

# Violent Video Games Incite Teen Violence

*L. Rowell Huesmann, Ph.D., of the University of Michigan, has reviewed more than 50 years of research on the effects of violent media on young people. His study was published in the Fall 2007 issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health, in an article entitled "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research."*



*Huesmann shows that violent video games are a major public health threat, and a leading contributor to violent behavior. In fact, of a list of correlations of each of ten major public health threats with the behavior which heightens each threat, only the correlation of smoking with lung cancer narrowly exceeds the correlation of violent media, especially video games, with violent behavior.*

*The study grabbed international media attention when published. Dr. Huesmann warns that video game units, which are now in 83% of American homes, have significant long-term effects. Under the heading, "Desensitization," he writes, "Repeated exposure to emotionally activating media or video games can lead to habituation of certain natural emotional reactions. This process is called 'desensitization.'" He continues, "the effects on stimulating long-term increases in violent behavior should be even greater for video games than for TV, movies, or Internet displays of violence."*

*Dr. Huesmann concludes, "The evidence ... is also compelling that children's exposure to violent electronic media, including video games, leads to long-term increases in their risk for behaving aggressively and violently..."*

*"One valid remaining question is whether the size of this effect is large enough that one should consider it to be a public health threat. The answer seems to be yes" (emphasis in original). The article is available at [www.jahonline.org/article/PIIS1054139X07003916/fulltext](http://www.jahonline.org/article/PIIS1054139X07003916/fulltext).*

*Don Phau interviewed Dr. Huesmann on Dec. 21, 2007.*

**EIR:** In your study on the effects of violent media, you single out video games. Do you consider video games more effective in provoking aggressiveness than other media?

**Huesmann:** Yes, there's the issue of scientific evidence versus theoretical beliefs. My theoretical belief, is that playing violent video games, compared with the same amount of time watching a violent movie, is more likely to cause a person to behave aggressively. But, that is still being investigated in the laboratory, so I can't state that with scientific certainty. What I can state with scientific certainty, is that either one will cause a person, more likely, to behave aggressively.

One of the difficulties is the amount of time being spent on video games. Seeing a violent movie can have a very strong impact on someone, just like playing a violent video game. But kids tend to play violent video games day in and day out, over and over again, and that probably increases their effect too.

**EIR:** I was surprised that you say eight- to ten-year-olds spent the most time on video games, and that it declines as they get older. I would think that the eight- to ten-year-olds are more affected by violence.

**Huesmann:** Yes, that's true.

**EIR:** There has been a rash of shootings that has ended in suicide by the shooter. You had the Virginia Tech killings, in which the shooter was an addicted video-game player; just today, in Colorado, the kids killing kids—the killers had been playing "Mortal Kombat." The fact is that many have ended in suicide. The founder of our magazine, Lyndon LaRouche, said that the phenomenon of suicide bombers in the Mideast has come to the United States. Do you see this as related to video games?

**Huesmann:** I haven't looked at that empirically, but I have some strong ideas. First, keep the Virginia Tech shooter separate, because I'm 99% certain that he was a paranoid schizophrenic, and that's a very unusual case. But there are now many cases, recent cases, where kids have behaved very violently and obviously have been influenced by violent video games, one way or the other. There have been cases where kids have apparently followed scripts of video games in shooting a policeman, for example. So I think those clearly have an effect.

As to why the kids commit suicide, I have a couple of speculations about that. First, for most kids who did that, it was about more than just playing video games. Video games increase the risk of aggressiveness and behaving violently for anyone, but the kids most likely to really act out, in a very serious violent way, almost always have some converging, other psychological factors. Now in the case of school shootings, one of those is, very frequently, being an outcast, having been rejected by peers, so one of the things they are trying to do is to get back—a revenge motive, modelled on video games. Part of being an outcast is having feelings of not wanting to live, because things are so bad. I see the suicide as a very important part of the whole picture of the person, but somewhat different than what the video game is stimulating.

**EIR:** At the beginning of your study you say, "The recent increase in the use of mobile phones, text messaging, e-mail, and chat rooms by our youth have opened new venues for social interaction in which aggression can occur and youth can be victimized."

There have been a number of cases where these shootings have come about after these kids have been online with MySpace, Facebook, and chat rooms. There has been coordination, such as in Finland, where the kid who shot eight people was communicating with another kid in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia police arrested him and found a whole stockpile of armaments in his home. Have you looked at how these chat rooms, MySpace, Facebook, and the Internet, are contributing to the violence?

**Huesmann:** They are, but no differently than peers would contribute. The real difference is that it is now so much easier to find people all around the world, when you're on the Internet. You can meet many more people than you can meet in your neighborhood. But it would frequently be the case that a youth who was thinking about doing one of these things, had a friend in his neighborhood who provided support and would say, "Yeah, they deserve to die," and so on. I think the main thing the Internet has done, as I said in the paper, is that anybody now, no matter where a child is living, can quickly be transported into a bad neighborhood, meeting all sorts of bad peers. They don't have to go out and walk to one, to get the kind of feedback that will reinforce their bad behavior.

