Virtual Scapegoat:

Portrayal of violent video games in news media

Brittany Green-Miner

University of Utah

Abstract

In the decade and a half since the mass shooting at Columbine High School, video games have been under the spotlight as a possible cause of violent behavior. Although extensive research has yet to find a causal relationship between prolonged violent video game use and violent behavior, video games are still scapegoated in news media, in politics and even among many academics. My research will investigate how video games have been portrayed in news media, particularly in connection with incidents of mass violence. This research will draw attention to the fact that news media exaggerate or even fabricate the influence of video games on suspects in mass shootings and hopefully encourage a refocus on the real potential causes of aggressive behavior.

Introduction

In 2012, consumers spent $20.77 billion on the video game industry, according to the Entertainment Software Association. 58 percent of Americans play video games, and the average player is 30 years old.

Despite the massive growth in popularity of video games over the last several decades, there remains a stigma against video game players and the industry. Games are accused of being too violent, too sexualized and of making the younger generations **"dumber."**

Significant research has been conducted looking for a causal link between prolonged video game play and violent behavior, but none has been found. While some studies have found a connection between exposure to violent media and a temporary increase in aggression, they have been criticized as limited and ineffective at connecting to real-world situations (Ferguson, 2013).

In the last decade and a half, violent media — violent video games in particular — have faced criticism from the news media, politicians and researchers as potential causes of aggressive behavior and mass killings, despite a lack of scientific backing for their claims.

Video games first came under the spotlight after the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School.

The suspects in the shooting, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were allegedly obsessed with the violent video game Doom. Harris created custom levels for the game, and some media organizations claimed that one of those levels mimicked the layout of

Columbine High School and that Harris and Klebold practiced prior to the attack (Simpson & Blevins, 1999).

No official reports after the Columbine shooting pointed to those alleged **"practice" levels and there were no causal links between Klebold and Harris' video game** playing and the attack, yet media still connect video game use with the Columbine shooting.

In the hours after the 2007 attack at Virginia Tech, national media reports alleged that suspected shooter Seung-Hui Cho was an avid player of the video game Counter-Strike (Beck, 2008; Jaccarino, 2013)**. However, official reports said that Cho's roommate claimed that he didn't play video games at all, something the roommate** found unusual. Additionally, investigators found no video games or video game paraphernalia in Cho's dorm room (Virginia Tech Review Board, 2007).

This standard of media misinformation – both exaggerated and fabricated – about mass shooting suspects has continued, as can be seen in the 2012 Aurora theater shooting, the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School and, most recently, the 2013 Navy shipyard shooting.

Misinformation and false allegations against violent video games have led to political pushes for limits on video game production and sales, both at state and national levels (Ferguson, 2013).

These false claims against video game violence create multiple problems. First, they place undue negative stereotypes against the video game industry and video game players. Second, and most importantly, arguments about video game violence distract the public, politicians and researchers from looking for the true cause of incidents of mass violence.

While significant research has looked at the effects of violent media on adolescents and potential increased aggression, there hasn't been much research on media connections between violent video game use and violent behavior.

My research will focus on news media reporting of violent video games, particularly in connection with incidents of mass violence, and the impact of those reports on politics and the general public.

This research will hopefully draw attention to the misinformation presented in news media, the negative impact it has on the public and encourage a discussion about the true cause of aggressive behavior and incidents of mass violence.

Literature Review

By any benchmark, video games are now a highly popular and profitable medium in the USA. But with the exception of violence effects studies on children, and some recent work on gender and identity in gaming, the video-game industry — which in 1999 equaled motion pictures in domestic revenues (Graser 2000) — remains largely ignored by communication studies scholars. Studies by historians and sociologists are also notably absent. To date, the only historical accounts of video games have come from journalists and hobbyists (Herman 1997; Sheff 1999; Kent 2000; Poole 2000) and focus on industrial history. Beyond the details of corporate practices lies an undiscovered social history and a story of vilification and redemption that echoes that of many earlier new media technologies. (Williams, 2003, p. 523-524)

While there has been significant investigation into the effects of video game violence, very little research has looked at how video games are portrayed in news media.

Multiple EBSCOhost searches using keywords connected to video game violence and news media found only a handful of investigations.

The most closely related article, published by McKernan in September 2013, looked at coverage of video games in *The New York Times* between 1980 and 2010. He concludes that, "During this period, evaluative articles primarily treat video games as a major threat. However, a small subset of articles rejects this portrayal. During the 1980s and 1990s, this **alternative account identifies video games' functional benefits. This** narrative changes in the 2000s to celebrating video g**ames' artistic merits**" (McKernan, 2013, p. 307).

