

Testimony of

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American Psychological Association

Before the

Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights

On

"What's in a Game? State Regulation of Violent Video Games and the First Amendment"

March 29, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for initiating this important hearing on violence in videogames. I am Dr. Elizabeth Carll, the chair of the Interactive Media Committee of the Media Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association (APA). The effects of media violence on children has been a career long interest with the adoption of the APA Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media being one of the initiatives when I served as the president of the Media Division of APA. I am also a psychologist in private practice in Long Island, New York, and have worked with children, teens, and families for more than 25 years. The APA is pleased to participate in today's hearing and thanks Sen. Brownback for his important work on issues surrounding media and children.

The Interactive Media Committee was formed to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations of the Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media, adopted by APA in August 2005, which I will be discussing. APA's Media Psychology Division spearheaded the adoption of the APA Resolution with the recognition that there is often a disconnect between research, legislation and implementation of useful recommendations at the community level.

It may be of interest for the Committee to be aware that, as a result of the APA Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media, a formal dialogue with the Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB) has begun to discuss ways in which the current ratings system may be improved.

It is also important to emphasize that electronic media plays an important role in the emotional development, social behavior and intellectual functioning of children and youth. There are many video games that are very helpful for children to facilitate medical treatment, increase learning, and promote pro-social behavior. However, there are also video games that include aggression, violence and sexualized violence that may have a negative impact on children. It is this group of video games that I will be discussing today.

Many of the issues that I will be discussing today were of concern when I first testified at the 1999 New York State legislature's hearings on the effects of violence in interactive media on children and discussed the unique characteristics of video games. However, what has changed since that time has been the rapid growth in the body of research that continues to point to the detrimental effects of violence in video games and interactive media on children, as well as the increasing public concern regarding this issue.

What are the unique characteristics of video games and interactive media vs. TV and film?

More than four decades of research have revealed that TV violence has a strong influence on the aggressive behavior of children and youth. Exposure to violent media increases feelings of hostility, thoughts about aggression, suspicions about the motives of others and demonstrates violence as a method to deal with conflict.

However, video games and interactive media have certain qualities that are distinct from passive media, (i.e., TV and film). For instance, video games:

- ? Require active participation enabling rehearsal and practice of violent acts, which enhances learning;

- ? Include frequent repetition of acts of violence as part of winning the game, which enhances learning;

- ? Reward game players for simulated acts of violence, which enhances learning. Often the winner of the game is the one who kills and destroys the most; and,

- ? Enables the identification of the participant with a violent character while playing video games, which enhances learning.

Therefore, this practice, repetition, identification with a violent character and being rewarded for numerous acts of violence may intensify learning of violence. With the development of more sophisticated interactive media, the implications for violent content are of further concern. This is due to the intensification of more realistic experiences, which may be even more conducive to increasing aggressive behavior as compared to passively watching violence on TV and in films.

What are the effects of exposure of children to violence in video games?

A comprehensive analysis of violence in interactive video game research suggests exposure increases aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and decreases helpful behavior.

Studies further suggest that sexualized violence in the media has been linked to increases in violence towards women, the acceptance of rape myth and anti-women attitudes.

Research also suggests that the most popular video games contain aggressive and violent content. Girls and women, boys and men, and minorities are depicted in exaggerated stereotypical ways. Sexual aggression against women, including assault, rape, and murder, is depicted as humorous and is glamorized and rewarded.

What are some of the concerns regarding the current rating system for video games?

Efforts to improve the rating system for video games and interactive media would be a first step in providing additional helpful information as to the content of video games. Currently, the labels are very general and more content specificity is needed for parents to make more informed decisions about the video games their children play. For example, are there only a few depictions of violence or is it a main theme? What types of violence are depicted - sports violence, war violence, sexual violence (such as rape and murder) or random thrill kill violence? Is violence linked with negative social consequences or rewarded? The scientific community should be involved in the development of a more accurate rating system to better inform parents and consumers.

## Recommendations from the APA Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media

? Advocate for funding to support research on the effects of violence in video games and interactive media on children, adolescents, and young adults. APA supports the Children and Media Research Advancement Act (CAMRA) to amend the Public Health Service Act to authorize funding to establish a program on children and the media within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to study the role and impact of electronic media in the development of children.

? Teach media literacy to children so they will have the ability to critically evaluate interactive media. This needs to involve educating teachers, parents and caregivers.

? Encourage the entertainment industry to link violent behaviors with negative social consequences. Showing violence without realistic consequences teaches children that violence is an effective means of resolving conflict. Whereas, seeing pain and suffering as a consequence can inhibit aggressive behavior.

? Develop and disseminate a content-based rating system that more accurately reflects the content of video games and interactive media and encourages the distribution and use of the rating system by the industry, parents, caregivers and educational organizations.

The complete text of the APA Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media is available at [http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/violence\\_in\\_videogames\\_interactive\\_media.pdf](http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/violence_in_videogames_interactive_media.pdf) and is included as an attachment to my statement.

I would like to thank the Committee for their interest in this important issue and Senator Brownback for his continued leadership in this area.

