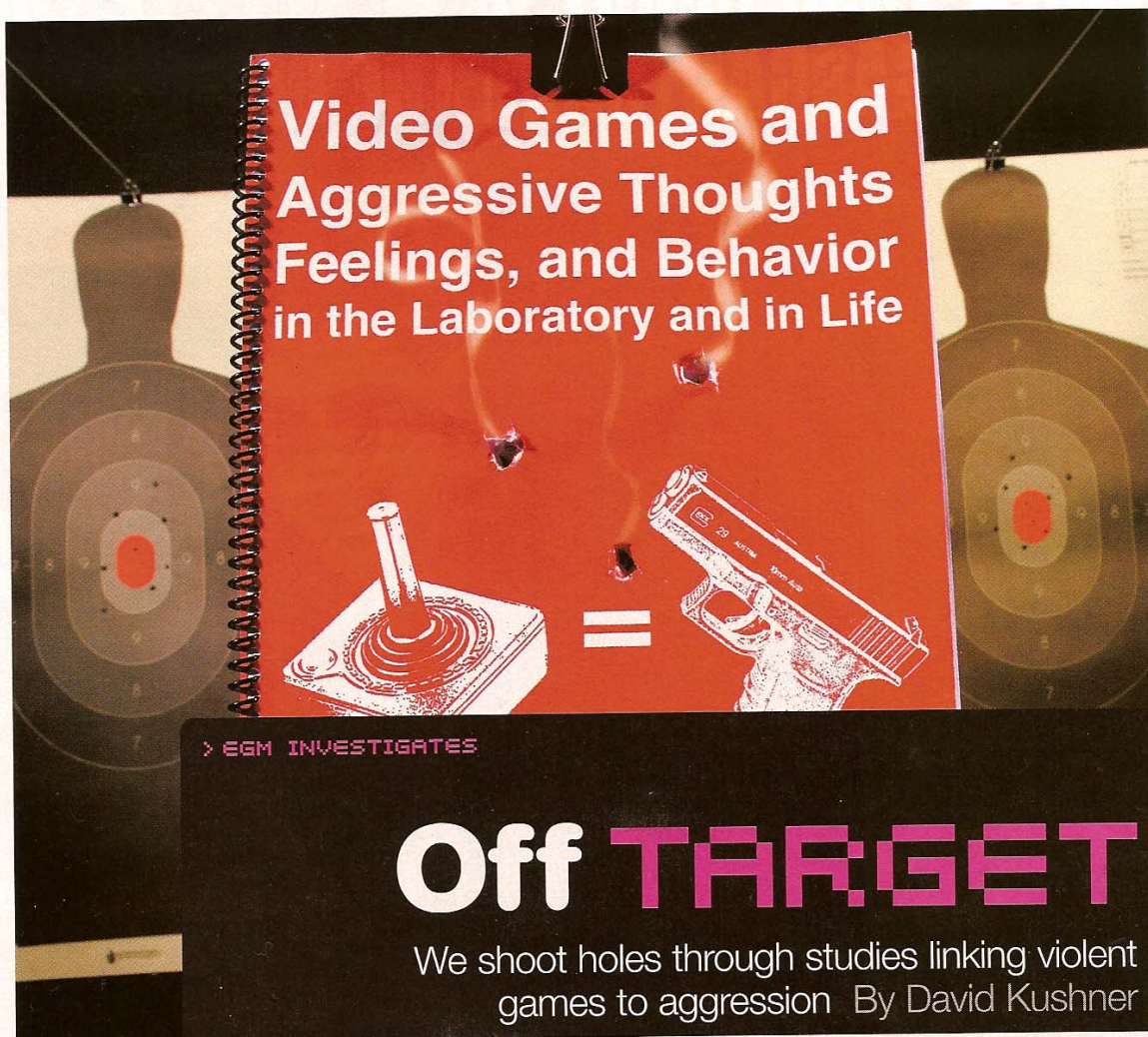


PRESS START

➤ features, previews, japanese man-slaves, and other stuff



Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life

EGM INVESTIGATES

Off TARGET

We shoot holes through studies linking violent games to aggression By David Kushner

Photography by R. Dodson/STMicroelectronics, Inc.

Read it and weep: We pay particular scrutiny to one study in this article: 2000's "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life." Read it yourself on the American Psychological Association's website (www.apa.org).

WE CAN ASSUME TWO THINGS about you if you're reading this magazine: You don't think playing violent videogames can make someone go aggro in real life, and you haven't authored any studies linking violent games to violent behavior. But the people who *do believe* and *have authored* such studies have gotten a lot of play lately in the mainstream media—and they're putting the future of your favorite pastime at risk.

