

# 'Bad' video game behavior increases players' moral sensitivity

27 June 2014, by Pat Donovan



A study led by Matthew Grizzard has shown that playing violent video games may lead to increased moral sensitivity in players.

(Medical Xpress)—New evidence suggests heinous behavior played out in a virtual environment can lead to players' increased sensitivity toward the moral codes they violated.

That is the surprising finding of a study led by Matthew Grizzard, PhD, assistant professor in the University at Buffalo Department of Communication, and co-authored by researchers at Michigan State University and the University of Texas, Austin.

"Rather than leading players to become less moral," Grizzard says, "this research suggests that violent [video-game](#) play may actually lead to increased [moral sensitivity](#). This may, as it does in real life, provoke players to engage in voluntary behavior that benefits others."

The study, "Being Bad in a Video Game Can Make Us More Morally Sensitive," was published online ahead of print on June 20 in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*.

Grizzard points out that several recent studies, including this one, have found that committing immoral behaviors in a video game elicits feelings of guilt in players who commit them.

The current study found such guilt can lead players to be more sensitive to the moral issues they violated during game play. Other studies have established that in real life scenarios, guilt evoked by immoral behavior in the "real-world" elicits pro-social behaviors in most people.

"We suggest that pro-social behavior also may result when guilt is provoked by virtual behavior," Grizzard says.

Researchers induced guilt in participants by having them play a video game where they violated two of five moral domains: care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, in-group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity/sanctity.

"We found that after a subject played a [violent video game](#), they felt guilt and that guilt was associated with greater sensitivity toward the two particular domains they violated—those of care/harm and fairness/reciprocity," Grizzard says. The first includes behaviors marked by cruelty, abuse and lack of compassion, and the second, by injustice or the denial of the rights of others.

"Our findings suggest that emotional experiences evoked by media exposure can increase the intuitive foundations upon which human beings make moral judgments," Grizzard says. "This is particularly relevant for video-game play, where habitual engagement with that media is the norm for a small, but considerably important group of users."

Grizzard explains that in life and in game, specific definitions of moral behavior in each domain will vary from culture to culture and situation to situation.

"For instance," he says, "an American who played a violent game 'as a terrorist' would likely consider his avatar's unjust and violent behavior—violations of the fairness/reciprocity and harm/care domains—to be more immoral than when he or she performed the same acts in the role of a 'UN peacekeeper.'" **More information:** "Being Bad in a Video Game Can Make Us More Morally Sensitive." Grizzard, Matthew, Tamborini, Ron, Lewis, Robert J., Wang, Lu, and Prabhu, Sujay. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. ahead of print. DOI: [10.1089/cyber.2013.0658](https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2013.0658).

In conducting the study, researchers combined a model of intuitive morality and exemplars representing current advances in moral psychology with media-effects theories to explain how mediated or indirect experiences influence individuals' [moral judgments](#). Provided by University at Buffalo

The study involved 185 subjects who were randomly assigned to either a guilt-inducing condition—in which they played a shooter game as a terrorist or were asked to recall real-life acts that induced guilt—or a control condition—shooter game play as a UN soldier and the recollection of real-life acts that did not induce guilt.

After completing the video game or the memory recall, participants completed a three-item guilt scale and a 30-item moral foundations questionnaire designed to assess the importance to them of the five moral domains cited above.

Correlations were calculated among the variables in the study, with separate correlation matrices calculated for the video-game conditions and the memory-recall conditions. The study found significant positive correlations between video-game [guilt](#) and the moral foundations violated during game play.

The study was co-authored by Ron Tamborini, PhD, professor, Department of Communication, Michigan State University; Robert J. Lewis, PhD, assistant professor, Department of Advertising and Public Relations, University of Texas, Austin; and Lu Wang, a former graduate student in the Department of Communication at Michigan State.

In May, a study by Tamborini, Grizzard, Lewis and three other authors published in *Journal of Communication* described mechanisms involved in exposure to entertainment and moral judgment processes.

APA citation: 'Bad' video game behavior increases players' moral sensitivity (2014, June 27) retrieved 28 November 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-06-bad-video-game-behavior-players.html>

*This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.*