

## **Violent Interactive Video Games as Play Poison**

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The video game industry has grown into a multi-billion dollar market over the past decade. The sales of video games were \$6 billion in 2000; over 280 million units were sold in 2000 alone. It is estimated that over 60% of all Americans, or over 145 million people, play video games on a regular basis(Children Now, 2001). With rapid technological advances, children are drawn to videogames by the combination of their visual attractiveness and interactivity or potential for social interaction – and peer pressure.

There may be some benefits to playing video games. Hypotheses advanced over the years by are that video games promote hand-eye coordination, visual scanning, auditory discriminations, and spatial skills(Greenfield,1994; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1994). These hypotheses lack convincing empirical support. Some studies have found that playing video games can improve children’s visual attention, spatial iconic skill and computer literacy. On the other hand, the use of educational games have been shown to help improve academic performance(Children Now,2001).

On the negative side, a host of studies have found relationships between playing video games and unhealthy outcomes, such as social isolation, obesity, belief in gender stereotypes and increased aggressive behavior(Anderson&Bushman,2001;Anderson&Dill, 2000;Bensley&Eenwyk,2001; Kirsh, 1998; Krahe & Moller, 2004). In fact, unique interactive capabilities and reality may make them likely to adversely affect children’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors –more so than traditional forms of media (Anderson,2000; Funk, Baldacci, Pasoldi & Baumgardner,2004).

Of the top-selling video games across different game systems, most video games (89%) contain violent content, almost half of which is serious in nature. Killing are almost always presented as justified, sending the message that violence is an acceptable way to achieve one’s objectives and that players could be heroes by using violence successfully (Heintz-Knowles&Henderson, 2001). These findings are particularly alarming because some children may internalize these messages and act them out aggressively or they may become desensitized to violence. Others who come from violent neighborhoods may come to believe this violence is acceptable(Funk, 2003, 2004).

Video games tend to reinforce gender stereotypes. Female characters account for only 16% of all characters, and these few females also were likely to scream and wear revealing clothing. Males were more likely to engage in physical aggression (Heintz-Knowles&Henderson, 2001). Such biased portrayals send negative and misleading messages to children-- that there are certain ways that males and females are supposed to look and act.

Video games also contain very little racial diversity. Nearly all heroes were white; African Americans and Latinos were typically athletes. Asian/Pacific Islanders were usually wrestlers or fighters. These kinds of racial images and stereotypes adversely influence children's attitudes towards people of other races. In addition, children of color feel devalued or ignored because of limited and stereotypical representations of people from their own racial group – or believe the only legitimate occupation for them is athletics or fighters. Rarely ever cast as champions, rescuers or heroes, their portrayals often amount to nothing more than muscular brutes, exotic fighting machines or athletes displaying near-supernatural ability.

Teachers and parents admit that it is very hard to ban children from playing video games, even as they may worry over the possible negative influence identified above. Video games, as a form of the electronic media like computers, are interactive, in contrast to television, radio, and movies-- which are all essentially one-way communications. The combination of visual attractiveness and the potential for interaction is very appealing. Most children prefer video games to academically oriented computer programs. For this reason also, there is a strong need to develop appealing educational and non-violent, non-sexist video games.

