



The Research Is In: Violent Video Games Can Lead to Violent Behavior

Dr. Anderson, distinguished professor of psychology at Iowa State University, is one of the three authors of Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research, and Public Policy (Oxford University Press: 2007). His co-authors are Douglas A. Gentile, assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State University and Director of Research for the National Institute on Media and the Family; and Katherine E. Buckley, a graduate student in psychology at Iowa State University. Don Phau interviewed Dr. Anderson on May 11.

EIR: The cover to your book states, “Violent video games are successfully marketed to, and easily obtained by children and adolescents. Even the U.S. government distributes one such game, ‘America’s Army,’ through both the Internet and its recruiting offices. Is there any scientific evidence to support the claims that violent games contribute to aggressive and violent behavior?” Would you like to answer that question?

Anderson: The simple answer is “yes.” The evidence is actually quite strong. Some of the evidence is in that book; there are a lot more studies on violent video-game effects that have been conducted over the years. These are the most recent ones, that we’ve been doing in our lab. There is also 45 or 50 years worth of research on other kinds of media violence, and that research is relevant. These are different versions of the same product. It’s sort of like research on tobacco effects: There’s research on cigarette smoking, and cigar smoking, and pipe smoking, and they are relevant to each other. They are slightly different in a number of ways. In this case, there are likely to be some differences between violent video-game effects and violent television effects. But it is basically the same phenomenon, the same psychological processes are at work.

There really shouldn’t be any debate any more about whether there are harmful effects, in our view. The main scientific debate is on finer detailed questions, about what characteristics make a violent video game somewhat more harmful, or somewhat less harmful—not whether there are any harmful effects. Because we know that there are.

EIR: Wouldn’t you say there was a qualitative difference be-

tween watching a violent movie, and playing a first-person shooter game?

Anderson: Yes, we do think the violent video games are likely to have a bigger effect, mainly because of the active participation. You are practicing all the aspects of violence: decision-making and carrying it out. That is not the case in a television show or violent movie. You’re not the one who decides to pull the trigger or tries to hurt someone; you’re simply the observer. Practicing making a particular kind of decision, makes you better at making that kind of decision, just like practicing your multiplication tables makes you better at multiplication.

A well-designed video game is an excellent teaching tool for a whole host of reasons. There are very positive uses of video games in educational domains, even in medical domains. But an excellent teaching tool teaches *whatever* the content is, whether for the benefit of society, or anti-social. And for the most part, violent video games are not the kinds of lessons we want America’s children and adolescents to be learning.

EIR: You cite in your book many of the research studies showing that playing these violent video games increases aggressiveness. Can you explain how one determines that?

Anderson: We have three very different kinds of studies in the book, each one of which represents one of the three main types of study designs that one can do in any scientific field. The first is a true experimental study, in that research participants—children and college students—are brought into a lab setting and randomly assigned to play either a violent or a non-violent video game. Then we have them do a standard laboratory measure of aggressive behavior, which involves the participant setting punishment levels for an opponent—an opponent whom they don’t meet, but who is supposedly in another room. The measure for aggressive behavior is the level of punishment that each participant sets for their opponent over a series of 25 opportunities. That’s a very standard measure that’s been very well validated in a lot of ways, and it predicts aggressive behavior in the real world—things like fights.

The second study is a cross-sectional correlational

study. This one focussed on high school students, and measured their past exposure to violent video games, television, and movies, and a number of other variables. We had measures of mild kinds of physical aggression, as well as more severe forms of physical aggression—aggression that would be considered criminal, if it were known to the police. And what we found was that these high school students who reported that they have a history of playing a lot of violent video games, also reported that they were more likely to have engaged in a lot of mild physical aggression against other people, as well as being more likely to be involved in the more serious forms of physical aggression. And that holds even after you control for whether the participant was male or female, how much time they spent on any kind of entertainment media—it really seems to be pretty specific to the violent content.

