a bigger problem than guns, because video games affect people” (Markey et al., 2014). One of the ways video games affect people, according to Lt. Col. David Grossman, is by training them to become murderers. Lt. Col. David Grossman claimed that games like *Quake* are good for training individuals how to commit murder because they teach one how to clear the room by moving quickly from target to target and aiming for the head (Horn, 1999). All in all, the main argument from the politicians and the media is that by playing violent video games the young adults are influenced to commit a violent crime. In other words, when an individual plays a violent video game that individual will go on to commit an aggravated assault or murder because they want to replicate what they see on their screens. Researchers have dwelled in this topic, but their findings do not align with the media’s rhetoric.

Laboratory evidence indicates that playing violent video games heighten physical and emotional reactions related to violent and criminal attitudes. It is important to note that some of the laboratory studies are somewhat limited because of the way aggressive behavior is measured in these contexts is completely different from severe forms of aggression in the real world (Ward 2010; Markey et al., 2014). In other words, the way aggression is measured in a controlled environment differs greatly from how one would measure aggression outside a laboratory. For example, Markey et al., (2014) found the majority of experimental studies involve having one group of participants play a violent video game and another group of participants play a nonviolent video game. After playing the assigned video game for a short period of time, the aggressive behaviors of the participants are measured. Researchers have found that individuals who play violent video games are more likely to report feeling more hostile on a questionnaire (Markey and Scherer, 2009). Also, some individuals have been reported to give hot sauce to hypothetical individuals who do not like spicy food (Barlett, Branch, Rodenheffer, and Harris,

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2009) The inability to properly measure real world aggression may be due to prevent any harm towards the human subjects, but the fact that there may be an increase in emotions that are related to those found in violent or criminal actions does not signify that playing violent video games leads to criminal behavior. So, one may wonder why does the media continue to portray violent video games as the main source for violent behavior? The answer may be that violent video games are the scapegoat or folk devil of the media. In other words, folk devils allow one to “channel our blame and fear... [to] remedy what many believe to be a growing problem” (Stenheimer, 2007). Furthermore, these fears were produced partially by the rise in crime during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Also, the large population of teens during the late 1990s led policymakers to fear that the rise in the number of teen males would bring a parallel rise in crime (Stenheimer, 2007). One would assume that the policy makers were correct due to the amount of school shootings in the past two decades. Coincidentally, the amount of school shootings has led researchers to describe violent video games as murder simulators (Markey et al., 2014). Some people have argued that video games can train children to kill in a manner similar to how a flight simulator teaches a person to pilot a plane (Markey et al., 2014). Furthermore, some researchers have characterized the negative effect of violent video games on public health to be similar to the causal relationship between smoking and lung cancer (Markey et al., 2014). Fortunately, crime data suggests the opposite.

Although the research does not support the media’s claims entirely, it is important to note that there is some truth to the media’s allegations. If playing violent video games makes an individual more violent, then the group most at risk would be young adults. According to Ward (2010), 30 to 40 percent of individuals who play video games are 18 years or younger. In other words, video gaming is a disproportionately youth activity. The video game industry is not going

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away anytime soon either. One report suggests that the video game industry has won 30 [percent] of the U.S. toy market, earning \$8.8 billion in the United States (Horn, 1999). This is a larger intake than the movie industry. It is expected that worldwide sales from video games will go up to \$82 billion by 2017 (Markey et al., 2014). Furthermore, Markey et al., (2014) suggest that four of five homes in the United States with a male child have a video game system. It can be argued that video games are the new opiate of the masses for the current generation. So, it is important to conduct studies to see how video games affect its users. Unfortunately, the majority of the attention has gone to how it negatively impacts the youth. This is a major issue because time after time researchers conclude that there is little evidence that suggest that playing violent video games will lead to someone committing a crime. There is little to no research that looks at how playing video games might help lower the crime rate.

