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Brainstorm: Violence, Videogames, and Learning to Say “I Don’t Know” – Part 1

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Confirmation bias is a term I have been thinking a lot lately, especially as the familiar gun-control/gun-freedom pugilists take their respective corners on the far sides of our televisions.

One particular subject has to do with the role violent videogames play — or do not play — in creating aggressive tendencies in the people who play them (particularly young males).

As you may know, confirmation bias is the predilection to gravitate toward data (or commentaries or people) that support a person’s already pre-formed view about a subject. It is embodied in the comment “Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up!”

The internet is chronically infected with such biases – cable TV news channels too – and the sad result is that public discourse is often reduced to throwing punches. Examples abound in the reactions that various media outlets – both amateur and professional – have had to violent videogames in the wake of the gun-control discussions. It has a heart-wrenching immediacy, given that our most recent massacres were perpetrated by young males.

There are advocates who clearly believe that allowing these kids to play violent videogames is the real culprit behind their aggressive tendencies. The executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, Wayne LaPierre has called the psychological effects of games like Splatterhouse a “dirty little truth that the media try their best to conceal.” Blogs from deeply concerned parents whisper the same thing. Media sources frequently cite a famous study authored by C.A. Anderson et al, published in the Psychological Bulletin (2010, reference provided below) It is a meta-analysis, which means the authors scoured a large number of previously published studies to see if some agreement or trend could be found amongst researchers studying the subject.

The results of the analysis are damning. Here’s a quote from the abstract:
The evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.

Sounds like the case is closed, doesn’t it? Slammed shut. “I knew it!”, certain citizens in our culture might decry, especially those who don’t like violent videogames to begin with. And even if you were waffling in the center of the boxing ring, this study might be enough to push you into the game-hating corner. This is scientific evidence, after all.

Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. It is not even the end of the journal.

Published back-to-back in the same volume of Psychological Bulletin was a sharp refutation of the meta-analysis of Anderson et al. We will listen to those scientific voices in the next installment.

Reference:
Anderson CA et al (2010)
Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy and prosocial behavior in Eastern and Western countries: A meta-analytic review.
Psych Bull 136(2): 151 – 173

Comments

ONE COMMENT TO “VIOLENCE, VIDEOGAMES, AND LEARNING TO SAY “I DON’T KNOW” – PART 1”

William says:
April 28, 2013 at 10:41 pm
Any kid who gets bullied at school and comes home to play these games.. who do you think he is shooting at.??