

Video shootout: The games kids play

by [Noreen Herzfeld](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

My Minnesota hometown is the sort of place where neighbors look in on each other and leave the doors unlocked. As in Lake Wobegon, the children are all above average. In September one of those children brought a .22-caliber Colt semiautomatic to school and shot and killed two of his classmates.

As with similar shootings at Columbine and in Kentucky, the media were quick to note that the shooter (in this case 15-year-old Jason McLaughlin) had been an avid video game player. This almost goes without saying. The National Institute on Media and the Family (NIMF) reported that in a survey of 778 students in grades four through 12, 87 percent of all students and 96 percent of the boys said they play video games regularly.

Shortly after the shooting in Cold Spring, I asked my college students about their experience with video games. The young men in the room had a lot to say—video games are a large part of their life.

Today's video games are far from the world of early games like Pac Man or Super Mario. They are visually stunning, complex and deeply immersive. There are role-playing games, puzzle and strategy games, simulations and sports games such as virtual soccer or skateboarding.

The largest category of games, however, and the ones my students prefer, are "first-person shooter" games in which the player faces down other players, monsters or characters. Favorite games have names like Street Fighter, Vice City, Doom, America's Army and Manhunt. One student noted, "Everything but the sports games requires you to kill."

And the killing has become increasingly graphic. In the '80s or early '90s, shooting an opponent resulted in the collapse of that figure on the screen. Today's graphics provide gore, flying body parts, realistic writhing and screams of pain. "There's blood everywhere," one student said. While most games used to come with a "blood off" default setting, today's games are generally "blood on." The new games involve

not only more graphic kills, but more kills. The video world is especially hostile toward women—games often include rape scenes, prostitution, full nudity and disembodied body parts.

In response to this increase in violence, the Entertainment Software Rating Board has come up with a system designed to keep the most violent games out of the hands of young children. But this system is little understood by parents and often unenforced by vendors. The most restrictive rating, AO (adults only), is for games that include “graphic depictions of sex and/or violence.” Most major retailers will not sell AO games, so this rating is almost never used.

Some games that include both graphic sex and violence, such as Grand Theft Auto or Manhunt, are rated M (not appropriate for persons under 17). Yet according to the NIMF survey, 87 percent of boys in grades four through 12 play M-rated games, and 78 percent of the boys rank these games among their top five favorites.

But it’s only a game, right? Killing a fictional character doesn’t cross a moral boundary.

The question is what the simulated violence does to the player. Several recent studies offer evidence that playing violent video games increases aggressive behavior. A Japanese study of fifth and sixth graders showed a correlation between the amount of time spent playing video games and later physical aggression. Two other studies found a similar link between violent game playing and aggressive thoughts and behavior, even after controlling for innate temperament and exposure to violence in other sources, such as movies and television.

The results of these studies are no surprise to the U.S. military, which uses video games as recruiting and training devices. America’s Army, a first-person shooter game, is distributed on CD by army recruiters and is downloadable from the army’s Web site. The Marine Corps has used the game Dune. David Grossman, retired professor of psychology at West Point, says that these games provide a script for rehearsing the act of killing: “It is their job to condition and enable people to kill . . . [These games] teach a person how to look another person in the eye and snuff their life out.”

While it is disturbing that these games imitate war, it is even more disturbing to realize that these days war seems to be imitating video games. The current policy of preemptive attack, for example, sounds like life in the video game world, where you

must “get the bad guys” before “they get you.” Video games are strong on quick reaction to threats and weak on reasoned response.

The administration’s focus on the initial conflict rather than postwar planning also resembles the video game universe, where games never progress past killing. General Wesley Clark has described Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s vision for Operation Iraqi Freedom as simplistic—detect and destroy enemy forces with minimum risk to one’s own forces. This vision emphasizes dominance through precision strikes. In the words of one senior officer: “Imagine a box of enemy territory 200 kilometers wide and 200 kilometers deep; we should be able to detect every enemy target there, and to strike and kill any target we want.” War as video game.

Exposure to simulated violence and death desensitizes people, lowering inhibitions and making it easier to commit violence in the real world. Video games romanticize violence and equate it with personal power and achievement. Some include “back stories” that explain the characters and their motivations. Revenge is a common feature, and the stories foster the notion that violence as payback is justifiable. Nick Yee, a student in communications, notes that “it’s hard to have an in-game and out-game moral compass. . . . When you play the game, your moral compass gets influenced and impacted by your decisions.” Though one does not kill real people, one gets used to the concept of killing. From a Kantian or utilitarian ethical perspective, one has neither used nor hurt another person. But virtue ethics warns us that one’s character is formed by one’s habits. First-person shooter games present the world in adversarial terms and inure players to violence.

Of course, not all video games are violent. Some test and teach strategy, concentration and observation skills. In one category of games, the emphasis is on designing functional tools or worlds—in other words, on showing oneself to be master of a particular game environment. Unlike other games, however, in these the player works alone, trying out different scenarios to see how things interact within the game’s world. In the “God games,” the player builds and controls a virtual environment. Examples of God games include SimCity, in which cyber characters go about their day-to-day lives; Tropico, in which the player manages a banana republic; RollerCoaster Tycoon, in which one builds and runs a theme park; and, for an odd twist, SimAnt, in which players build a simulated ant colony.

Role-playing games, a third category, also have a large following. Many are designed in an adventure/quest format. Again the person is an autonomous agent trying to gain advantages in a virtual world. In EverQuest, one of the most popular multiplayer role-playing games, players create their own characters, go on quests, solve puzzles and kill evil creatures. Other players may be teammates or opponents, and some of the quests can be solved only in groups. Yet the players often make decisions too quickly for them to be in any real sense collaborative.

While these games are not violent, they suggest that the player can manage alone—all she has to do is assert herself and exercise her will. Video games promote this propensity to view oneself as alone, rather than as cooperating with others. Reinhold Niebuhr said that the human will-to-power lies at the root of sin. “There is a pride of power in which the human ego assumes its self-sufficiency and self-mastery.” To see the self only in terms of mastery is risky.

In the end, the world of video games is a very lonely place—there is no socialization, as in Monopoly, and no engagement with a live opponent, as in tennis. And there is definitely no physical activity. Instead, the games present virtual people, and actions with simple and predictable consequences, all occurring inside of a box. If you walk around a certain corner, you’ll get shot. If you fail to maintain the buildings in your simulated city, some will fall down. The consequences have little relevance to real world complexities, and the only experience gained is the experience that’s been set up and bounded by the game’s creators.

Many of my students play video games as an occasional release, a way to hang out with friends, a chance to get an adrenaline rush in a safe way. As an occasional pastime, video games seem harmless enough. But when the average American child spends nine hours a week playing them, we need to ask what sort of worldview the games are furthering. What are they teaching children about what it means to be human, about decision-making, about social roles, about living in the real world?

Eugene Provenzo, professor of education at the University of Miami, testified before a Senate committee:

[These games] are the cultural equivalent of genetic engineering, except that in this experiment, even more than the other one, we will be the potential new hybrids, the two-pound mice. It is very possible that the people killed in the last few years as the result of “school shootings” may

in fact be the first victims/results of this experiment.

In my hometown, a student responded to persistent teasing by acting out the role of first-person shooter. What influence did video games have on his view of the world? We may never know. But such events call us to pay attention to the nature of our entertainments.