The general idea for the argument made in this article arose when one compared the violent crime rate with the rate of violent video game sales. Side by side, there seems to be an inverse correlation between violent video game sales and the violent crime rate in the United States. To elaborate, the violent crime rate in the United States has gone down significantly since the 1980s. This is the opposite of what the media mentions on a daily basis. On the other hand, violent video game sales have skyrocketed since the 1980s. This is due to more people being able to afford video game consoles to play at home. If what the media and politicians argue about violent video games were true, then the violent crime rate would have gone up as well. One interesting statistic found in the ten years following the popular first person shooter *Doom* release, homicide arrest rates fell by 77 percent among juveniles. Furthermore, school shootings remained extremely rare. Students had less than a 7 in 10 million chance of being killed at school (Stenheimer, 2007). The numbers of crimes and deaths decrease with increases in the number of

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video game stores (Ward, 2010). What is even more shocking is the fact that some researchers found that as the video game market has developed, “the trends in a number of overall measures of antisocial behaviors, including rates of youth violent crime...have decreased” (Ward, 2010). All in all, there is evidence that suggests that playing violent video games results in less crime. One may argue that the drops in violent crime rates can be attributed to other social factors, but one has to look at the possibility that video games may be, in part, that factor. In a study conducted by Markey et al., 2014, they found that monthly sales of video games were related to concurrent decreases in aggravated assaults. Furthermore, searches for violent video game walkthroughs and guides were also related to decreases in aggravated assaults and homicides two months later. Lastly, they found that homicides tended to decrease in the months following the release of popular mature-rated video games. With this in mind, it is appropriate to conduct a study to find an explanation as to why the crime rate has gone down at the same time that violent video game sales have gone up.

There are three sociological theories that one will use to describe the phenomenon that has been described above. Rational choice theory looks at potential offenders who choose to commit a crime after calculating the possible rewards and risks (Barkan, 2012). Video games can become an expensive hobby with consoles costing hundreds of dollars and video games costing up to \$60 USD or more. When a popular video game like *Call of Duty* comes out millions of individuals want to play it. Some people may be tempted to steal a copy if they cannot afford it. Video games can be shared across multiple users, so one may see that borrowing a copy of *Call of Duty* from a friend is easier than stealing it, thus eliminating a crime from occurring. This theory is the weakest of the three because there are other social factors that affect one's tendency to commit a crime, but it is important to list multiple theories and test them in this field of study.

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Routine activities theory assumes that the habits, lifestyles, and behavioral patterns of potential crime victims enhance their contact with offenders. As a result, they increase the chances that a crime will occur (Barkan, 2012). Furthermore, there are three tenants to routine activities theory. First, there needs to be a suitable target. In this case it would a young adult. Second, there needs to be a motivated offender, such as someone who is unemployed. Lastly, there needs to be an absence of a capable guardian like a police officer. People who play video games in the United States typically play in the confines of their homes or in a gaming lounge. One can argue that if someone is indoors playing video games for hours at a time with capable guardians around, then they are less likely to be victimized. Again, similar to rational choice theory this is a weak theory and there would have to be more studies conducted to find support. Lastly, the third theory is social control. Social control theory (also called social bonding theory) emphasizes that social and cultural values control over one's individual behavior. Furthermore, social institutions such as: the family, school, neighborhood, religion, and the government enforce those values (Fagin, 2014). The institutions can exert control formally, such as an arrest, or informally like parental disapproval. One will focus on the informal aspect of social control because online gaming communities can be an institution that enforces social and cultural values. Furthermore, the bonds that individuals have with one another can deter someone from committing a crime.

