

Video Games & Youth Violence:

EXAMINING THE FACTS

INTERACTIVE DIGITAL SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of tragic and highly publicized incidents of youth violence in recent years, the nation has discussed and debated the causes of youth violence and the steps that can be taken to prevent it. While the discussion has drawn out a broad diversity of views, each is rooted in a common perspective: a sincere concern about the problem and a shared desire to curtail it.

Indeed, it is precisely because society's concern about youth violence is so sincere that we should be fastidious in debating its causes and consequences. That is the perspective from which the computer and video game industry approaches the important question of how its products affect young people; and how to balance the rights it has under the First Amendment with its responsibilities to consumers.

The French journalist Georges Bernanos once said that “the worst, the most corrupting of lies is a problem poorly stated.” Youth violence is a problem in this country, but its solution will not be found by ignoring facts, sensationalizing opinions, or pointing fingers.

The fact is that youth violence has dramatically declined in the United States during the past decade, precisely the period in which video game use — among adults and children — has skyrocketed. Moreover, the most objective and methodologically sound studies have found no causation between game playing and violent activity.

This document is an effort to gather facts and provide information about the computer and video game industry, the games it produces, the people who play the games, the scientific research on the effects of the games, and the extensive efforts the industry has undertaken to inform parents about the games they buy for their children.

Everybody is entitled to his or her own opinions about the entertainment industry. But not to their own facts. We hope that by bringing important facts to light we can help correct some misperceptions about the industry and its games, and foster a public dialogue that addresses a serious issue with the seriousness it deserves.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Highlights of this report include the following:

Computer and video games are mass-market entertainment, offering a wide variety of titles for a diverse audience of players.

- About 145 million people — or 60% of Americans — play video games. Their average age is 28 and 43% are women.
- Ninety percent of the best-selling games in 2001 are appropriate for everyone over age 6.
- Adults, not kids, purchase nine out of ten games sold in the U.S.

There is no compelling evidence that establishes a link between playing games and aggressive behavior. In fact, the most objective comprehensive reviews of research find no such link. Additional objective indicators also support this conclusion.

- Youth violence in America has fallen dramatically at the same time that game sales have skyrocketed.
- The same games causing concern in the U.S. are sold around the world, yet youth violence is sharply lower in those countries.
- In 1999 the Government of Australia performed the most comprehensive unbiased review ever done of all research on the effect of games and found that, “The accumulating evidence — provided largely by researchers keen to demonstrate the games’ undesirable effects — does indicate that it is very hard to find such effects and that they are unlikely to be substantial.”
- In January, 2001, U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher released the most exhaustive U.S. government study to date on youth and violence from a public health perspective, which found that “The impact of video games on violent behavior remains to be determined.”

The computer and video game industry has implemented significant self-regulatory measures to help ensure that games not made for children are not played by them.

- In 1994, the industry established the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), an independent, voluntary ratings system for computer and video games that Senator Joseph Lieberman has called “the best media rating system in existence.” The ESRB has rated over 7,000 products, the vast majority of which are appropriate for everyone over the age of six.
- The industry created the Advertising Review Council (ARC) of the ESRB, to ensure that marketing campaigns and advertisements placed by U.S. computer and video game software makers are responsible, truthful, and accurate.

VIDEO GAMES: A Mass-Market Entertainment Medium

Sixty percent of all Americans — roughly 145 million people — play computer video games, which have become one of this country’s most popular family entertainment activities. In fact, twice as many people played computer and video games last year as attended Major League Baseball games in 1999. As journalist Ted Fishman noted in an article for *Worth Magazine*, “For investors, for businesses and even for national economies, video games aren’t child’s play. They are becoming a dominant medium.”¹

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— Ted Fishman, *Worth Magazine*

Who Plays Video Games?

Contrary to popular myth, the majority of people who play computer and video games are adults, not kids, as evidenced by the findings of a 2000 survey by Peter D. Hart Research Associates:

- ▶ The average age of computer and video game players is 28 years old;
- ▶ Sixty-one percent of all game players are age 18 and over;
- ▶ Thirty-five percent of game players are over 35 years old;
- ▶ Forty-three percent of video and computer game players are women.