## Desensitization to Violence

**EIR:** You have a section in your study on "desensitization." How do you see video games doing that?

**Huesmann:** I think this is really important. It's like what happens to soldiers when they're in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Vietnam, when they're in continuous combat, with people dying around them. To survive, they have to become—it's part of the automatic way the nervous system works: The nervous system stops responding negatively, emotionally, to blood and gore, and you become numb to that. That makes it easier to survive psychologically, but it also makes it much easier for you to become very brutal and aggressive and violent, because violence and aggression no longer have the negative emotional connotation. Studies have shown that if you expose people to violent films continuously, or violent video games continuously, first they react very emotionally to the violence, and then they stop reacting over a period of time. It is bound to make it easier for them if they are provoked; it makes them mad and they behave aggressively, because they become desensitized to that, emotionally.

**EIR:** One would think that in video games, because you are actually involved in playing them, that you would become even more desensitized than watching television or a movie, because you are not just sitting there, passively,

watching a television.

**Huesmann:** Yes. My colleague Brad Bushman and I have an hypothesis, and we're trying to study it. He's been working on emotional desensitization and video games. It's easier to show that it occurs, but it is a little more difficult to determine *how* it occurs, more than it would occur from watching a very violent, bloody, gory, movie.

**EIR:** Have you read David Grossman's book?<sup>1</sup>

**Huesmann:** Yes.

**EIR:** Grossman says these point-and-shoot video games are "murder simulators." From his work training military sharpshooters, he can see that some of these school shooters shoot almost professionally, very quickly.

**Huesmann:** Yes, a very good example of that is a kid in Alabama, a couple of years ago, who had been playing "Grand Theft Auto" or another shooting game, and the police arrested him for delinquency. He really mimicked a script out of the game: He grabbed a policeman's gun, took a two-handed stance, and shot several policemen right in the middle of the forehead, each one, a perfect shot. It's hard to believe that he could have done that, except for all the practice he had on a shooting game.

**EIR:** Grossman has said that when you shoot someone, it's normal to shoot them several times to make sure they're dead, but the fact that these kids shoot quickly, going from one victim to another, shows you that they think they're just playing video games.

**Huesmann:** I think we know two things. We know that video games teach specific behavioral scripts: how to shoot. They can teach how to land an aircraft, but they can also teach how to shoot—the muscle movements, the cognitive decisions that you need to make. And we know that they also emotionally desensitize, which makes it easier to shoot, because you don't have the negative emotional feelings that would arise in any of us, if we started to point a gun at another human, and thought about the results of that.

## What Can Be Done To Curb Video Violence?

**EIR:** I had mentioned to you that the Society of German Psychotherapists voted last month to call for a ban on violent video games.<sup>2</sup> Have you raised this with your colleagues? Are you thinking that we have to do something more than just put out reports?

**Huesmann:** Well, yes. There has been a big movement in this country to ban the sale of violent video games to minors;

for example, any game rated M should be illegal to sell to a minor. Something like 15 to 16 states have attempted to pass laws, and do you know what's happened every time a state has passed a law?

The Electronic Software Association files a lawsuit which, at least at the lowest level of the courts, results in an injunction against the law. So most states think this is hopeless, and it's going to cost a fortune, and they don't pursue it. That's what happened in Michigan. Michigan passed such a law, and they really didn't pursue fighting the lawsuit at all, because it was going to cost too much money. It's not clear to me why one couldn't win such a lawsuit. If you think about, for example, restrictions against pornography. It is generally accepted legally, that you have restrictions against showing pornography to kids, against kids buying pornography. Why not buying violence? What's the difference?

It comes down to the political process and the amount of money involved. There's a huge amount of money in electronic games, and the people who sell them are very panicked. They're willing to spend a lot of money on high-priced lawyers to fight such a law. I'm not a lawyer, but it seems to me, with sufficient money, one could certainly fight one of those lawsuits successfully.

**EIR:** If the medical community and psychotherapy community says this is dangerous for children and raise this strongly—

**Huesmann:** But Don, years ago the American Academy of Pediatrics said the same thing as the German Society of Psychotherapists. Not recently, but a long time ago. The American Psychology Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Medical Association, they all said those things. It hasn't really had much effect.

**EIR:** We have to bring forward, in the minds of the people in the country, what Dave Grossman said: These are "murder simulators."

## Video-Game Violence Turns Children Into Killers

Schiller Institute founder Helga Zepp-LaRouche's speech to a Feb. 20, 2000 conference, titled "The Mark of the Beast," is available in video format (1 hour and 40 minutes).

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1. Lt. Col. David Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call To Action Against TV, Movie & Video Game Violence* (New York: Crown Books, 1999).

2. See "German Psychotherapists: 'No Killer Video Games for Christmas!'" *EIR*, Dec. 14, 2007.