### *Method and Data Collection*

The purpose of the study is to attain a clearer picture of the effects of playing video games on an individual and on the crime rate. The leading method to attaining descriptive information is through qualitative analysis. The researcher interviewed six individuals from a public university in the United States. The six individuals were a part of the institution's eSports club. The club focuses on hosting video game events throughout the academic year. Furthermore,

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the club has over 200 members. The six participants that were chosen had to meet the following criteria: they had to be at least 18 years of age, they had to have played violent video games in the past, and they had experiences playing video games online. One limitation from this study is the amount of individuals interviewed. In order to truly understand the effects of video games one needs to interview more than six individuals. Another limitation that arose is that no females accepted the invitation to be interviewed for this study. One myth about video games is that it is a male dominated activity. The number of female participants has risen over the past couple of years, but there is still stigma on females who play video games, so that may have been a reason for the females to not accept the invitation. The participants were asked to answer number of questions. The length of the interviews were around 30 minutes. The empirical data from the interviews were coded and placed into categories. The categories included: informal social control, violent behavior, violent thoughts, time, parental supervision, and crime. In other words, when instances of violent behavior was mentioned the researcher made a note and labeled it under the category of violent behavior. This was done to find if any of the data can be linked to informal social control. The following section will discuss the findings.

### *Findings and Discussion*

All but one of the individuals in this study played their first video game at an early age. The average age was seven years. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that they played their first violent video game around the same time they first began playing video games. This suggests that the participants have played violent video games since they were in the first or second grade of elementary school. This is important because children are still developing their minds at this age, so one can argue that playing violent video games can desensitize them and make them more violent, but as studies have shown there is no direct link between playing

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violent video games and committing a crime. The genre of violent video games they played when they were young has remained the same. Some of those genres include military simulators, first person and third person tactical shooters, and massive multiplayer online games. The video games that the participants play in particular are very violent in nature. Some of the violence they described include decapitations and shootings which result in blood scattering across the screen. All of the participants agreed that their parents would not have approved of them playing those video games at that age, but their parents never paid attention to the violent nature. This supports the claims in related studies that have stated that parental supervision of violent video game playing is rare (Horn, 1999). In other words, parents are unlikely to supervise their children who play violent video games. As it was stated before, there are limitations in place to prevent children from purchasing a game. The participants claimed that if their parents would not purchase the game they wanted in particular, then they would go to their friend's house whose parents purchased the game for their friend. This goes to show that access to violent video games is relatively easy. One important statistic that came out of the study is that the average amount of time spent playing video games is around three to four hours per day, or 21 to 28 hours per week. This is an increase from previous studies that found that the average amount of time spent playing video games by teens and young adults was around five hours per week. If individuals are playing video games at greater lengths of time, then one can argue that they are reducing their chances of being a victim or becoming an offender if they are busy playing video games. Also, a good portion of their friends play video games. Online services like Xbox Live and the Playstation Network allows one to play with their friends without having to leave one's home. They can all stay in their respective homes and play together online. All of the participants were asked if they consider the people they play online with as friends. Surprisingly, they all said

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yes. The dynamic of meeting people online is the same as meeting people in 'real' life. For example, if one meets an individual on the street and continues to talk to them for a period of time, then that individual is considered a friend. The same dynamic works for the people who play online together. They do not have the same face to face interactions, but they talk and play the same games which builds a bond. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that they would seek advice or give advice to their online friends. One participant in particular mentioned that an online friend prevented him from committing battery. The participant said:

After I found out that my girlfriend was sexting this guy she knew I smashed her desk and ran out of her dorm. I went back to my apartment and called my buddy from Texas. I met this guy playing World of Warcraft many years ago. I have never met this person in real life, but I consider him one of my best friends. I told him the situation and that I was looking for this person. I knew that he was on campus, but I had no clue where. In my headset I constantly heard my friend saying that I was not worth it. He said I should calm down and resolve the issue with a clear mind. He kept telling me that I should not risk getting in trouble because it might affect my chances of working in a public office. After a couple of minutes I calmed down and went back to doing my thing. If I had not talked to my buddy from Texas...God only knows what kind of damage I would have done to that kid.