Nine Out of Ten of the Best-Selling Games are Appropriate for Everyone

The vast majority of all games, including best-selling games, are rated as appropriate for everyone and do not contain violent content. This has been the case year after year. For example, during the first half of 2001 the top-selling titles were “Pokemon,” “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” “SimCity 3000,” and racing and skateboarding games. From

January to June of 2001 none of the top-ten selling computer and video games were rated “Mature”, and less than 8% percent of all titles sold in 2000 carried a “mature” rating. And the industry rating system that generated these ratings is reliable — it was described in July 2001 by Senator Joseph Lieberman as, “the best media rating system in existence,” and a “model” for other entertainment industries.

Video games have become mass market entertainment, resulting in a substantial market for casual games like puzzle, board, and card games, and hunting and fishing titles, in addition to staple products like football, racing and other action games.

With that said, there are clearly some games that are created specifically for the over 18 gamers who are such a large part of the market, just as there are books and movies made to be read and seen by adults. The industry

has established the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) to ensure that such games are clearly labeled for their intended audience. (See Section III below).

Who Buys Video Games? Parents Are in Control

It's adults, not kids, who actually purchase nine out of ten computer and video games sold in the United States. Of people under 18 who buy games, more than four out of five — 84 percent — say they get their parents' permission before they do so, according to the 2001 IDSA consumer survey conducted by The NPD Group. Similarly, in the survey by Peter Hart, 83 percent of parents said they “try to watch or play, at least once, every game that their child plays to determine whether it is appropriate.”²

These findings are virtually identical to those of the Federal Trade Commission. In an April 2001 report on the marketing of entertainment products to children, the Commission said of video and computer games: “It is clear that most parents are able to play a watchdog role when they choose to do so... According to parents' responses [to the FTC's survey], even more parents (83%) are involved in the actual purchase transaction; 38% report that they usually purchase or rent the games, and another 45% of parents do so together with the child.”³

Why People Play Games

People play video games for a wide variety of reasons. More than half of respondents to the IDSA's 2001

TOP GENRES: Q2 2001	
RANK	GENRE
1.	Strategy/RPG
2.	Action
3.	Sport Games
4.	Racing
5.	All Shooter Games
6.	Simulations
7.	Family Entertainment
8.	Children's Entertain.
9.	Fighting
10.	Other Games
11.	Edutainment

Source: The NPD Group

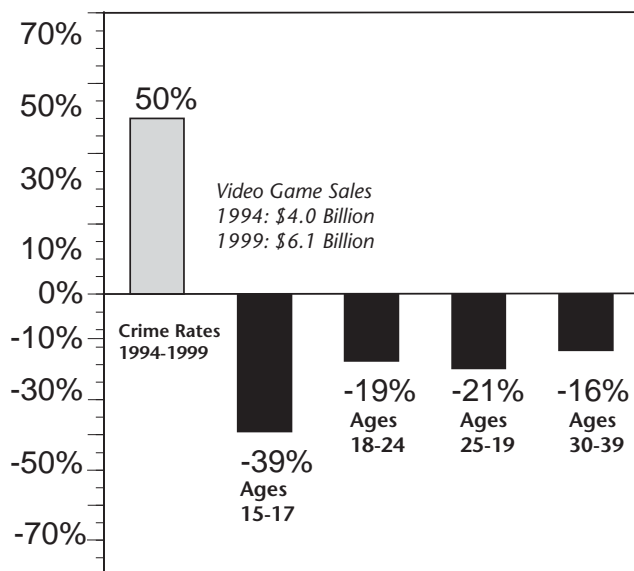
consumer survey say that playing video games relieves stress, roughly half believe video games are a good entertainment value for the money and more than a third say video games are an interactive social experience that can be shared with friends and family. Respondents also ranked video and/or computer games as the most fun form of entertainment, ahead of watching television, surfing the Internet, and going to the movies.

Research also shows that video games are increasingly becoming a shared family activity. The 2001 consumer survey found that 43 percent of the most frequent game players play with other family members, while 25 percent of the most frequent game players play video games with one or both parents.

VIDEO GAMES AND YOUTH VIOLENCE

In the wake of media attention surrounding tragic episodes of youth violence, some observers have questioned whether violent content in video games contributes to aggressive behavior, especially in children. The most objective reviews of studies on the subject of video games and behavior have concluded there is no link between video game use and aggressive behavior in children. And while there are some studies that do purport to show such a link, those that do so tend to be based on flawed methodology and/or are performed by researchers who have a predisposition to find a link between violent games and aggressive behavior. In addition, there are other strong objective indicators that such a link does not exist, as discussed below.

