

# Violence in Video Games Causes Desensitization to Violence in Reality

by Hannah Garry

*This student-authored article was published in the South High Southerner, the newspaper of South High School in Minneapolis, MN.*

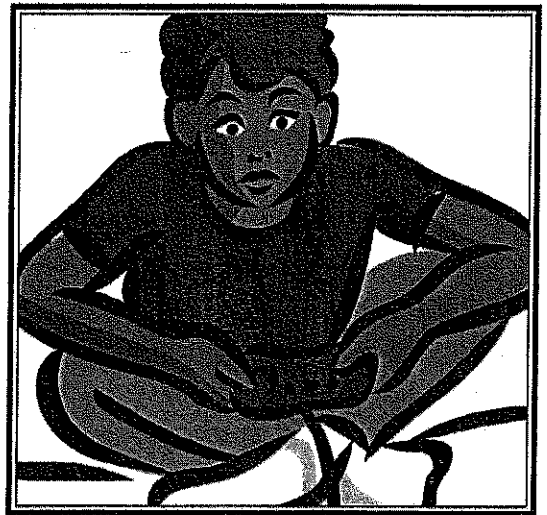
We see a lot of violence. As high school students, as Americans, as humans in today's society, we are all almost certainly exposed to violence on a daily basis.

On TV, crime shows and dramas feature serial killers and violent deaths that would have caused shock and horror in generations past. At the movie theater, movies like *Kill Bill* and *Ninja Assassin* showcase blood and gore every other scene. The taking of life is no longer presented as a terrible loss or an earth shattering event but merely as background noise to an exciting story. Violent acts have become too commonplace in our sources of entertainment.

Especially in video games, violence is rampant and everywhere. In the most popular video games today, games like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*, violence is the main activity players perform. Whether players are shooting at the enemy or beating up a hooker or even shooting a deer in *Big Buck Hunter Pro* (comes with not one, but two plastic rifles) violent acts have become too commonplace in our sources of entertainment.

The most disturbing is the violence that appears in video games. In movies and tv [sic] shows you are, at least, somewhat detached from the act itself. In video games you are actually doing the shooting/beating/blowing up.

When playing a video game containing violence (and studies have found that over 85% of video games contain some violence and almost 50% contain serious violent actions) players are rewarded for performing violent acts by moving up a level or gaining new assets or tools. Science has shown that the very active nature of playing violent video games is having some frightening effects.



Gamers spend an average of 8 hours per week playing video games, according to the Entertainment Software Rating Board. But according to a study done by the University of Iowa, all it takes is 20 minutes of playing a violent video game to cause gamers to have lessened reaction and decreased heart rate to scenes of violence. This shows rampant desensitization in our generation that should cause shock and alarm.

Parents continue to buy their children these games, regardless of the rating. Not that anything besides the rating in the marketing of these video games would suggest that they're inappropriate for children. They're presented as fun, fast-paced adventures where you get to play the hero, taking out bad guys however you see fit.

In the actual playing of these games violence is presented as justified, consequence-free, and fun. Players gain positive emotion incongruent with normal negative reactions to violence.

These studies have also shown that playing a violent video game makes it easier to access aggressive thoughts and feelings. In one case involving primary school children it was found that those who played more violent video games were more likely to get into fights with other children.

The Video Game Industry defends themselves against these findings by saying that violent video games don't make people aggressive, they merely attract already aggressive people. They also contend that video games containing violence are actually good for you because they allow you to release pent up aggression.

The Video Game Industry is like the Tobacco Industry in this way, making arguments against science to defend their findings. When studies first started showing that smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer, the tobacco industry scrambled to defend their product. But just like cigarettes didn't stop killing people, violent video games won't stop people from viewing killing people as something less than it is.

A more aggressive, desensitized future? Does that sound good to anyone?

Video games are only getting more violent. Every year, higher quality, more realistic graphics are available. Every year more players buy powerful desensitizing tools in the form of these video games. Every time they sit down to play they will be re-enforcing a growing belief that death and violence are commonplace and mundane.

The fact that parents even let their children play these games is worrying. If playing violent video games leads to kids viewing violence as no big deal then this means huge consequences for the future America. These video games, coupled with machine Nerf guns and *Law and Order*, all contribute to a major wave of desensitization. We're human beings, and the killing of another human being should affect us. Who's to say that it will in 50 years? If the amount of violent content we're viewing keeps rising, who's to say that it won't?

I'm not saying that violent video games cause violence. What I am saying is that they change the way we view violence. When it comes down to it, I only ask parents to be more conscience [sic] of the future they are creating by purchasing their children games which contain violence, and game players to be conscience [sic] of the content and meaning behind a game. Who needs *Grand Theft Auto* when you could play *Mario Kart*?

Originally published Feb. 14, 2011. Reprinted by permission of the *South High Southerner*.

