

Violent video games eventually lose their ability to produce guilt in gamers

April 8 2016, by Bert Gambini



Rapidly advancing technology has created ever more realistic video games. Images are sharp, settings have depth and detail, and the audio is crisp and authentic. At a glance, it appears real. So real, that research has consistently found that gamers feel guilty committing unjustified acts of violence within the game.

Now, a new University at Buffalo-led study suggests that the moral response produced by the initial exposure to a video game decreases as experience with the game develops.

The findings provide the first experimental evidence that repeatedly playing the same violent game reduces emotional responses—like guilt—not only to the original game, but to other violent video games as well.

Yet why this is happening remains a mystery, according to Matthew Grizzard, assistant professor of communication and principal investigator of the study published in current issue of the journal "Media Psychology," with co-authors Ron Tamborini and John L. Sherry of Michigan State University and René Weber of the University of California Santa Barbara.

"What's underlying this finding?" asks Grizzard. "Why do games lose their ability to elicit guilt, and why does this seemingly generalize to other, similar games?"

Grizzard, an expert in the psychological effects of media entertainment, has previously studied the ability of [violent video games](#) to elicit guilt. The current study builds upon that work.

Gamers often claim their actions in a [video game](#) are as meaningless to the [real world](#) as players capturing pawns on a chess board. Yet, previous research by Grizzard and others shows that immoral virtual actions can elicit higher levels of guilt than moral virtual actions. This finding would seem to contradict claims that virtual actions are completely divorced from the real world. Grizzard's team wanted to replicate their earlier research and determine whether gamers' claims that their virtual actions are meaningless actually reflects desensitization processes.

Although the findings of his study suggest that desensitization occurs, mechanisms underlying these findings are not entirely clear.

He says there are two arguments for the desensitization effect.

"One is that people are deadened because they've played these games over and over again," he says. "This makes the gamers less sensitive to all guilt-inducing stimuli."

The second argument is a matter of tunnel vision.

"This is the idea that gamers see video games differently than non-gamers, and this differential perception develops with repeated play."

Non-gamers look at a particular game and process all that's happening. For the non-gamer, the intensity of the scene trumps the strategies required to succeed. But gamers ignore much of the visual information in a scene as this information can be meaningless to their success in a game, according to Grizzard.

"This second argument says the desensitization we're observing is not due to being numb to violence because of repeated play, but rather because the gamers' perception has adapted and started to see the game's violence differently."

"Through repeated play, [gamers](#) may come to understand the artificiality of the environment and disregard the apparent reality provided by the game's graphics."

Grizzard say his future research is working toward answering these questions.

"This study is part of an overarching framework that I've been looking at in terms of the extent to which media can elicit moral emotions, like guilt, disgust and anger," he says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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