

# Could a video game promote children's understanding of war and aggression?

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By: [Parenting Desk](#) | New Delhi |  
March 5, 2020 11:15:59 am



Playing video games do have some salutary effects on children's cognitive and learning processes. Some research has shown that playing action-based video games improve spatial ability especially around visual attention, identifying contrasts, peripheral attention skills, multiple object tracking. (Source: Getty/Thinkstock)

By *Vishnu Karthik*

The use of video games has rapidly increased over the last several years. Video games are not just played by teenagers but also by young teens and adults. Nearly 88 per cent of children between ages eight to 18 have played a video game (Gentile as cited in Blumberg & Altschuler, 2011) and the average age of a gamer is 35 years old (ESA as cited in Gentile, 2011). The complexities of video games have also increased across technology platforms, multi-player networks and sophistication of the game.

Today, video gaming is a fast growing industry with over 21 billion-dollar revenues in 2008 and growing at an annual rate of over 19 per cent (Gentile, 2011). The large popularity is due to its ability to engage and provide an immersive experience to the player. Some of the reasons are that video games provide adaptable optimum challenge that can vary based on the expertise of the player, thus providing the right mix of mastery and challenge to the player. Given its increased usage and influence, video games are in the center of a debate over its benefits and harmful effects. The more important question is, given the increased nature of violence and aggression in video games, does it increase the understanding of war and aggression among children?

Before we debate on the benefits and harmful effects of a video game, it is important to define what it means and the specific parameters to assess it. There is no simple definition to define a video game. A simple and rustic 'Pacman' game of the 1970s to today's complex War of World Craft played in a multi-player environment, all fall under the generic definition of a video game. They not only include strategic thinking games like SIMS but also violent and bloody games like Grand Auto Theft and God of War. Thus, rather than branding a video game good or bad, it is imperative to assess them individually on the following parameters: "amount of play, content of play, context of game, structure of game and the mechanics of game play" (Gentile, 2011).

Playing video games do have some salutary effects on children's cognitive and learning processes. Some research has shown that playing action-based video games improve spatial ability especially around visual attention, identifying contrasts, peripheral attention skills, multiple object tracking (Bavelier et al. 2011). Across age groups, sustained exposure to certain mental rotation games like Tetris have shown enhanced performance on standardized spatial ability tests (Blumberg & Altschuler, 2011). Further, such games have shown to reduce the gender differences in mental rotation and spatial skills (Blumberg & Altschuler, 2011).



It is not to suggest that violent video games will create violent people, but if the game's content and context is to be on the lookout for enemies, the players develop a "hostile attribution bias" in their everyday lives. (Source: Getty/Thinkstock)

Certain video games also have an impact on the player's behaviours. In a study where children were asked to play 30 minutes of Mario (a game which involves cleaning up pollution and graffiti), they were found to be more likely to help others one week after playing the game (Rose, class slides, 2011). Games like 'The World of Warcraft' also requires players to partner and collaborate with other players encourage collaboration and networking among team players (Gentile, 2011).

That said, there some observable negative impacts due to video games. The amount of video game play in the initial school years does negative predict school performance in later years (Gentile, 2011). Although it is not conclusive if video games per se impact grades and school performance, the displacement of time spent on video games as against the time spent on other school tasks does impact school performance. Other health issues like obesity, and "Nintendinitis" have been linked to the time spent on playing video games. Distribution of playtime also seems to have an impact in video game aftereffects. In a study of children playing violent action games, children who split their time into more regular and frequent intervals tend to be more aggressive than children who distributed their playtime less (Gentile, 2011).

The context and content of the video game does have an impact on the player's future behavior. Research has indicated that playing violent video games does increase "aggressive cognitions, aggressive behaviors and aggressive feelings" (Anderson as cited in Gentile, 2011). It is not to suggest that violent video games will create violent people, but if the game's content and context is to be on the lookout for enemies, the players develop a "hostile attribution bias" in their everyday lives (Bavelier et al. 2011). In a meta-analysis of research conducted on 130,296 participants, playing violent games did lead to significant increase in aggressive cognition, aggressive behaviour and desensitisation (Bavelier et al. 2011). "Violent video games alone are unlikely to turn a child with no other risk factors into a maniacal killer. However, in children with many risk factors, the size of the effect may be sufficient to have practical negative consequences" (Bavelier et al. 2011). We can infer that there are some conclusive cognitive benefits as well as some negative behavioural impacts of playing video games. Rather than condemn or praise, it is important to assess each video game based on its content, context and the structure. The amount of time spent of playing these games should also be kept in mind while assessing the impact of the game on the player. Action games, for a prepared mind, may have salutary benefits. Like the Karmapa (The next Dalai Lama) of Tibet said of his hobby of playing play station wargames – "If I'm having negative thoughts or feelings, video games are one way I can release that energy in the context of the illusion of the game ... I don't have to go and hit anyone over the head" (Halliwell, 2010). The question is whether children are ready for such exposure to violent and visually bloody games. Prolonged exposure of adolescents or preadolescents to certain violent and aggressive games may promote aggressive cognitive tendencies. Parents and educators could consciously choose action games that develop visual spatial skills, eye hand coordination and other cognitive benefits and yet are not visually graphic and excessively violent.

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