Violent Crime, Particularly Juvenile Crime, Decreased Dramatically From 1994 to 1999 While at the Same Time Computer and Video Game Sales Soared



Youth Violence Has Declined As Game Sales Have Risen

Perhaps the most compelling counterpoint to the argument that video game use does not cause violent behavior in young people is the fact that youth violence fell dramatically in the 1990s over exactly the same period that video game use skyrocketed.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program, between 1994 and 1999 violent crime among 15-39 year olds decreased dramatically. Further, the data shows that the biggest decrease (39%) came from juveniles between the ages of 15 to 17.

As the chart at left illustrates, during the same period when juvenile violence was plummeting, video and computer games surged in popularity and sales. Between 1994-1999, video and computer game sales soared by 50 percent.

Games Are Sold Around the World Yet Youth Violence is Virtually Non-Existent in Those Countries

Many of the games with violent content sold in the United States — and some with far more violence — are sold in foreign markets. If these games caused violent behavior, one would expect the rates of youth violence in these markets to be comparable with those in the United States. In reality, though, the incidence of youth violence in these foreign markets is considerably lower, and in fact, does not even approach the levels in the United States. Why then is violent crime among juveniles

much lower in foreign markets that sell identical video game products? We suggest the answer is clear — the cause lies of youth violence lies elsewhere.

Most Objective Studies Find No Link Between Video Game Play and Youth Violence

The most objective and methodologically sound studies of video game play and aggressive behavior find no link between the two. Perhaps the most compelling and direct evidence of this can be found in two studies whose primary purpose was to objectively review existing research on the subject and subsequently form an overall conclusion as to whether media and games can be linked to aggressive behavior. Both studies, one conducted by the United States Surgeon General and one conducted by the Government of Australia, found no such link. Following is a summary of both reports.

With regard to the research on video games, the Surgeon General's report said, "The overall effect size for both randomized and correlational studies was small for physical aggression and moderate for aggressive thinking....The impact of video games on violent behavior remains to be determined."

The U.S. Surgeon General's Report

Prompted by the shootings at Columbine High School in April 1999, Congress and the Clinton Administration asked U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher to evaluate recent research on the incidence, causes, and prevention of youth violence. The Surgeon General's findings were released January 17, 2001.

The report — the most exhaustive U.S. government study to date on youth and violence from a public health perspective — found that there is no research to support the notion that violent media leads to long-term violence rather than only to some aggression.

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At the press conference releasing the report Satcher went on to say, "We clearly associate media violence to aggressive behavior. But the impact was very small compared to other things. Some may not be happy with that, but that's where the science is."⁵

The report found that media exposure appeared to have only a "low-level" long-term effect on youth violence compared with young people's access to guns and other situational factors such as bullying, taunting, and demeaning interactions.

The Surgeon General also noted the important role that parents have in determining what forms of entertainment their children see, hear and play. Parents play a key role in limiting and shaping their children's exposure to violent media. "Regardless of government and other interested groups' attempts to limit the amount of violence reaching American families, families themselves play a critical role in guiding what reaches their children," the report stated.

The U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Education released a joint study in 1998 that identified the early warning signs that could potentially lead to violence in children. Among the attributes cited: bullying behavior, social withdrawal, poor academic performance; expression of violence in writings and drawings, patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, drug use and alcohol use, affiliation with gangs, and inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms. Interestingly, the study does not include video games in its list of things to examine for early warning signs of violence.

The Australian Government Study

At the end of 1999, the Government of Australia released “Computer Games and Australians Today,” one of the most comprehensive, unbiased reviews ever done of all the research performed on the subject of interactive game play.

After reviewing the academic research, the report concluded:

“After examining several attempts to find effects of aggressive content in either experimental studies or field studies, at best only weak and ambiguous evidence has emerged....The accumulating evidence — provided largely by researchers keen to demonstrate the games’ undesirable effects — does indicate that it is very hard to find such effects and that they are unlikely to be substantial.”

Other key findings of the report include:

- ▶ Aggressive content per se has low appeal among computer game players. Very few respondents to the quantitative survey mentioned aggression as a feeling that they associate with their preferred games. “Players rate high-resolution graphics and multi-player capacity as a major importance.”
- ▶ “Young players said that they perceive the aggressive content as fantastic and preposterous, with the result that they do not take it seriously: they do not perceive their own actions as harming others since they do not believe that the characters on screen are real or suffer pain.”
- ▶ Most people associate positive feelings, such as “enjoyment, happiness, exhilaration, relaxation and challenge,” with playing computer games.

