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February 24, 2000

## Media Effects: Video Game Violence

In 1998, the US software industry sold \$6.3 billion worth of video games (see Unknown). Not bad for an industry that didn't exist 25 years ago! Yet despite its continued growth, all is not well in the video game industry. Recent youth violence in Littleton, Colorado; Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; and Conyers, Georgia have shocked the nation (see Malcolm). Understandably, grieving parents and sympathetic citizens are searching for a cause for this "outbreak" of youth violence. Obviously, "when children, the symbol of innocence, commit the severest of crimes, then something must be going wrong with society." (see Maker)

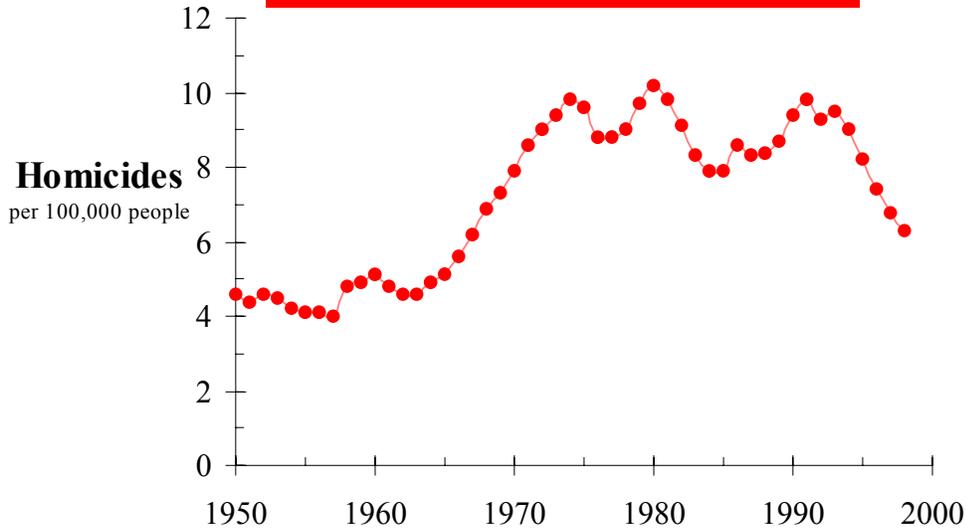
The problem is, no one is exactly sure what is wrong with society. However, there have been no shortage of potential candidates. Perhaps the "40,000 killings children will see on television and in the movies by the time they are age 18" has something to do with it (see Gordon)? Maybe weak or uninformed gun laws are to blame? How about irresponsible parents or the loss of family values? Are overcrowded classrooms or a lack of school counselors the critical factors? Maybe the Internet has corrupted our youth? Did hyper-violent video games cause this "rash" of student violence? Or is it a combination of all of these factors?

The problem in determining a cause(s) is further compounded by mixed experimental findings. Scott (1995) did not find a positive

relationship between video game violence and aggressive feelings among youth. In fact, there seemed to be a decrease in aggressive attitudes after playing violent games. These result seems to run counter to related studies concerned with the relationship between aggression and film violence. Bushman (1998) found a fairly convincing positive relationship between film violence and the "accessibility of violent constructs in viewers." In a separate study, Zillman (1999) concluded that "prolonged exposure to gratuitously violent film is capable (a) of escalating hostile behavior in provoked men and women, and (b) perhaps more importantly, of instigating such behavior in unprovoked men and women." Other studies seemed to find similar relationships. Yet, other authors have raised concerns about the validity of these findings. Freedman (1996) states that many studies "have used dubious measure of aggression" and have difficulty "distinguishing effects of violence from effects of interest and excitement" because "the violent films in [some] experiments are more arousing than the neutral films." All of this makes it very difficult for concerned citizens to draw any definite conclusions.