Following the April 16 Virginia Tech shootings, the *Washington Post* reported online that the killer had a history of playing the PC squad-based

multiplayer shooter *Counter-Strike*. By the time the paper took down the reference from its website the next day (due, the writer later said, to a necessary update), it was too late. Ubiquitous antigame crusader Jack Thompson raised the specter on CNN. Dr. Phil played the blame game on *Larry King Live*. "The mass murderers of tomorrow are the children of today that are being programmed with this massive violence overdose," he said.

Then on April 26, the Federal Communications Commission weighed in with its report, three years in the making, on the impact

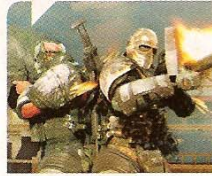
of media violence (particularly television violence) on kids. It suggests that Congress can step in to protect kids from harm by regulating violence on TV without violating the First Amendment. The thought of the Feds legislating videogames strikes many as dangerous. The American Civil Liberties Union calls it "political pandering." Howard Stern calls Dr. Phil an a-hole. Once again, the debate that has run from Columbine to Blacksburg continues to rage. And when it does, each side looks to the same place to buttress their arguments: scientific research on the effects of violent vid-

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Preview:
Lucky
number XIII



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Uncle Sam
wants two



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Preview:
Rock and
drum roll

eogames. But with sensational media and political distortion in the way, getting to the truth of the research is the trickiest game of all.

Anger management

At the end of the day, scientists—including those behind the studies cited in the FCC report—still aren't sure if playing violent games leads to real-life violence at all. "The research doesn't support the notion that [playing violent games] leads to aggression," says Dr. Jonathan Freedman, a psychologist from the University of Toronto. "It doesn't even deal with the question of whether it leads to criminal violent behavior or real violence. At most, it addresses the question of whether it leads to aggression, which I don't think it does."

One of the problems with the studies is how the term "aggression" is defined. "The missing element is that most of these studies, if you look at them just a little bit critically, don't really measure what a lot of people purport they're measuring, and people don't understand how they fall short," says sociologist Dr. Karen Sternheimer of the University of Southern California and author of *Kids These Days: Facts and Fictions About Today's Youth*. While the general public equates aggression with violent behavior, actual violent behavior has never been measured—for obvious reasons. "We can't have people assault, rape, or murder someone" in the lab, says Dr. Brad Bushman, a University of Michigan psychologist who studies the effects of media violence. Instead, researchers are left to measure innocuous examples of so-called aggressive behavior—behavior that doesn't remotely resemble criminally violent activity. This has ranged from having subjects punch an inflatable Bozo doll to, more commonly, blast opponents with a loud noise.

Even Dr. Karen Dill, who with Dr. Craig Anderson coauthored one of the most-cited studies—2000's "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life"—admits "hearing the noise is not harmful." Nevertheless, the report opens with an allusion to Columbine and purports that "one possible contributing

factor is violent games." To many, that's an egregious leap. "Pressing a button that delivers a short burst of loud noise is pretty remote from real aggression," Freedman notes.

Old data

But it's not just the measures of aggression that are questionable—it's the means through which participant reactions are elicited in the first place. Reading the fine print in the Dill and Anderson study, for example, reveals that the researchers used outdated, mismatched games and required an absurdly brief amount of actual playtime from the subjects. The researchers compared the response to people playing two games released in the early 1990s: *Wolfenstein 3D*, the first first-person shooter, and the puzzle adventure *Myst*. The disparity between the game styles raises questions about the results. Though the goal of the study is to explore the effect of violent games on aggression, a shooter is sure to elicit more aggressive behavior than a puzzle game. It's like comparing apples to hand grenades. Wouldn't it have been better to compare two action games—one with violence and one without?

The study required 32 undergrads to play the games for 15 minutes each.

They were then given the opportunity to send a noise blast to an opponent—often just a computer proxy—after they finished the game. "You can't study people for 20 minutes and know what's going to happen to people in society 10 years later," says Dr. Dmitri Williams of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Williams recently authored one of the first long-term studies, in which he observed players of the online PC role-playing-game *Asheron's Call* for more than 56 hours in a period of a month. His results? "I found no evidence of increased aggression or aggressive attitudes," he says.

Dr. Patrick Markey, a psychology professor at Villanova University, decided to take another perspective: studying what role a person's anger level *before* playing a game has on the aggressive behavior coming out. And Markey, unlike some of his colleagues, actually uses games played in the last decade. The 167 students who participated played games such as *Doom 3* and *Project Gotham Racing*. His conclusion: The people who had previously filled out questionnaires reflecting an even-keel personality were less aggro after playing a violent game. Those who had a more aggressive disposition were more susceptible

➤ **Most of these studies...don't really measure what a lot of people purport they're measuring.**

—Sociologist Dr. Karen Sternheimer



■ Aside from being trailblazers in their respective genres, *Wolfenstein 3D* (left) and *Myst* played a major role in a 2000 study on aggression. Which begs the question: When's the last time these researchers visited a game store?

to these heightened emotions.