The final study is the first public study that has a longitudinal design, and this is where we have elementary children measured at two points in time. We measured their media habits—how much they tend to be exposed to violent video games and violent television and so on—as well as their aggressive behaviors, as measured by their teachers’ reports, classmate reports, and their own self-reports. We did this early in the school year and then roughly 5-6 months later. So then you can see whether or not media violence exposure early in the school year predicts aggressive behavior by the end of the school year, even after you statistically control for how aggressive the kids were seen earlier in the school year. What we found was that those children who were being exposed to a lot of violent video games early in the school year did in fact become more aggressive over that 5-6 month period, than those who were not so exposed.

EIR: The conclusions that the book draws obviously fly in the face of your quotes from Doug Lowenstein [former president of the Entertainment Software Association], who said that there is absolutely no evidence, *none*, that playing a violent video game leads to aggressive behavior.

Anderson: There are all kinds of research teams around the world now who have found harmful effects, and unless one takes a very inaccurate view of the way scientists operate, one really can’t dismiss all these research teams, many of which are headed up by top researchers in the field. The only people who really deny that there are these video-game violence effects, are people who don’t have any real claim to expertise in the research area. The industry has to work very hard to find people that they then call experts, to contradict what the real experts say—as identified by the National Institute of Mental Health, for example, or the Surgeon General’s office, or the major public-health groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, or the American Psychological Association. When you ask people who are identified as experts by those groups, they all come to the same conclusion: Yes, there are

these harmful effects.

In fact, we’ve had a pretty hard time getting research funding to do these video-game studies, in part because review panels from the National Institutes of Health, or the National Science Foundation, say, “We already know that these effects exist. Why would we spend more money trying to do more research to show that they exist?” Whereas many in the general public say, “I don’t know whether there’s any real effect of violent video games or violent television.”

EIR: The most vehement opposition to the notion that video games can lead to violence, comes from the people who are playing them. If you say that to young teenagers who are playing them, they go crazy denying it.

Anderson: Yes, some of them get pretty angry about it. A large part of that, I think, is they’re afraid that if society decides that there are harmful effects, that automatically means that these games will be banned. And of course, that’s not a logical conclusion. Public policy never flows, and shouldn’t flow directly, from scientific research. The scientific research is certainly relevant, but there are other concerns that have to be taken into account as well. The most obvious one is that there are legal concerns having to do with First Amendment protections involving free speech. . . .

In the letters and e-mails that I get sometimes from the extremely angry gamers, they are arguing against a position that no media violence researcher that I know has ever taken. I get e-mails that say, “I’ve played violent video games all my life and I’ve never killed anyone; so therefore, the research must be wrong.” But none of the researchers have said that if you take a normal, healthy, well-adjusted person with no other risk factors, and have them play violent video games for a month or a year or five years, that they’re going to become a school shooter, just on the basis of playing those games! That’s not the way extreme violence occurs.

We know that for *extremely* violent behavior to occur, such as school shootings, there has to be a convergence of multiple risk factors. And there are about a dozen risk factors that we know, each of which increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior; but no one of which by itself is a perfect predictor or a single cause of violent behavior. . . .

EIR: Have you looked closely at the shooters from Columbine, Paducah, Jonesboro, what went on with those kids? Has anybody looked at that?

Anderson: There’s a psychologist named Mark Leary who looked into some of that a few years ago, and what you do tend to see in terms of the school shooters, is a convergence of multiple risk factors. And they aren’t all the same risk factors in every case, but there are some similarities. In order to be a school shooter, you have to have access to guns. Usually the school shooters are people who feel that they’ve been picked on by a lot of other people at school, and sometimes they have

been; sometimes it's not so clear that they've been picked on, but they think they have been. There are very often, but not always, problems at home, in terms of lack of parental monitoring, or fairly severe disagreements between the parents and kids. In most of the cases, there is a fascination with violent entertainment media.