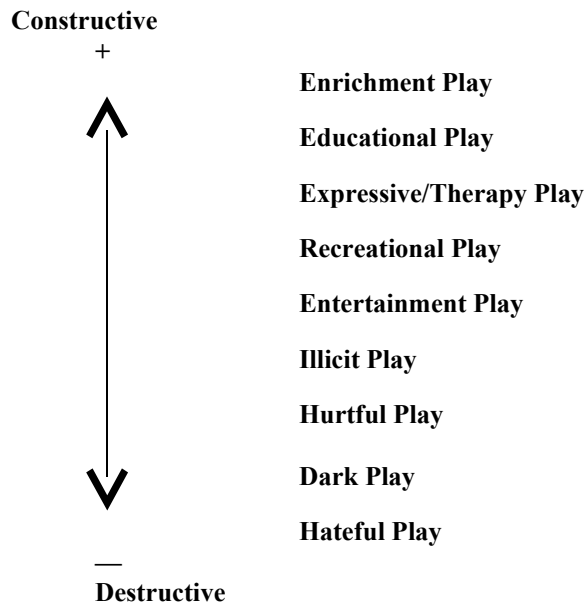
Children's play can be influenced by video games. School-age children reframe the video game "Super Mario 5" in a playground game involving roving around and encountering and surmounting obstacles and barriers (Dorst, 1999). In this video game children fight a variety of dangerous creatures, acquire artifacts that give them enhanced powers, enter "warp zones" that allowed special movements, and traverse boundaries from one imagined world to another. Children moved around the playground and acted out the kinds of encounters and events that appeared in the video games, they also seemed to improvise, elaborate, and include more imaginative ingredients to their play than found in the video games themselves. For instance, they added putting themselves "on pause" which required freezing the action as one can do with a key on a control pad. Children also collectively mapped the playground in terms of correspondences between mundane physical features such as bike racks and jungle gyms and the imagined landscape of a particular fantasy world. The children's play reflected a blending of video game content (ideas or images of the animated figures moving about a fantasy landscape beset with obstacles and adversaries), with a video game player in (or the child sitting in front of the console itself) the software and the computer.

### Is There Such a Thing as Play Poison?

Attending to the being and the becoming of young children demands asking how play is a child's friend and foe in the process of growing up. Answering this question properly requires appreciating play as a complex multifarious phenomenon. Examining play in relation to child development and early childhood educational programming, and other social contexts, not only leads to a realization that play is a differentiated construct, but also that it may be possible to fruitfully order the play behaviors of children along an evaluative dimension (Johnson, 2004).

Evaluating play is a value statement as well as an interpretation of theory and research evidence which is relevant in defining play quality. Play evaluation can assist in deciding play options. One general criterion I propose for judging play quality is whether play serves any of the 'powers of play'. Various potential powers of play are recognized including these three

categories: (1) promotion of divergent thinking, imagination, and creativity; (2) fostering individual expression for personal discovery and fulfillment; and (3) social communication, belonging, and communal bonding (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). A second criterion I propose is whether the play harms self or others physically or psychologically, or destroys property or the environment. How these questions are answered with respect to a specified play action determines where the play is placed along the play evaluation continuum depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Play Evaluation Continuum**

As seen in this figure 1 the most positive play is labeled *enrichment*, or play which nourished the over-all development of the child. This play is common in Waldorf or Steiner kindergarten programs (Drummond, 1999) or Reggio-inspired ECE (New, 2005), for example, where children are granted the freedom and time to engage in deep and authentic play experiences that are very meaningful to children. This play is spontaneous, child-initiated, and transformative. Next along this continuum is *educational play* that serves some teacher-determined pedagogical goal as part of an intellectual, not academic, curriculum. This kind of “learn-full” play is common in the US in well-run developmentally appropriate and enhancing classrooms and centers, such as those following Montessori or the US ‘home-grown’ curricular models of the Banks Street, Spectrum, High/Scope, and the Projects Approach programs or in high quality classrooms (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005).

*Expressive or therapeutical play* appears next and is also clearly positive in that it serves many wholesome interests and needs which are not directly tied to traditional areas of cognitive development but which are nonetheless beneficial due to its healing or restorative functions or because it gives children an avenue for physical, artistic or musical self-expression, recovery, resoration and fulfillment. Some teachers and parents may chose to value expressive play even

more than educational play that aims exclusively for intellectual growth in traditional areas of cognitive development.