Video Games: Constitutionally Protected Artistic Expression

Video games, like other forms of entertainment, are recognized as protected speech, and are indeed a modern

form of artistic expression. Like movies, today’s video games are rich combinations of narrative, story line, music, and graphic design. The creative process of developing video games resembles that of other forms of protected expression.

A video game begins as a creative concept in the minds of game developers and is brought to life by teams of artists. Story lines and themes guide the development of games from concept art to a final product that contains extensive plot and character development. Even games without explicit plots or story lines, such as puzzle games, contain visual art, graphic design and sound elements that constitute a form of aesthetic expression akin to music or abstract art.

In fact, courts have supported the contention that games are protected speech. For example, in *AAMA v. Kendrick*, the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit recently granted an injunction against the enforcement of an Ordinance that prohibited business owners from allowing persons under 18 years of age to play certain video arcade games depicting violence. In a broadly written opinion, the Court recognized that children have First Amendment rights, found that the ordinance curtailed freedom of expression significantly without any offsetting justification compelling or otherwise, and that the arcade industry demonstrated a strong likelihood of ultimate victory.

Connecticut Governor John G. Rowland, vetoing a bill that would have prohibited business owners from allowing people under 18 years of age to play certain video games: “I believe that violence in our society is a real problem that deserves meaningful answers; not new feel-good laws that are impossible to enforce.”⁶

HELPING PARENTS MAKING INFORMED CHOICES ABOUT VIDEO GAMES

Adults are capable of deciding what video games they should buy and play. Children are not. Parents must have sufficient information to determine whether any game is appropriate for their children. The computer and video game industry provides that information.

Here is how the industry is upholding its responsibility to help parents make informed choices.

“If we are looking for an industry model, I would point to the video game rating system, which is administered by the independent Electronic Software Rating Board (ESRB). The ESRB system, which was a response to Congressional hearings, pairs age-based icons with detailed content descriptors in a clear, concise, and informative format. I believe it is the best media rating system in existence.”

— U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT),
July 25, 2001

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is an independent, voluntary ratings system for computer and video games established by the Interactive Digital Software Association in September 1994. Since its formation, the ESRB has rated more than 7,000 computer and video game titles.

The ESRB is also counseled by an advisory board composed of experts in the fields of academia, consumer rights, children’s advocacy, and education. The board provides guidance and insight about the effectiveness of the system.

The ESRB has set up a toll-free number that has received more than 1.5 million calls for information on the ratings since they were established in 1994. ESRB also operates a web site (www.esrb.org), offering millions of consumer’s instant access to information about ratings, including rating descriptors, news and information, a parents’ guideline and an overview of the ESRB.

How Titles Are Rated

Ratings fall into five age-based categories: Early Childhood (ages 3+), Everyone (ages 6+), Teen (Ages 13+), Mature (ages 17+), and Adults Only (limited to those ages 18 and older). ESRB is the only ratings system that goes beyond age to include short phrases called descriptors that provide detailed information on content. The descriptors fall into several categories, including: violent content, sexual themes, language and others, such as drug use and alcohol use.

The ESRB rating system is based on the prior review of actual product content and other materials by three raters randomly chosen from a pool of 100 demographically diverse individuals from all walks of life. Based on extensive training, these raters assign a rating and appropriate content descriptors after reviewing a range of materials, including the most extreme content of the product. Thus, the ESRB ratings represent the views of typical consumers with no ties to the industry, exercising their independent judgement on how a title should be rated.

What Consumers Think About the ESRB

The system receives positive reviews from those who count most: parents. According to a 1999 study by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 80% of Americans who were explained how the ESRB system works said it would be “helpful” or “very helpful.” In a separate July 2000 study, Hart Research Associates conducted mall-intercept interviews with 410 adults nationwide, including 246 parents who were shown videotapes of game clips and asked to rate them based on the ESRB standards. The survey found that “in 84% of all instances, games are rated equal to or less strictly than the official ESRB rating.” Hart found that the ESRB is “twice as likely to be more conservative than the public” in rating decisions. With respect to the content descriptors, the survey found “participants are generally in agreement with the ESRB on violence descriptors, and in instances in which there is disagreement, they are usually less strict than the ratings board.” Also in the 1999 survey by Peter Hart, 75% of those surveyed said that parents — not government or game makers — bear the primary responsibility for monitoring the computer and video games their children play.