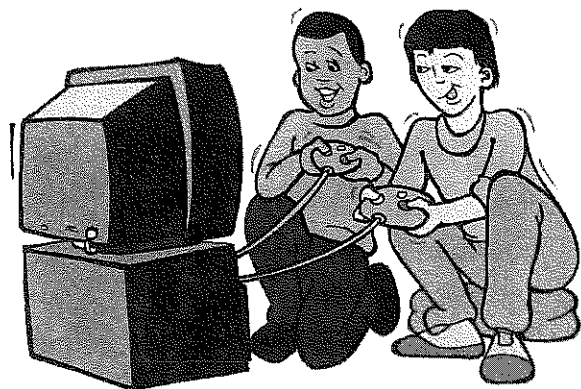
# Excerpt of “Op-Ed: In Defense of Gaming”

How I discovered the many joys of video play at an unlikely age

by Trevor Butterworth

With its rejection of a law prohibiting the sale of violent video games to anyone under 18 without parental consent, the Supreme Court last week gave California kids the right to exercise that inalienable joy of childhood: imaginary destruction. Long may this virtual pleasure continue.

For years, I simply ignored video games because life was too full; but then, out of curiosity, I tried the original *Halo*—the revolutionary first-person shooter, as such games are known, which had debuted in 2001. It was weirdly compelling, which was a deeply embarrassing thing to admit because it was also, by 2010, the equivalent of touting a brick-sized mobile phone.



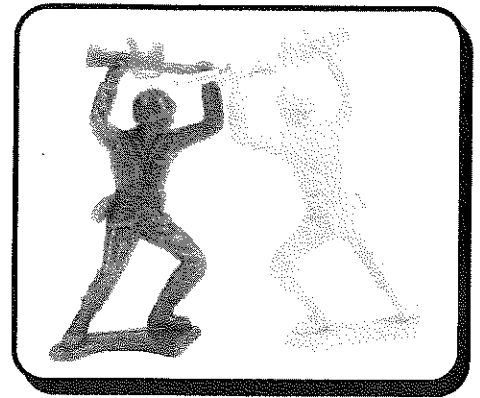
Advancement proved tricky. Trying to play the infinitely more sophisticated *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* on an underpowered laptop—especially after the ritual downloading of a gazillion patches to make the game play nice with Windows—was its own ironic and joyless form of modern warfare. . . .

So, at the tender age of 41, I broke down and bought an Xbox 360, and armed myself for long winter nights with *Bad Company 2*, *Halo Reach*, *Mass Effect 2*—and many others, typically sequels, as I wanted to experience the most sophisticated game in any given series. . . . I was merely in search of things I could shoot.

And a lot of shooting I did. Still, compared with the average teenager, I am a pathetic gamer: I am easily pleased; I don't mind dodgy artificial intelligence—coding glitches that cause your computer-generated enemies to walk into walls—because it evens the odds of my survival; and I do only solo campaigns, instead of the more popular teaming up with fellow warriors online because I suspect I might end up melding with my couch.

I have three observations about my journey. The first is that I've gone straight back to the past. Violent video games are not that much different from what my cousin and I did in the late 1970s with thousands of tiny, inch-high soldiers. We created worlds and characters, built tanks and aircraft, and committed mass slaughter week in and week out. Occasionally, plastic dinosaurs

would suddenly appear and decimate our imaginary, cardboard-box cities; sometimes, a plague would turn most of the soldiers into zombies requiring our band of heroes to use extreme violence to survive.



My cousin and I weren't alone, and my neighborhood was anything but extraordinary. We pitied the kids whose parents banned them from playing with "war toys" in the misguided belief that exposure to anything militaristic was a gateway to belligerence and fascism. Didn't they know it was just pretend violence? In fact, the most dangerous kid on my street was pacified by military model-building, mesmerizing us all with his fabulously airbrushed miniature warplanes instead of his fists.

That is, perhaps, one deficit of video gaming—you don't have to learn how to make stuff to have the coolest stuff on the street. (Although I suspect that today, the nanny-state brigade would be horrified at the idea of children using craft knives and glue and "chemical" paints.)

The second point that struck me was that video gaming seemed like a mass initiation rite. Instead of joining a gang and beating up other gangs, or going off to war and winning honor, or undergoing potentially deadly trials to prove one can transition from childhood to adulthood, you can advance through a virtual world that rewards increasing courage, skill and tenacity. The games industry has become, in effect, a tribal elder for the world's teenagers, pushing them through ever more complex feats of prestidigitation.

In defending violent video games on the grounds of free speech, Justice Antonin Scalia couldn't help but apologize for the implication that the court was allowing bad art a license: "Reading Dante is unquestionably more cultured and intellectually edifying than playing *Mortal Kombat*," he wrote. "But these cultural and intellectual differences are not constitutional."

I happened to read Dante's *Inferno* at 13, as the thrill of toy soldiers and war games was passing into the fixed memory of childhood, with a sense that it could never be felt again. Girls beckoned. The Smiths' debut single, "Hand in Glove," and other anthems of teenage disaffection, were only a few months away. But there before me in a 14th-century poem was a violent hell, lurid and lewd. It wasn't intellectually edifying—little is at 13—it was just like the games of my middle age, awesome.

Originally published July 4, 2011. Reprinted by permission of *The Daily*.