The middle 'neutral' region of this play evaluation continuum is taken up by child-initiated *recreational* play that tends to be active, as well as *entertainment* play that tends to be passive and mostly escapist in its intent, a time to 'turn off ones mind' and relax, such as by television watching or by video game playing. However, some forms of this entertainment play can be negative. This happens when the entertainment play (*e.g.*, certain books, music, movies, television shows or computer or video games) promotes hostile or otherwise negative feelings, thoughts, or behaviors in the child. The negative side of the continuum also includes *illicit* play which can include disruptive play at school or on the playground, such as throwing spitballs, or making a game out of seeing how many times you can be excused by the teacher to go to the rest room, or to go to the pencil sharpener without a real need(King, 1986)

Further down the scale comes *hurtful* play, *dark* play and *hateful* play which are all very negative forms of play because either self or other, or both self and other, are victims of the play. Such play is offensive, nasty or mean-spirited, and often hostile and aggressive. Teasing, bullying, and enjoying sexist, racist, and violent entertainment in the use of "X"-rated video games are examples of very negative play behaviors. Hurtful play that is persistent and intentional and that reflects ill-will and a desire to express harm toward another person or group of people is labeled hateful play. Dark play is a form of pathological, morbid play in which the player takes a chance of being killed or killing oneself and others(*e.g.* Russian Roulette).

Parents and teachers have responsibility to promote opportunities for positive and constructive play in children and to guard children from temptations to participate in negative and destructive play. Analogous to eating, all children need nourishing 'play food' to thrive, but sometimes "play junk food" is okay, neutral types of recreation and passive entertainment. However, extremely negative and destructive illicit play, and certainly hurtful, dark and hateful play, must be considered 'play poison' and must be stopped and removed without question.

In the US today social and economic class differences exist in play experiences of children(Johnson et al., 2005; Ramsay 1998). Highly educated and more affluent parents are more likely to ensure that their young children are afforded positive play opportunities, while less educated and low income parents usually have more difficulty achieving this, and are more likely to allow their children to engage in the more neutral and negative forms of play. This is particularly so due to families' differing susceptibility to commercial and popular culture. Less educated and wealthy families are far more vulnerable and are therefore more likely to be exploited by market interests or hucksters from the toy and entertainment industries who bear some responsibility not only for increasing rates of childhood obesity, attention deficits, hyperactivity, and problem-solving difficulties. The entertainment media also contributes to what has been called 'abuses of enchantment'. As Lillian Katz(1992) said:

I hope that you maintain your commitment to eschewing fantasy and fanciful products and décor. I believe the majority of young children suffer from a surfeit of adult-generated fantasy. It is one thing to encourage children's own rich fantasies and imaginations, but it is quite another to impose those of adults and various industries (Disneyworld, Barbie Dolls) upon them from above. We have reached a stage that I call

the abuses of enchantment; it is another aspect of treating children like silly empty-headed pets that have to be amused and titillated (p. 193).

In sum, professionals need to help all families contend with the many threats to quality play for young children that currently exist in the US culture and elsewhere (Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Haydel & Varady, 2001). There are many play culprits in children's homes (e.g., over-scheduling special activities, too many toys, TVs in bedrooms, etc.) in their schools (e.g., push for early academics, elimination of recess), and in the society-at-large (e.g., technology, media and the toy and entertainment industries). Fortunately, there are a number of play advocacy organizations in the US to help teachers and parents promote play and child development. These include: Playing for Keeps ([www.playingforkeeps.org](http://www.playingforkeeps.org)), Alliance for Childhood ([www.allianceforchildhood.net](http://www.allianceforchildhood.net)), American Association for the Child's Right to Play ([www.ipausa.org](http://www.ipausa.org)), Institute for Play ([www.instituteforplay.com](http://www.instituteforplay.com)) and Play Matters ([www.playmatters.net](http://www.playmatters.net)). Others include: National Institute on Media and the Family ([www.mediaandthefamily.org](http://www.mediaandthefamily.org)) Hopefully, by working together more positive play can be encouraged and the current concerns and trends causing turbulence for ECE can pass, leading to brighter days ahead for play and childhood life in the US, and elsewhere.

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