Spreading the Word

In Fall 1999, the ESRB launched an annual national campaign to promote awareness and use of its rating system during the holiday season. The campaign, which urges parents to “check the rating,” included a public service announcement featuring professional golfer Tiger Woods; paid advertising in national publications, including Newsweek, People, U.S. News and World Report, Parents, Parenting, Good Housekeeping, and USA Today; and relationships with prominent national organizations like the PTA, YWCA, YMCA, Child Welfare League of America, Mothers Against Violence in America, Children’s Television Workshop, and the Children’s Television Resources and Education Center.

The ESRB released a new public service announcement (PSA) in Spring 2001 featuring New York Yankees’ All-Star Derek Jeter urging parents to “check the ratings”

before they buy video and computer games. This PSA is airing in stores around the country, and has generated nearly ten million audience impressions so far on more than 50 television stations, including both cable and broadcast outlets.

IDSA and ESRB have also encouraged retailers to provide educational materials to in-store shoppers and to make their best efforts not to sell games rated “mature” to children under the age of 17. To date, major retailers such as Toys ‘R’ Us, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Target, Circuit City, Staples, CompUSA, Babbages, Funcoland and Electronics Boutique have agreed to participate in this effort in some way.

The Advertising Review Council (ARC) of the ESRB

The ESRB’s Advertising Review Council (ARC) ensures that advertisements placed by U.S. computer and video game software makers are appropriate, responsible, truthful and accurate. On January 31, 2000, the ESRB began monitoring and enforcing new ARC Principles and Guidelines to ensure that computer and video games are marketed appropriately to all audiences, that ads for games accurately reflect the content of the game and its rating, and that ads are appropriate for the average consumer.

In addition to promulgating these guidelines, the industry has also taken the extraordinary and unprecedented step of strengthening its existing enforcement system to sanction violators of the industry guidelines. Under this new enforcement system, ESRB is empowered to take a wide range of steps against ad code violators, including levying fines, and in extreme cases, actually withholding a rating, which would be commercially crippling for any software publisher. There is apparently no other industry — in entertainment or other fields — that has adopted such explicit restrictions on the marketing of a product it is entirely legal to sell, and that has empowered a self-regulatory body to enforce compliance and punish violations of such guidelines.

CONCLUSION

No matter what one's point of view on the entertainment industry, everyone should be able to agree on two points. First, any amount of youth violence should be treated as a serious concern. Second, solutions to serious problems must be based on serious assessments of their causes.

This paper has attempted to put some of the issues surrounding video games and violence in proper perspective, and we hope, to help inform intelligent discussion aimed at finding real solutions rooted in the true causes of youth violence. The computer and video game industry will continue to help parents and other consumers ensure that games that are not appropriate for children are not played by them. We hope that others will join us in this effort, as well as in our effort to help move the critically important debate about youth violence from finger pointing and scapegoating toward real solutions.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Fishman, Ted C. The Crouching Tiger. Worth Magazine, March, 2001.
- ² Peter Hart Research Associates. ESRB Survey. October 1999.
- ³ Federal Trade Commission. Marketing Violence To Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry Practices In The Motion Picture, Music Recordings & Electronic Game Industries, Washington, DC, September 2000.
- ⁴ Leake, Jonathan. Cyber-Games Make Children Brighter. The Times: London, July 2001.
- ⁵ U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher at the press conference releasing the U.S. Surgeon General Report. Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General. Washington, DC, January 2001.
- ⁶ Rowland, Governor John G. In a letter to Connecticut Secretary of State Susan Bysiewicz. May 2001.

ABOUT THE IDSA

The Interactive Digital Software Association is the U.S. association dedicated to serving the business and public affairs needs of companies publishing interactive games for video game consoles, handheld devices, personal computers, and the Internet. IDSA members collectively account for more than 90 percent of the \$6 billion in entertainment software sales in the U.S. in 2000, and billions more in export sales of American-made entertainment software. The IDSA offers a range of services to interactive entertainment software publishers, including operating a global anti-piracy program, staging the Electronic Entertainment Expo trade show, fielding business and consumer research, and representing the industry at the Federal, State and local levels on a wide range of policy issues. For more information, log on to www.idsa.com.



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