

Chapter 3

Not in My Class You Don't! The Naive Association of Video Games with Aggression as a Hindrance to Their Use in Education

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ABSTRACT

It has been recognized that video games may function well as a platform for education. However, educators may be reluctant to use such games, particularly those with violent content, given controversies over games in recent years. Yet recent data suggests that these controversies over video games may have been misplaced. The current chapter examines the controversies over video games, data to support and refute these controversies, and how the public debates on video games may have influenced educators' decisions about the use of video games in their classrooms. It is argued that it is time to acknowledge that the alleged harmfulness of video games was far overrated and that educators may wish to consider how games, even those with mildly violent content, can contribute to education.

INTRODUCTION

In November of 2010, the Sacramento Public Library decided to host a video game tournament featuring the game "Black Ops," a first-person shooter game with an M-rating for mature violent themes. The library had been motivated by the goal of attracting young people to the library.

The tournament was limited to those 17 and up, due to the M-rating of the game (which suggests the game be limited to those aged 17 and older). Nonetheless, the library's effort became the focus of a vocal protest by a few, including the local chapter of the Veterans for Peace, who did not feel it appropriate that the library use a violent video game to attract young people.

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Black Ops is a war game, part of the Call of Duty series. Put briefly, the game takes place during the 1960s and involves taking on missions as a special forces/covert ops soldier during this time period. The game has a gritty, 'is it all worth it' feel to it; fun to play, but presenting war as a dark experience. In this sense it has similarities to *Apocalypse Now*, a movie both entertaining to watch as a war movie despite being condemnatory toward war itself.

The protests were led, in part by a group called the Veterans for Peace, mainly US war veterans who campaign against war and violence in all forms. Video games are not a typical element of their platform, although in this case they felt that the use of Black Ops potentially glorified war. Interestingly the protestors seemed to take no offense to the myriad of war themed books or movies contained within the same library, not the least of these *Apocalypse Now* and *Hearts of Darkness*, the book on which the movie was based.

Given my interest in video game violence, I contacted the organizer of the Veterans for Peace protests, named John Reiger. I found him to be a very cordial man, but also passionate about his opposition to violence in all forms. He was gracious enough to discuss, even debate the issue with me a bit, although neither of us convinced the other. However, toward the end of our exchange I thought to ask him whether he had played the game Black Ops, which he was protesting. He responded that he had not, in fact had not played any electronic games other than solitaire. I had almost been embarrassed to ask the question as it is something of a cliché for someone to protest a form of media to which they had no exposure, no understanding. But in this case the cliché happened to be accurate.

It is not my intent to be overly critical of Mr. Reiger, who I found to be quite sincere and passionate. Indeed the issue of video games at the Sacramento Library was only a small part of an otherwise worthy agenda. However, I do suspect this case illustrates an ongoing issue for the debate

of video game violence: so much of it is bred from ignorance, fear and misunderstanding. So much of the rhetoric over video game violence has focused on the notion that they "award points for antisocial behavior" or that their "interactive" nature makes them more harmful. These sorts of portrayals are incredibly simplistic and do more to illustrate the speaker's unfamiliarity with games or personal biases than they do an objective understanding of the phenomenology of video game use. Of course in previous generations, older adults said the same basic things about everything from waltz music to comic books to dime novels to *Dungeons and Dragons*.

This chapter concerns itself with the debate over video game violence and how this debate is both related to historical cultural processes involving the introduction of new media in psychology and also may have fostered misunderstanding and reluctance to incorporate video games, including those with violent content, into educational pedagogy. I begin by presenting evidence regarding the utility of video games in learning environments before moving to the issue of violent video games and aggression and the "urban legends" that surfaced during that debate. Finally, I will discuss how misinformation regarding the effects of violent video games ultimately impacted the educational system and the willingness to incorporate games into pedagogy.

VIDEO GAMES IN EDUCATION

Violent Video Games as Blazing Angels

In discussing the issue of video game violence, we first must try to understand what a violent video game is. Most often when talking about violent video games today people imagine the ultraviolent shooters, most often typified by the *Grand Theft Auto* series in which players could take on the role of a thug and shoot police officers or run over in-

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