This is the first example of informal social control. The friend from Texas reminded the participant of the social norms that he was going to break. Due to the bond that the participant had with this individual he took into account that not only would he commit a crime, but also his friend would disapprove of his actions. So, the bond between them, as weak as it may seem, prevented someone from committing a crime. All of the participants in this study mentioned that they have not seen anyone physically harm someone else as a result from playing violent video games. What did occur was that their friends, including themselves, showed signs of aggression. Some of the aggression resulted in punching the desk or throwing the joystick to the ground. Despite the aggressive behavior none of the participants agreed with the media's narrative of violent video games. One of the participants mentioned that he would be shocked if anyone in

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the eSports club instigated a fight. He went on to say that just because one enjoys playing violent video games does not mean that they will replicate it. Another participant went on to say that the online gaming communities have certain barriers, or norms, that one cannot cross. If one looks at the language used in the online community chats one would see extensive profanity. Sometimes one may see descriptions of some of the actions some members want to do to others, but when someone takes it too far, then the community itself comes together and police that individual. One participant told the following story of when one of his friends verbally abused someone online:

One evening I was playing *League of Legends* with a couple of my friends. We were losing and the game was pretty much over. We had a member in our group that did not know how to play. My friend at the time kept insulting the kid through the game chat. At first it was funny because the kid was pretty bad, but then my friend took it to far. He asked the kid if he had any mental disabilities and that he was a cancer to the game. After he said that we told our friend that he stepped over the line and should apologize to the kid. He refused, so as a group we placed a complaint to the game's moderators and he was banned from playing the game. He has not offended or verbally abused anyone, at least to my knowledge, since that day.

This is another example informal social control. The group reminded the abusive player of the norms and values that he broke with his actions. This illustrates how online communities act like an informal social institution that contributes to the formation and reinforcement of social values. All in all, there is evidence, although small, that informal social control exists in online gaming communities, and that they may help prevent crimes from being committed on any of the members in these communities.

### *Conclusion*

The media has made allegations that those who play violent video games will go on to become criminals. The research that the media uses does not fully support their claims. In fact, the research suggest that there is not enough evidence to support the notion that one will

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become a criminal if they play violent video games. In this paper, one saw a couple of the attacks the media and politicians have made against violent video games over the past couple of decades. Also, one saw the inconsistencies in the research that has been done in recent years. The most important aspect of this paper is that the author wanted to shift the focus from blaming violent video games as the culprit for crimes committed by young adults to focusing on doing research that can help explain how video games may help reduce crime. This was done by showing an inverse correlation between the violent crime rate in the United States and the rate of violent video game sales. Also, one saw three sociological theories that might explain this phenomenon. Those theories being rational choice theory, routine activities theory, and informal social control. Out of the three theories, informal social control has the most support from the study and should be the primary focus for other researchers who want to tackle this proposal. In the study conducted, the author illustrates how informal social control may be a reason why crime rates may be going down. There is evidence that online gaming communities police each other and remove those who do not follow the norms. Also, online communities seem to create and maintain certain social values. This can prevent members of the online communities from being harmed by the deviant members, as well as, prevent them from becoming offenders. Furthermore, there is minimal evidence that rational choice and routine activities theory may help explain some of the findings and they should be discarded from future research in this topic. It is important to note that there are severe limitations to the study. First of all, there were only six individuals who were interviewed. Second, no females participated in this study. Lastly, the interviews were short in length. While there is limited support for the argument that playing violent video games may result in lower crime rates there has to be more research done in this relatively new field of study. The author proposes that other researchers continue to focus on

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informal social control and its effect on crime. Also, researchers should focus on how the crime differentiates between genders. One would argue that female gamers are more susceptible to becoming victims and males become the offenders. One last point that researchers should focus on is how crime rates in different regions of the country are affected. In the end, hopefully this study shifts the focus from blaming violent video games for the youth's deviant behavior to finding ways how playing video games might help reduce violent crime. There are other reasons as to why the youth rebel and commit heinous crimes, but blaming video games will prevent one from finding out what other factors play into that role. It is certainly possible that playing violent video games may not have any role in the reduction of the United States crime rate, but one will not know for certain if researchers do not take the time to find out.

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