

Don't blame Call of Duty for teenage suicide

May 29 2014, by Mark Griffiths



There is no evidence that Call of Duty causes suicide. Credit: campuspartymexico

A British coroner has sparked anxiety among parents by linking Call of Duty, one of the most popular video games in the world, to teenage suicide.

John Pollard says Call of Duty has "[figured in recent activity before death](#)" in three or four of his inquests and that parents should not let their children play the 18-rated game.

Teenage [suicide](#) is a tragedy for any family and those affected will naturally want reasons why their loved ones have taken their own lives. There are hundreds of scientific studies on suicide and many risk factors have been identified, including psychological, environmental and genetic or biological factors. Conditions such as mental illness and substance abuse can also heighten the risk.

There have been very few studies examining the relationship between suicide and videogame playing and those that have don't necessarily implicate the games as triggers.

A [2011 US study](#) of 30,000 teenagers reported that those who spent more than five or more hours a day playing video games were slightly more likely to have thought about suicide. A similar finding was also reported in a [large national German](#) study of more than 15,000 teenagers in 2010.

But these studies highlight a correlation – not causation. No study published on this matter has demonstrated causality. They have only been able to show, at best, that there may be an associative link among those that play excessively every day.

One of the major problems with research in this area is that studies typically fail to take into account all the other types of suicide and violence that people are exposed to on a day-to-day basis. That includes suicide and violence on the news, in films and television and the suicide and violence people witness in their own lives and local community.

What's more, academic journals tend to only publish studies that show statistically significant findings. That means they are more likely to publish a study that suggests a link between playing video games and subsequent suicide or aggression rather than those that do not.

While there's a growing body of research (particularly in the US) claiming a link between [violent video games](#) and behaviour, most of it doesn't follow players over long periods of time.

Much of the research has also been experimental and carried out in non-ecologically valid settings, such as in the laboratory. In fact, all of the measures used to assess "aggression" are proxy measures that are not related to actual violent actions because it is unethical to try and induce actual anti-social and violent acts within a research experiment.

As a result, I don't think any scientific research shows a proven link between videogame playing and subsequent suicidal or violent behaviour (and certainly none showing the link between gaming and suicide).

The press is currently referring to four teenage suicides in particular in the wake of Pollard's comments. All four teens are alleged to have played Call of Duty but there is nothing in the reports suggesting causation.

However, if the papers are to be believed, all four teenagers were excessive game players. My own [research](#) has shown that excessive (and particularly addicted) videogame players often play excessively as a way of escaping other negative aspects of their lives. If excessive gaming is symptomatic of other underlying emotional, family or social problems, I wouldn't be surprised to find increased levels of suicide among this group because they are already experiencing negative problems to begin with.

The teenagers may have had an inherent trait towards playing [violent videogames](#) that meant they sought out games such as Call of Duty. Videogames may have had an influence in informing how they might have done something or given them ideas but they are highly unlikely to be the root cause of suicide. If I played Call of Duty all day, every day, I

really don't think it would heighten the risk of me becoming suicidal.

I must have watched and read about thousands of suicidal events (both fictional and real) and I have played violent videogames – but it hasn't changed my behaviour in any way (at least I don't think it has). Saying that, I'm a father to three screenagers and I don't let them play violent videogames. Just because I don't personally think the evidence shows there's a link, that doesn't mean there isn't any effect. It's that science has failed to demonstrate a conclusive cause.

This is not about putting the blame on the game. At best, playing videogames like Call of Duty might be a minor contributory factor to suicide. But it shouldn't be a scapegoat.

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