McKernan referred to Williams' (2003) investigation of video games in American news magazines between 1970 and 2000. Like with McKernan, Williams' findings indicate "vilification and partial redemption" of video games during the 30-year period under investigation (Williams, 2003, p. 523).

However, both Williams and McKernan look at media portrayal of video games in general, rather than video game violence.

Scharrer, Weidman, & Bissell (2003) looked at media responses to three high-profile events, including the Columbine shooting. Although their investigation looked at various media (music, television, etc.), they did cite video games as one blamed medium. This study doesn't provide much information about video game perceptions in media, but it does provide a good example of how one could conduct such an investigation.

Most research into video game violence has been conducted by psychologists. Serious investigation into the effects of video game violence on aggressive behavior began in the mid-1980s.

Early research looked at video game violence in connection with other media (television and movies) and possible correlations that could be made between aggressive responses to various violent media.

A review of past studies published in "Aggression and Violent Behavior" in 1998 (Dill & Dill, 1998) argued that:

> A similar relationship should exist [between violent video games and aggressive behavior] because the same conceptual variables are involved. Specifically, video-game violence effects should operate through elaboration and priming of aggressive thought networks, weakening of inhibitions against antisocial behavior, modeling, reinforcement, decreased empathy for others, and the creation of a more violent world view. (ibid, p. 409)

The review went so far as to argue that the impact would be more pronounced in video games than in other media because they are more immersive and allow the player to connect more with characters in the game.

Past studies identified in Dill& Dill found mixed results, with some finding a correlation between violent video game use and aggressive behavior and others finding no differences.

Dill & Dill concluded that, "Overall, the majority of investigations have supported the predicted relationship between violent video-game or violent virtual reality play and increased in aggression or aggression-**related outcomes," but** noted problems in the **literature, "the majority of which were in efforts that found no differences or that failed to support their own hypotheses." (**ibid, p. 420)

Since that 1998 literature review, the number of studies looking at video game violence and aggression has grown exponentially, and the validity of a possible link between the two is still hotly debated.

The shooting at Columbine in 1999 came amidst political discussions on the impact of media on aggressive behavior, and shortly after the massacre, the U.S. Senate held hearings on media violence (Ferguson, 2013).

> During these hearings, Senator Lieberman claimed that video games and other media had turned some children into killers, and Senator John McCain criticized the ESRB **ratings as "nothing but a smoke screen to provide cover for** immoral and unconscionable busi**ness practices" (ABC** News, 2000, para. 5). (Ferguson, 2013, p. 58)

Because of the increase in public awareness and the call for change, the American Psychological Association in 2005 called for a push to reduce violence in video games and its marketing towards youth and adolescents.

This controversial call came despite ambiguous research, said Ferguson in a 2013 TIME article (Peckham, 2013). Since then, some researchers, including Ferguson, Kutner and Olson, have openly advocated against the connection between video game violence and aggressive behavior (Ferguson, 2013).

The APA has since called for a review of their policy, saying that they will look at research conducted in the eight years since the 2005 statement was made.

Most of the studies claiming a link exists expose participants to violent or non-violent video games in a laboratory setting and investigate possible increases in aggressive behavior. Some of these studies have found a link while others have not (Ferguson, 2013).

The most prolific researcher alleging such a link is Craig Anderson, who is currently employed at the Department of Psychology at Iowa State University in Ames. On his profile on the Iowa State University website, Anderson is listed as an author or coauthor on 130 articles since 1995 (Anderson, 2013).

However, other researchers call these types of studies flawed, arguing that laboratory results of short-term increases in aggression cannot be extrapolated to real-world increases in violent behavior (Ferguson, 2013). In its opinion and ruling in ***Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*** (2011), the U.S. Supreme Court criticized **psychological research on violent video games, calling it "unpersuasive" and saying that** it contained methodological flaws (Ferguson, 2013). Anderson's studies were specifically called out on several occasions in the opinion.

There are no studies that have found a conclusive link between prolonged violent video game play and violent behavior, partly because it is difficult to eliminate all other possible variables when considering causes of violent behavior and partly because the sample size of mass killers is so small (and even among that sample, the number of mass killers who survive their attack is even smaller) (Ferguson, 2013).

Purpose

As video game use becomes increasingly popular among a diverse population in the United States and the world, it is important for researchers to look at its impact. As I've described above, there has been significant research on the effects of video games and the content of video games, but not much on how video games are portrayed in news media. As outlined by McKernan and Williams, the media helps shape the public's opinions and, in turn, provides a good reflection of the public perception.