While some could conclude in broad strokes that games cause aggression, the nuances tell another story, Markey notes. "The general research shows there is an effect of violent games on aggression, but what gets lost is [that] this effect isn't that big," he says. And, of course, videogames aren't the only pastimes that could lead to aggression: dodgeball, paintball, and a bad beat in Texas Hold 'Em can heighten arousal, too. Dr. Vincent Mathews, a radiologist at Indiana University who has studied the brain's response to violent videogames, suggests that the effects of these other activities would be comparable. "I would think that paintball or dodgeball would show similar results," he says. But no one is calling for these games to be banned.

Popular science

Critics of violent games cite the studies as further proof that media violence leads to murder. As Thompson

wrote in March 2007, "The American Psychological Association [APA] in August 2005 found a clear causal link between violent games and teen aggression." But as political watchdog site GamePolitics.com astutely reported, Dr. Elizabeth Carll, who co-chaired the study, wanted to make clear that "the resolution did not state that there was a direct causal link to an increase in teen violence as a result of playing videogames. Rather, [it stated] an increase in aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and a decrease in helpful behavior as a result of playing violent videogames."

If no one has said there's a causal link between games and real-life violence, why does it keep making

headlines, and why do these studies get cited so much? "The [American Psychological Association] is a political organization...and they do what is politically expedient like any other group," says Dr. Christopher J. Ferguson of Texas A&M International University's Department of Behavioral, Applied Sciences and Criminal Justice. Ferguson recently released a study named, with typically academic wordiness, "Evidence for publication bias in videogame violence effects literature: A meta-analytic review." In it, he finds what he calls "a systematic bias for hot-button issues" that results in overstatements and misleading results.

The authors of the reports bristle when their research is challenged. Dill, after agreeing to be interviewed for

➤ If this was affecting all kids in a bad way, we'd see something.

—Harvard Medical School Professor Dr. Cheryl Olson

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTING

We put real guns in pro gamers' hands to see if all that virtual target practice helps them shoot straight

With the mainstream media pointing out the gaming habits of any nut who picks up a gun and wreaks tragedy, we couldn't resist conducting an unscientific experiment: To see if the virtual marksmanship of first-person shooter pros translates to outside-the-game gunplay. So we enlisted Amber Dalton and her twin, Amy Brady, cofounders of the famous lady-gamers group the PMS Clan (pmsclan.com). Both are steely-eyed tournament pros, with Dalton serving on top *Halo 2* and *Gears of War* teams and Brady competing in *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* tournaments as one of Ubisoft's Fraggdolls. Of the two, only Brady has fired a real gun once before.

We sent the duo to a Texas shooting range armed with three custom *Halo* Spartan targets each and these rules: You only get six shots per target, you must use a semiautomatic pistol (common to nearly every game arsenal), and you can't request shooting instruction beyond safety and weapon-operation pointers. "I was very nervous at first," says Dalton about picking up her first real gun, "not only from holding it but also trying to learn everything—how to load it, how to use it safely. It's humbling to know that one mess-up could have dangerous consequences."

With 9 mm pistols in hand, the ladies got down to business—and some good ol' sibling rivalry. They unloaded their first six shots at their targets from 15 feet away, aiming for the chest. All of Dalton's bullets perforated the Spartan's torso, but only one hits dead center—not bad for her first

time pulling a real trigger. Brady missed with every shot but one, which hit dead center. "I kicked my sister's ass," Dalton says. Round two played out with similar results. Dalton, aiming for the Spartan's noggin, scored two head shots and a body shot. None of Brady's six bullets struck home. For the third and final target, the ladies aimed for the green guy's "sensitive area"—a small below-the-belt zone we deemed was worth 100 points. Neither scored a groin shot, although Dalton got two thigh hits (Brady missed entirely). "Even missing the ball shot, I feel like a winner," Dalton says. "Not only did I win the rounds—I also managed to overcome a little bit of my fear regarding real guns."

Triumph over your twin is well and good, but did this seemingly natural marksman chalk up her success to all her pro gaming? "I might have thought that if not for the fact [of my sister's performance]," says Dalton. "She's equally experienced with first-person shooters and actually shot a real gun before." She adds that while playing games might help with the basic points of lining up a target and pulling the trigger, "it doesn't help with critical areas such as proper stance, holding the gun, and actually having to use [the pistol's sights]. In games, it's typically just a circle. Plus, you don't learn how to load a gun or use the safety. Where's the automatic reload? It's much easier in *Halo*."

