



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MEDIA VIOLENCE , YOUTH VIOLENCE

The violent video blame game

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In a much-anticipated decision on a free-speech challenge of a California law banning the sale or rental of violent video games to minors, the U.S. Supreme Court got it right. Voting 7-2 in favor of the gaming industry, the Court majority ruled that the evidence suggesting that games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Grand Theft Auto* pose a significant harm to minors is weak and inconclusive.

It can be tempting to try to implicate the mass media especially video games” for various stunning episodes of extreme violence. A Gallup poll taken in the wake of the April 1999 Columbine massacre found that 62% of the over 1,000 adults surveyed nationwide felt that entertainment media was a major cause for school and youth violence. Moreover, 83% supported restrictions on sales of violent media to children, the very kind of restrictions that passed the California legislature in 2005.

Of course, much has changed in the decade since the frightening string of school massacres at Columbine and elsewhere, and fortunately, calmer heads have prevailed. It is not surprising that a most schoolyard shooters had played violent video games in their spare time. To be sure, violent people are often attracted to violent entertainment, on TV, in film, or through game console. But the ability to document a direct causal link, indicating that consuming violent entertainment leads to violence behavior, has eluded social science researchers for years.

What has also changed in the past decade or more is the level of violence and extent of realism offered by various video games on the market. As compared to books, television or film, video games offer active entertainment. Rather than just

lie on the couch and watch a massacre portrayed in some television show, children can cybernetically kill on demand -- and learn to enjoy it -- through one of many violent action games available to them in computer game stores or on the Internet.

Moreover, the intrinsic incentives and rewards, such as accruing a top score from killing, advancing through game levels while developing homicidal mastery, and defeating an opponent in an Internet-based competition, reinforce the will to kill, at least in the game setting. Although these games are fantasy, with multimedia sound and advanced graphics, the line between virtual reality and stark reality can become rather thin. Finally, role-playing games and the 360-degree perspective of more recent advances in gameware have taken another step toward realism.

In striking down the California ban, the Court majority specifically pointed to the lack of hard research evidence of a causal link. Some research suggests that frequent involvement in playing violent video games tends to impact negatively on a youngster's attitudes and affect. The frequent gamer may become angry or desensitized, at least in the short term, but not necessarily more violent. However, the extent to which violent games alter behavior is a wide-open question.

Despite their unwillingness to uphold the California ban, the justices were hardly unconcerned about the kind of content available in video games. However, they preferred to pass the responsibility for setting limits onto the shoulders of parents. In its ruling, the Court explicitly endorsed efforts on the part of the gaming industry to develop a detailed rating system designed to guide parents in choosing age-appropriate material.

Unfortunately, the Court's faith in media ratings and advisories is misplaced. Not only are they ineffective in preventing youngsters from playing games not designed for their age group, but ratings actually serve to enhance the appeal of proscribed material among immature youngsters who are eager for adulthood. An M rating for Mature audiences only is the gaming version of the forbidden fruit.

The media has, at times, been used as a convenient scapegoat, and censorship as an easy solution. Public concerns, political considerations, and fear have often encouraged us to point fingers at a profitable industry, while ignoring some of the fundamental causes of violence that are much more difficult to resolve.

To the extent that youngsters spend endless hours being entertained by violence says more about the lack of parental supervision and control. It isn't that the entertainment media are so powerful; it is that our other institutions --family, school, religion, and neighborhood -- have grown weaker with respect to socializing children. Banning violent entertainment may be an easy fix, especially when policymakers are unwilling or unable to deal with the more fundamental causes of youth violence.