EIR: In your book, you say that, "the Department of Defense does not doubt the serious aggressive teaching abilities of video games for teaching skills." You cite a number of games—Rainbow 6, Full-Spectrum Warrior, First To Fight. Can you say something about that aspect?

Anderson: We've never actually seen the Department of Defense data. They *have* to have data on how effective these games are as teaching tools, for the lessons that they want troops to learn. Those data have to exist, but I don't know that the general public, or even researchers, can actually get access to that. But the fact that they're spending so much money on video games as training tools, really suggests that they believe that they are very effective. And they do claim that they teach a lot of skills that involve coordination between different units, or between different members of a unit, as they're attempting to carry out a mission.

So some of that is certainly appropriate, in a military context. But it's not clear to me, as a parent at least, how appropriate that is to be teaching children some of those skills, including the desensitization aspects, and the willingness to view physical aggression as a means of solving problems—that's not something I think we really want to teach a whole generation of citizens.

One of the differences is, that when you're training soldiers, one of the aspects of training is what you might think of as control, or rules of engagement: When do you actually use deadly force? Well, none of that is part of the video game by itself. You just blaze away. There's no real control involved there, with the exception of a few of the games—you can play them in such a way that you're supposed to minimize the civilian casualties as you're training to take out the terrorists or whatever. But, for most of these shooter games—there's no teaching of control or of real consequences of violent actions. And that makes them considerably less appropriate for use with children and adolescents than it does for training soldiers or police officers.

EIR: You said in the book that the Marine Corps created a game called "First To Fight 6," and it was sold commercially.

Anderson: Yes, the military has certainly contracted out to different companies to create games for them for use in training purposes, and part of the contract was that they could then market a version of those games to the public. And of course, the Army has been using their own game series, "America's Army," as a recruiting tool.

EIR: You mention in your book the problem of enforcement of industry self-rating systems: that 82% of kids below 17 can buy "M"-rated ["mature"] games.

Anderson: Right. It's clear that the industry rating systems have serious problems, which makes parents' tasks harder. From a public policy perspective, what most of us research types have tried to do, is to present what the science says, as well as what the science doesn't say, without endorsing one particular solution or another, at least, at the early stages of debate about what might be good solutions.

I would like to see serious policy debate about how we can make it easier for parents to take control of their children's media diet; and we also have to do a better job of convincing the public that there is a reason for them to make the effort to control. At the moment, an awful lot of parents aren't really sure that there are any kind of harmful effects. The media industries have been very good at confusing the public about what the science really says—much as the general public didn't really believe there were harmful effects of smoking tobacco products, years after the scientific community knew that there were. And to some extent, the news media haven't done a good job of presenting accurately what the research shows. And to some extent, researchers themselves are to blame, for not communicating more clearly.

I think two things have to happen. One is that parents have to understand that there really are harmful effects that do accumulate over time, and also, parents have to be provided with better tools to be able to control what their kids are exposed to.

EIR: You said that in 1998, 13.3% reported playing video games, and in 2005, it increased to 21.4% in a survey of 600 colleges. That's quite a big jump!

Anderson: Almost all kids in the U.S. now play video games, and for most of them, their favorite game does contain violence. That's that's true for girls as well as for boys, and that's a big shift from, say, ten years ago. And the number of hours that they play goes up, basically every year. And the amount of violence in the games goes up every year.

EIR: I went over to a friend's house last week, and I asked his son about the Counter-Strike game. And so he showed me how first you have to find who you can get on your computer and play with. And there are roughly 30, 40, to 60 people on each set who are playing this game, and we multiplied, just looking at this thing, and there were approximately a million people playing at the very moment that I happened to walk in. That's incredible!

Anderson: Yes. South Korea has set up over 40 treatment centers for what they are calling Internet addiction, to help deal with large numbers of people who are playing it so much that it's interfering with their daily lives. We'll be seeing that issue here, too.