Download your own *Halo* Spartan shooting-range target at EGM.1UP.com.



Range rovers: Twin pros Dalton and Brady shoot the s***.





Playing Politics By Hal Halpin

The shooting at Virginia Tech again brings to the forefront the violence-in-videogames debate. The first responders in the media were infamous anti-games attorney Jack Thompson and the always-opinionated Dr. Phil, both pontificating about how games are murder simulators, how they desensitize us from violence and clearly are to blame for this tragedy. It reminds me very much of Columbine back during the early days of the last association I ran (a retail trade organization). The mass media was looking for someone to blame. They wanted causality. What thing could drive someone to commit these acts? Back then, the answer slowly became games, unveiling itself over the course of the ensuing weeks and months despite many a responsive and naturally defensive interview by trade association representatives, myself included, at the time.

Now, we could discuss how games are this generation's rock 'n' roll, comic books, or cable television. We could talk about how there have been no long-term studies that prove playing violent games leads to violent behavior. Or we could handily pick apart their arguments citing our best single resource: the truth. The reality is that nothing will change this paradigm until and unless we affect that change ourselves. Complaining about misrepresentation over the past 10 years or so has proven an ineffective strategy. The answer: change the game.

In politics, as in life, the rules are ever-changing. By channeling our collective voices, holding up examples of who we are and what we're about, and halting the onslaught of false and defamatory definitions about who gamers are, we can, over time, reverse this problem and win the game. The one thing we must stop doing is playing by their rules. Something has to give. We can't continue to allow "them" to state perverted lies as the truth because if there's no one there to counter the point, it becomes what people believe to be the truth.



Hal Halpin is founder of the Electronic Consumers Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to watchdog gaming legislation. Join its cause at www.theeca.com.



■ The *Doom* series seems forever entwined in the game-violence debate, despite a study that failed to connect it to aggression.

this story, later e-mailed to request that her interview not be used because of what she perceived to be an effort to "push the tired 'party line' that the research is wrong." Her colleague, Anderson, declined entirely, saying an interview would be "pointless."

But it's not just their research that's being challenged—it's the manner in which the findings are presented. "From the present body of literature, there's nothing that supports a relationship between violent videogame playing and aggression—not correlational or causal," Ferguson says. "The moral of the story is that scientists ought to be using much more measured tones in discussing what has become a political issue rather than giving in to the urge to engage in hyperbole." In other words, violent games sell—not to kids, but to the general public at large. Like Elvis in the 50s, or *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1980s, videogames are still viewed as the dangerous scourge of youth culture. In the face of awful, inexplicable tragedies, media violence is an easy target.

Truth be told

What's lost to the game-violence critics and public is a dose of reality, not only about the truth of the results but the context. "I don't think they understand the way the media are used in daily life enough," Williams says of the researchers. "They tend to focus more on lab research and ignore long-term research. People in the psychology community are less likely to pay attention to the social context of media use." But others are. The British Board of Film Classification conducted a survey that found that "the violence helps make the play exhilaratingly out of reach of ordinary life.... Gamers seem not to lose awareness that they are playing a game and do not mistake the game for real life."

And considered in light of recent youth crime statistics, all the noise blasts don't pass the muster of common sense. In 2005, for example, just 12 percent of the videogames sold were violent enough to bear an M-rating by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, the industry's voluntary ratings group. At the same time, youth crime is dropping precipitously. The number of kids under 17 who committed murder fell 65 percent between 1993 and 2004. "If this was affecting all kids in a bad way we'd see something," argues Dr. Cheryl Olson, professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School's Center for Mental Health and Media.

Even the surgeon general's youth-violence report, which the FCC cites in its recent findings, couldn't find a convincing link. "Taken together, findings to date suggest that media violence has a relatively small impact on violence," the surgeon general reported. And the specific inferences about game violence were even less swaying. "The overall effect size for both randomized and correlational studies was small for physical aggression and moderate for aggressive thinking....," the surgeon general found. "The impact of videogames on violent behavior has yet to be determined."

So what are we left with? A possible link between violent media and loosely defined "aggressive behavior" (noise blasts, clown-doll punching, and so on) but no evidence that playing violent games actually causes violent—let alone criminal—actions in real life. "It's time to move beyond blanket condemnations and frightening anecdotes and focus on developing targeted educational and policy interventions based on solid data," Olson suggested. "As with the entertainment of earlier generations, we may look back on today's games with nostalgia, and our grandchildren may wonder what the fuss was about."

➤ Scientists ought to be using more measured tones in discussing...a political issue.

—Texas A&M International University's Dr. Christopher J. Ferguson