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Stop Blaming Video Games for America's Gun Violence

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Stop blaming video games for America's gun violence

Studies show that a child playing a violent video game does not necessarily increase the likelihood that he or she will engage in real violence. Americans need to stop blaming something other than our own behaviors and ideologies for societal violence, especially gun violence.

A copy of the book 'Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games' sits on the table as Vice President Joe Biden convenes a meeting with representatives from the video game industry in his Washington office Jan. 11. Op-ed contributor Kristin M.S. Bezio says: 'The dialogue we need to have is about real violence, not virtual violence.'

(Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)

By Kristin M.S. Bezio
February 12, 2013

Recently, America's attention has been understandably focused on the potential causes of increased violence – especially gun violence – particularly among children and youth, and how to stop it. Alongside gun-control proposals, some of which President Obama is likely to highlight in his State of the Union address tonight, much of that attention has looked at the potential of violent video games to cause or exacerbate the tendencies of youth to engage in real, harmful violence.

While I applaud increased vigilance on the part of parents in supervising their children's behaviors and pastimes, a child playing a violent video game does not necessarily increase the likelihood that he or she will engage in real violence at that age or later in life.

Various reports and commentaries have documented the fact that Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza's video game playing included violent shooter games like Call of Duty, Counterstrike, and Starcraft. Some have cited that activity as a possible cause for his shooting massacre.

But if Lanza was playing Call of Duty 4, he was one of millions. On the Xbox 360 console alone, the game's developer, Infinity Ward, has documented nearly 4.4 million online players, not counting players who use a PlayStation 3 or aren't online. The statistics for Counterstrike are similar – an estimated 62,142 per day. And Starcraft is so popular in Korea, that it has professional leagues and an estimated online player population of around 50,000 each day.

Of those millions of players, few commit an act of violence, certainly not enough to say that, statistically, video game play is a principle cause – or even a significant cause – of real-world violent behavior.

So why are so many people blaming the video game industry?

It's a phenomenon known as "cultural lag," and it's what causes us to be hesitant in adopting new technologies, trying new fads, and changing our social mores. Cultural lag can be a good thing – some new things are dangerous, come with high levels of risk, and can infinitely do more harm

than good. But cultural lag also can inhibit the development of technologies and society because of irrational fears, which is what I'm seeing with recent criticism of the gaming industry.

Before video games, society blamed rock 'n' roll for violence and bad behavior among young people. Before rock 'n' roll, we blamed television. Before television, movies. Before movies, mystery novels, which were once known as "penny dreadfuls." Before mystery novels, Shakespeare, who repeatedly was accused of producing violent, lecherous, and otherwise improper behavior in his audience.

In essence, as a society, we always will try to find out "why" bad things happen, but we aren't actually very good at finding the answers. We look back at our past with rose-colored glasses and look forward into the future with trepidation.

We see our own childhoods as joyful and carefree, and when, as adults, we are exposed to the grim realities of our world, we wonder, "What happened?". And then we try to explain the difference between the past that we remember and the present as we perceive it. When we do this, we very often look to technologies that did not exist 20, 30, or 40 years ago, and we think: That didn't exist back then when things were "better," therefore it must have some impact on why things have "gotten worse" now.

First of all, I am unconvinced that "things have gotten worse," but even if we assume that they have, in blaming technologies like video games for real-life violence, we assume causation, where numerous studies show there is only correlation – at best. This is tantamount to assuming, as journalist Jeanine Celestin-Greer of Gamastura (a gaming journalism website) points out, that because Lanza drank Mountain Dew, Mountain Dew causes violent behavior.

In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Christopher J. Ferguson, a psychologist at Texas A&M International University, claimed that the recent outcry against video games as the cause of "school shootings" in general is patently fallacious. He explains that among hundreds of studies on violence and video games, not a single one has proven conclusively a causal relationship between violent behaviors in the real world and violent video-game play. And yet, scholars and politicians who often have little to no experience playing video games themselves continue to suggest that this is the case.

Americans need to stop trying to blame something other than ourselves for the increase – if there is an increase – in violent behavior. Video games, music, television, movies, novels, and Shakespeare don't cause violence. Mental illness, psychological abuse, and physical abuse cause violence. Ideologies that reward and condone aggression, particularly in men, cause violence. Global genocide causes violence. The only conclusive evidence we do have is that it is real-life violence that causes real-life violence.

As long as we, as a society, condone violence in the name of nationalism, continue to minimize domestic violence and rape, and promote aggression as ideal masculinity, violence will continue to be a problem in our homes, on our streets, and in our schools. Critics will argue that the imagery and plots of video games do just that – and in turn, perpetuate those behaviors. Yes, video games *reflect* some of these highly problematic aspects of our society that contribute to a tolerance of violence. Just like movies and books. But they don't *cause* it.

Remove video games from the equation and you will still have a commensurate level of violence.

And yes, video games can influence ideology, but they aren't the only – or even the predominant – influence on society or an individual. In fact, video games can influence our ideologies in as many if not more positive ways than they do negative ones. Many recent games actually encourage players to play non-violently and reward players for humane treatment and good judgment.

So while video games are influencing us, and sometimes through violent images and play, many of them are pushing us to criticize the very violence that some people seem to believe they are causing.

The dialogue we need to have is about real violence, not virtual violence, and I sincerely hope that America's leaders recognize this as we move forward in addressing the problem.

Kristin M.S. Bezio is an assistant professor at the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies. Her research explores the intersection of literature and leadership, looking at influences ranging from Shakespeare to video gaming.