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American Psychological Association  
Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media

WHEREAS decades of social science research reveals the strong influence of televised violence on the aggressive behavior of children and youth (APA Task Force On Television and Society; 1992 Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972); and

WHEREAS psychological research reveals that the electronic media play an important role in the development of attitude, emotion, social behavior and intellectual functioning of children and youth (APA Task Force On Television and Society, 1992; Funk, J. B., et al. 2002; Singer, D. G. & Singer, J. L. 2005; Singer, D. G. & Singer, J. L. 2001); and

WHEREAS there appears to be evidence that exposure to violent media increases feelings of hostility, thoughts about aggression, suspicions about the motives of others, and demonstrates violence as a method to deal with potential conflict situations (Anderson, C.A., 2000; Anderson, C.A., Carnagey, N. L., Flanagan, M., Benjamin, A. J., Eubanks, J., Valentine, J. C., 2004; Gentile, D. A., Lynch, P. J., Linder, J. R., & Walsh, D. A., 2004; Huesmann, L. R., Moise, J., Podolski, C. P., & Eron, L. D., 2003; Singer, D. & Singer, J., 2001); and

WHEREAS perpetrators go unpunished in 73% of all violent scenes, and therefore teach that violence is an effective means of resolving conflict. Only 16 % of all programs portrayed negative psychological or financial effects, yet such visual depictions of pain and suffering can actually inhibit aggressive behavior in viewers (National Television Violence Study, 1996); and

WHEREAS comprehensive analysis of violent interactive video game research suggests such exposure a.) increases aggressive behavior, b.) increases aggressive thoughts, c.) increases angry feelings, d.) decreases helpful behavior, and, e.) increases physiological arousal (Anderson, C.A., 2002b; Anderson, C.A., Carnagey, N. L., Flanagan, M.,

Benjamin, A. J., Eubanks, J., Valentine, J. C., 2004; Anderson, C.A., & Dill, K. E., 2000; Bushman, B.J., & Anderson, C.A., 2002; Gentile, D. A., Lynch, P. J., Linder, J. R., & Walsh, D. A., 2004); and

WHEREAS studies further suggest that sexualized violence in the media has been linked to increases in violence towards women, rape myth acceptance and anti-women attitudes. Research on interactive video games suggests that the most popular video games contain aggressive and violent content; depict women and girls, men and boys, and minorities in exaggerated stereotypical ways; and reward, glamorize and depict as humorous sexualized aggression against women, including assault, rape and murder (Dietz, T. L., 1998; Dill, K. E., & Dill, J. C., 2004; Dill, K. E., Gentile, D. A., Richter, W. A., & Dill, J.C., in press; Mulac, A., Jansma, L. L., & Linz, D. G., 2002; Walsh, D., Gentile, D. A., VanOverbeke, M., & Chasco, E., 2002); and

WHEREAS the characteristics of violence in interactive video games appear to have similar detrimental effects as viewing television violence; however based upon learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Berkowitz, 1993), the practice, repetition, and rewards for acts of violence may be more conducive to increasing aggressive behavior among children and youth than passively watching violence on TV and in films (Carll, E. K., 1999a). With the development of more sophisticated interactive media, such as virtual reality, the implications for violent content are of further concern, due to the intensification of more realistic experiences, and may also be more conducive to increasing aggressive behavior than passively watching violence on TV and in films (Calvert, S. L., Jordan, A. B., Cocking, R. R. (Ed.) 2002; Carll, E. K., 2003; Turkle, S., 2002); and

WHEREAS studies further suggest that videogames influence the learning processes in many ways more than in passively observing TV: a.) requiring identification of the participant with a violent character while playing video games, b.) actively participating increases learning, c.) rehearsing entire behavioral sequences rather than only a part of the sequence, facilitates learning, and d.) repetition increases learning (Anderson, C.A., 2002b; Anderson, C.A., Carnagey, N. L., Flanagan, M., Benjamin, A. J., Eubanks, J., Valentine, J. C., 2004; Anderson, C.A. & Dill, K. E., 2000); and

WHEREAS the data dealing with media literacy curricula demonstrate that when children are taught how to view television critically, there is a reduction of TV viewing in general, and a clearer understanding of the messages conveyed by the medium. Studies on media literacy demonstrate when children are taught how to view television critically, children can feel less frightened and sad after discussions about the medium, can learn to differentiate between fantasy and reality, and can identify less with aggressive characters on TV, and better understand commercial messages (Brown, 2001; Hobbs, R. & Frost, R., 2003; Hortin, J.A., 1982; Komaya, M., 2003; Rosenkoetter, L.J., Rosenkoetter, S.E., Ozretich, R.A., & Acock, A.C., 2004; Singer & Singer, 1998; Singer & Singer, 1994)

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that APA advocate for the reduction of all violence in videogames and interactive media marketed to children and youth.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA publicize information about research relating to violence in video games and interactive media on children and youth in the Association's publications and communications to the public.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA encourage academic, developmental, family, and media psychologists to teach media literacy that meets high standards of effectiveness to children, teachers, parents and caregivers to promote ability to critically evaluate interactive media and make more informed choices.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA advocate for funding to support basic and applied research, including special attention to the role of social learning, sexism, negative depiction of minorities, and gender on the effects of violence in video games and interactive media on children, adolescents, and young adults.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA engage those responsible for developing violent video games and interactive media in addressing the issue that playing violent video games may increase aggressive thoughts and aggressive behaviors in children, youth, and young adults and that these effects may be greater than the well documented effects of exposure to violent television and movies.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA recommend to the entertainment industry that the depiction of the consequences of violent behavior be associated with negative social consequences.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA (a) advocate for the development and dissemination of a content based rating system that accurately reflects the content of video games and interactive media, and (b) encourage the distribution and use of the rating system by the industry, the public, parents, caregivers and educational organizations.

#### LIST OF RELEVANT RESOURCES

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