Therefore, it is important to look at how news media reports on video games and violence, especially as incidents of mass violence continue to make headlines and debate over the possible cause remain heated and frequent.

With my research, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of how video games are portrayed in the news media, particularly in connection with incidents of mass violence.

I have considered several approaches and research questions with my investigation:

- I could look into historical representation of video games in the news media; how has the perception changed over the years and how does the current portrayal compare to the past?

- I could look at reports of video game violence in connection with a certain event, like the shootings at Columbine or at Virginia Tech.

- My research could also look at how scientific research is represented in media reports; are scientific studies being cited or are reports based on anecdotal evidence? Who is being cited? Politicians? Researchers?

- I could compare representation across different media. Do television news reports have the same bias as online reports? Or print reports? Does the individual source make a difference on the reports?

- I could look at effects of these reports on consumer attitudes. How does the public perceive violent video games? What impact has the portrayal had on politics and the video game industry?

I have decided in this study to look at reports of video game violence in connection with certain incidents of mass violence to see whether video games are cited as having a possible causal effect on violent behavior.

For my investigation, I will look at five high-profile incidents of mass violence often cited in connection with violent video game play:

- Columbine: Harris and Klebold entered Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, and opened fire, killing 12 students and one teacher and injuring 21 others before killing themselves. Media have cited their alleged obsession with the video game Doom.

- Virginia Tech: Seung-Hui Cho, a senior at the school, shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others in two separate attacks on April 16, 2007, before killing himself. Media have incorrectly accused Cho of being obsessed with the video game Counter-Strike, even though investigators found no record of him playing any video games.

- Aurora: James Holmes shot and killed 12 people at a midnight showing of "The Dark Knight" in an Aurora, Colo., movie theater on July 20, 2012. The attack injured 70 others; 58 by gunfire, four by tear gas and eight who were injured

while fleeing (Girdon, 2013). Early reports suggested that Holmes played video games to "work up" to the shooting (Whitfield et al., 2012).

- Sandy Hook: Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., and shot and killed 20 first grade students and six adults at the school before killing himself. Media have cited an obsession with violent video games (Lupica, 2013).

- Washington Navy yard: On September 16, 2013, Aaron Alexis shot and killed 12 people in an attack that also injured eight (three from gunfire) before killing himself. Media have cited friends' claims that Alexis became "obsessed" with violent video games, often playing for up to 18 hours at a time (Campoy, 2013).

Methods

For my research, I will look at archives of top national news media sources and conduct a content analysis.

My investigation will be limited to top national news media in each category; I will look at top network and cable broadcast news programs and newspapers. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism has listed the following news sources as the top in each of their categories (Pew Research Center 2013).

These are:

Newspapers: *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA TODAY* and *The New York Times*.

Network news: PBS, CBS, NBC and ABC nightly news shows.

Cable news: MSNBC, CNN and Fox News.

To collect articles for investigation, I will use a Lexis Nexis database search linking "video games" with the five incidents I previously outlined; Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook and the Washington Navy yard.

I will code these articles based on the following criteria:

- Does the article present a generally positive or negative view of video game play or are both sides presented?
  - o If negative, does it allege a causal link between video game play and aggressive behavior?
- What is the general topic being discussed (e.g. politics, incident of violence)?
- Does the article link back to one of the previous incidents of mass violence?

With this coded information, I will hopefully be able to draw a conclusion about news media's portrayal of an alleged link between violent video game use and violent behavior.

Results

As outlined previously, based on my own experience and preliminary research into the topic, I expect that media reports will exaggerate or fabricate a connection between video game violence and aggressive behavior, particularly in connection with incidents of mass violence.

Earlier reports will tend more towards the negative side and draw more causal connections, but more recently, as research into the subject grows, there will be an increase in the number of people speaking out against a false causal relationship (Ferguson, Kutner and Olson, in particular, have appeared in media refuting the claims).

Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that media coverage of video games in connection with incidents of mass violence has become less prevalent in the last several years as gun control legislation has become the topic of choice for politicians and activists.

Discussion

My research will provide a historical content analysis of the news media's perception of violent video games and allow a deeper understanding into how misinformation about the impact of violent media on aggressive behavior spreads and impacts the public.

This understanding will bring awareness to the problems the news media faces when reporting on violent video games and hopefully encourage a change in media reports and/or a change on viewer perceptions.

By extension, the increased awareness and change in reports/viewer perceptions can draw the attention away from video games in the discussion of incidents of mass violence and focus instead on identifying other possible causes and reducing the risk factors of aggressive behavior.

