

Study: Video games can teach helpful behavior, too

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ISU psychologists Douglas Gentile (left) and Craig Anderson (right) are two of the lead researchers in a new study finding some non-violent video games can teach kids to be more cooperative and helpful of others. Photo by Bob Elbert.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Previous research by Iowa State University psychologists has found that violent video games can teach children to be aggressive, producing more aggressive behaviors over time. But according to new research led by those same psychologists, the opposite is also true -- some non-violent video games can teach kids to be more cooperative and helpful to others.

Youth of multiple ages (fifth-grade to college-aged) from three countries participated in studies of "prosocial" video games -- positive games in which characters help others. Across the three countries studied, students

who played prosocial video games also behaved in a more prosocial manner.

Douglas Gentile, an assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State and director of research for the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family, led the team of 12 researchers. ISU Distinguished Professor of Psychology Craig Anderson -- who serves as director of ISU's Center for the Study of Violence -- and psychology graduate student Muniba Saleem also participated in a paper summarizing the results titled, "The Effects of Prosocial Video Games on Prosocial Behaviors: International Evidence From Correlational, Longitudinal, and Experimental Studies." The paper has been released online and will be published in a future issue of the journal [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#).

The paper reports that a survey of 727 middle-school students from Singapore found those who played prosocial games exhibited more cooperation and empathy.

In a longitudinal study of 780 fifth-grade, and 1,050 eighth- and 11th-grade students from Japan, prosocial game play predicted later increases in prosocial behavior over a three- to four-month time span.

And in an experimental study of 161 American college students, those who were randomly assigned to play prosocial games (Chibi Robo and Super Mario Sunshine) behaved more prosocially toward another student in a subsequent task than those who played either neutral (Pure Pinball and Super Monkey Ball Deluxe) or violent video games (Ty2 or Crash Trinsanity). Those who played the violent games engaged in more harmful behaviors toward other students.

"Video games are not inherently good or bad," wrote the researchers in the paper. "Video games can have both positive and negative effects.

"Content matters, and games are excellent teachers," they continued. "Violent content in video games can lead people to behave more aggressively. Prosocial content, in contrast, can lead people to behave in a more cooperative and helpful manner."

The researchers conclude that the similar results across different methodologies, ages and cultures provide strong evidence of a prosocial game content effect. They also support the General Learning Model, which predicts that the kinds of associations that are activated and formed by a [video game](#) depend on the content of the game.

"This set of studies demonstrates why it is so critical that parents pay attention to the types of games that children play," Gentile said. "Games can have many benefits, but parents need to help choose the games that are most likely to get maximum benefits."

The complete paper is available online through the journal at psp.sagepub.com/pap.dtl .

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