Additionally, crime statistics further muddle the search for cause and effect. Homicide data suggest that murders have been steadily decreasing during the last decade (see Figure 1). Furthermore, there hasn't really been any detectable "outbreak" of youth violence over the last few years (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1: US Homicide Rate**

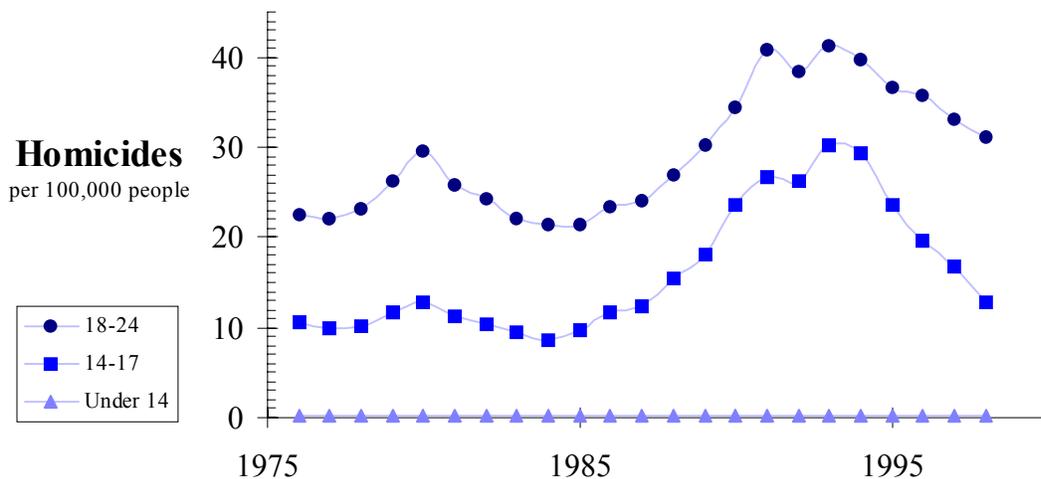


Data Courtesy of Bureau of Justice Statistics (see [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm))

Figure 1 shows that the homicide rate doubled between 1963 & 1973 (from 4.6 to 9.4 homicides per 100,000 residents). Why might this have occurred? It then oscillated from 8 to 10 homicides per 100,000 during the next 20 years. In 1994, the rate began to

drop fairly steadily. Today's homicide rate is the lowest it has been in 33 years. Yet, it is not clear whether the murder rate will continue to drop. Perhaps today's rate is just an exaggerated oscillation.

**Figure 2: US Homicide Rate Among Young Offenders (by Age Group)**



Data Courtesy of Bureau of Justice Statistics (see [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm))

Figure 2 shows that youth violence has also been decreasing. Has there really been a rash of youth violence lately? Maybe recent

events are just more sensational, and have therefore been getting more media attention.

The homicide data casts doubt on the notion that video games are causing violent behavior. For, if video games made users more likely to commit violent crimes (like murder), we would expect the homicide rate to have steadily increased as the number of violent video games on the market increased. Yet, this clearly has not happened (the homicide rate has been more-or-less constant or decreasing during the entire life span of the video game industry). While correlation is never sufficient to determine causation, the lack of any correlation between violent video games and youth homicide suggests that the two simply cannot be related.

And yet, this conclusion seems to go against common sense. For example, consider computer simulators. Pilots use simulators to learn to fly, doctors use simulators to learn to operate, drivers use simulators to learn to drive. Doesn't it make sense that video games, which are often nothing more than murder simulators, will teach our children how to kill? Or consider video game characters. They often use violence to solve their problems. Surely this is not something we want our children to emulate. And doesn't all this blood and gore eventually desensitize our youth to violence. If violence is no longer considered a deviant

act, won't they be more likely to become violent. These arguments seem compelling. "Can anyone still honestly doubt that violent and criminal images... incite aggressive behavior? Only those making mints of money purveying violence to the great American public even try to defend the practice." (see Callahan) It would be irresponsible for the industry to dismiss these concerns. The audience's (consumer's) emotional needs and fears simply must be addressed.

Ultimately, what does all of this mean for the video game industry and people who design software for that industry? It is hard to say with any certainty. A ratings system for violent video games has been a good start (see Keizer), but it is unlikely to entirely alleviate people's fears. Additionally, a little self-censorship may be in order. Just because a game developer has the first amendment right to put gratuitous violence in a game doesn't mean that it should be exercised. A little compassion, decency, and sympathy is not too much to ask from the gaming industry while society is trying to recover from the shock and sadness that has surrounded the recent rash of highly publicized youth violence. It is the moral thing to do...

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