With the Internet, the sources of news have grown dramatically. We can no longer look at just the top cable news networks or the top national news magazines to get a comprehensive understanding of what information people are getting. But a search of the entire Internet is impossible, and my investigation must be limited to top news sources. Still, a look at these top news sources should provide a decent understanding of media representations of video games and aggressive behavior.

References

Anderson, C. A. (2013, November). *Craig A. Anderson*. Retrieved from
http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/~caa/

Anderson, C., Gentile, D., & Buckley, K. (2007). *Violent video game effects on children and adolescents: Theory, research, and public policy*. Oxford University Press.

Bensley, L., & Van Eenwyk, J. (2001). Video games and real-life aggression: Review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *29*(4), 244–257. doi: 10.1016/S1054-139X(01)00239-7

Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, *131 S. Ct. 2729* (2011). Retrieved from http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/10pdf/08–1448.pdf

Campoy, A. (2013, September 16). Friend says Alexis was videogame fan, heavy drinker. *Wall Street Journal* blogs. Retrieved from
http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/09/16/friend-aaron-alexis-skilled-at-shooter-videogames/

Dill, K. E., & Dill, J. C. (1998). Video game violence: A review of the empirical literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *3*(4), 407–428. doi: 10.1016/S1359-1789(97)00001-3

Ferguson, C. (2013). Violent video games and the Supreme Court. *American Psychologist*, *68*(2), 57-74. doi: 10.1037/a0030597

Girdon, J. (2013, January 10). Officials release complete list of injured victims in Aurora massacre. *FoxNews.com*. Retrieved from
http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/01/10/officials-release-complete-list-injured-victims-in-aurora-massacre/

Grossman, D., & DeGaetano, G. (2009). *Stop teaching our kids to kill: A call to action against tv, movie & video game violence*. Random House.

Jaccarino, M. (2013, September 12). 'Training simulation:' Mass killers often share obsession with violent video games. *FoxNews.com*. Retrieved from
http://www.foxnews.com/tech/2013/09/12/training-simulation-mass-killers-often-share-obsession-with-violent-video-games/

Johnson, S. (2005). *Everything bad is good for you: How today's popular culture is actually making us smarter*. Riverhead.

Kirsh, S. (2012). *Children, adolescents, and media violence: A critical look at the research*. (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Kutner, L., & Olson, C. (2008). *Grand theft childhood: The surprising truth about violent video games and what parents can do*. Simon & Schuster.

Lupica, B. (2013, March 17). Morbid find suggests murder-obsessed gunman Adam Lanza plotted Newtown, Conn.'s Sandy Hook massacre for years. *New York Daily News*. Retrieved from http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/lupica-lanza-plotted-massacre-years-article-1.1291408

McKernan, B. (2013). The morality of play: Video game coverage in The New York Times from 1980 to 2010.*Games and Culture*, *8*(5), 307-329. doi: 10.1177/1555412013493133

Peckham, M. (2013, Oct. 8). Researcher says linking video games to gun violence is a 'classic illusory correlation' read more: Researcher says linking video games to gun violence is a 'classic illusory correlation'. *TIME*, Retrieved from http://techland.time.com/2013/10/08/researcher-says-linking-video-games-to-gun-violence-is-a-classic-illusory-correlation/

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2013). *State of the news media report 2013*. Retrieved from http://stateofthemedia.org/

Beck, G. (2008, May 1) Popular video game a murder simulator?; Congressman speaks out about immigration; Public viewer compares his book to Glenn's [News program]. (2008). In *Glenn Beck*. CNN. Retrieved from http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0805/01/gb.01.html

Scharrer, E., Weidman, L. M., & Bissell, K. L. (2003). Pointing the Finger of Blame: News Media Coverage of Popular-Culture Culpability. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, *5*(2), 49-98.

Simpson, K., & Blevins, J. (1999, May 04). Did Harris preview massacre on "Doom?". *The Denver Post*. Retrieved from http://extras.denverpost.com/news/shot0504f.htm

Virginia Tech Review Panel. (2007). Mass shootings at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007. Retrieved from http://www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techPanelReport-docs/FullReport.pdf

Whitfield, F., Fuentes, T., Keilar, B., Wyner, K., & Candiotti, S. (2012, July 20). Massacre at Batman premier [News program]. In *CNN Newsroom 9 AM EST*. CNN.

Williams, D. (2003). The video game lightning rod. *Information, Communication & Society*, *6*(4), 523-550. doi: 10.1080/1369118032000163240