

Players love the game not the gore

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This is Scott Rigby (left) and Richard Ryan. Credit: University of Rochester

The next time a loved one brandishes a virtual shotgun in their favorite video game, take heart. That look of glee, says a new study, likely stems from the healthy pleasure of mastering a challenge rather than from a disturbing craving for carnage.

Research to be published online January 16 in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* shows that, contrary to popular belief, violence does not make video games more enjoyable. The study by investigators at the University of Rochester and Immersyve Inc., a player-experience research firm, found that for many people, gore actually detracts from a game's "fun factor," decreasing players' interest and desire to purchase a game. When designing the next generation of video games, added the authors, developers should remember: blood does not help the bottom line.

"For the vast majority of players, even those who regularly play and enjoy violent games, violence was not a plus," explained Andrew Przybylski, a University graduate student and lead author of the study. "Violent content was only preferred by a small subgroup of people that generally report being more aggressive," added Przybylski, however, even these hostile players did not report increased pleasure when playing more gruesome games.

Through two online surveys and four experimental studies, the researchers showed that people stayed glued to games mainly for the feelings of challenge and autonomy they experience while playing. Both seasoned video gamers and novices preferred games where they could conquer obstacles, feel effective, and have lots of choices about their strategies and actions.

These elements, said coauthor Richard Ryan, a motivational psychologist at the University, represent "the core reasons that people find games so entertaining and compelling. Conflict and war are a common and powerful context for providing these experiences, but it is the need satisfaction in the gameplay that matters more than the violent content itself."

Scott Rigby, president of Immersyve and a co-investigator in the study, said the findings should be of practical help to the game development industry. "Much of the debate about game violence has pitted the assumed commercial value of violence against social concern about the harm it may cause," explained Rigby. "Our study shows that the violence may not be the real value component, freeing developers to design away from violence while at the same time broadening their market."

To assess players' experiences on a wide variety of games, the authors conducted two survey studies involving 2,670 frequent video game players. Participants rated their current favorite games based on

statements like "When moving through the game world, I feel as if I am actually there" and "I would buy a sequel to this game." The surveys focused on players' needs satisfaction, immersion, and enjoyment, based on a psychometric model developed by Immersyve called the Player Experience of Need Satisfaction (PENS). Respondents were 89 percent male and between 18 and 39 years of old.

Four additional experimental studies involving more than 300 undergraduates allowed the investigators to study the effects of violence under controlled conditions. In three of the tests, researchers modified the video programs to create violent or non-violent formats of the same game. One study used the commercially available game Half-Life 2 and assigned subjects to play either a bloody battle against computer-controlled adversaries or a low violence alternative, in which the robots were tagged and teleported serenely back to base. Another study using House of the Dead III varied the gore level from no blood to realistic wounds and graphic violence. A fourth experimental study took a closer look at subjects' aggressive tendencies. Using a 29-item scale, including such statement as "Given enough provocation, I may hit another person" and "I sometimes feel like a powder keg ready to explode," the study measured participants' hostility before having them play the bloodier version of House of the Dead III.

Across all of the studies and both surveys, added violent content added little and in some cases detracted from the enjoyment reported by players. Violent content was preferred, though not enjoyed more, by a small subgroup of people who scored high in aggression traits.

"Video games," concluded the authors, "are enjoyable, immersive, and motivating insofar as they offer opportunities for psychological need satisfaction, specifically experiences of competence and autonomy, to which violent content per se is largely unrelated."

This same research team has been studying the factors that motivate people to play games of all types, both as casual players or intense long-term fans. "Initially, many games are perceived as being fun," Rigby says. "Much of our work is focused on understanding when games reach to deeper levels of satisfaction that often sustain engagement over time, and to identify both the healthy and unhealthy aspects of that play."

Source: University of Rochester

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