

## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 7 to 9  
**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# Video Games

## Overview

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This lesson introduces students to the issue of violence in video games and helps them understand the effects that these games have on their own feelings and attitudes towards violence. Students begin with a discussion on the appeal of video games and complete a self-survey on their video game habits. This is followed by class discussion about stimulus addiction and rating systems for video games. Student activities include a case study about video game violence; deconstruction of video game ads and a short opinion piece on whether or not video games promote violence among young people.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students demonstrate:

- an understanding of the debates surrounding the influence of violent video games on young people.
- an understanding of the connection between violent video games and stimulus addiction.
- an awareness of the different types of violence found in some video games.
- a knowledge of the classification systems that govern video and computer games.
- an understanding of their own reactions to video games.

## Preparation and Materials

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- Prepare overheads *The Lure of Video Games* and *Video and Computer Game Rating Systems*
- Ask students to bring video game magazines to class
- Photocopy handouts
  - *Video Game Survey*
  - *Violent Video Games and Stimulus Addiction*
  - *Video violence too close to real thing*



## The Lesson

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For many teenagers, video games are an enjoyable and popular pastime. In approaching this topic in the classroom, teachers should encourage students to explore their own attitudes towards the issues surrounding the games that they play - without condemning the games themselves.

### Guided Discussion

Video games have come a long way since the creation of **Pong** in the early 1970's. **Pong** was a form of table tennis and it could only be played in video arcades. The graphics were (gasp!) black and white and, compared to today's games, it was very easy to play.

Nowadays, there are thousands of games to choose from, and every day the technology becomes more and more sophisticated. Companies like Nintendo and Sony can now bring games into your home with arcade-quality graphics and virtual reality home systems are just around the corner.

- Ask students how many of them play video games.
- Ask students what it is about video games that appeals to them.

On the overhead, place *The Lure of Video Games* and discuss these attractions with students.

### Activity One

Distribute *Video Game Survey* to students. Ask them to complete questions one to six only.

Once students have completed the six questions, take up their responses as a class. Select two students to fill in their responses on the board under the headings of *Girls* and *Boys*.

Survey the boys in the class regarding the time they spend each week playing video games and record the totals. Then do the same for the girls. Ask students to compare game-playing habits:

- Who plays more often? Boys or girls?
- Most computer and video game buyers are young males. Why do you think this is so?

List the favourite games of students on the board (you might want to make a third column for games that both sexes enjoy). Discuss the genres of the games that are listed. Is there a difference between the games preferred by boys and those preferred by girls? Ask your students

- What kinds of games attract female players? Do many such games exist?
- Young males are the main target group of video game manufacturers. How are these games designed to appeal to young men?
- Ask students
- Which of the games listed on the board do you consider to be the most violent?



- What types of violence exist in these games? (*Besides the more obvious answers of blood, gore, high body counts, etc., ask students to focus on the roles played by women and minorities in these games and how these depictions might also be interpreted as a form of violence.*)
- What messages do violent video games send players about how problems are solved? (*List student responses on the board.*)

### Activity Two

Ask students to complete the remaining questions in their survey. (These questions are intended to help them to explore their video game playing habits and their feelings towards the games they play.) Discuss responses.

Distribute **Violent Video Games and Stimulus Addiction** handout to class. Discuss with students. Do they agree with the points made about problem solving and video games? Have any students had their own experiences with "stimulus addiction"?

Rating systems classify violence, nudity, and language in video games. However, these classification codes don't always prevent children from accessing violent games. Place **Video and Computer Game Rating Systems** overhead onto the projector and discuss with class.

### Activity Three

Distribute **Video violence too close to real thing** and ask students to complete the questions that accompany this newspaper article. Discuss answers with class.

### Activity Four

#### Video Game Magazine Analysis

Divide the class into small groups and give each group a video game magazine.

- Ask the members of each group to count the advertisements that appear in their magazine according to genre (*ie: horror, puzzle, fantasy, action etc.*).
- Have students tally their results and list the genres, listing the most common types of games advertised, to the least common.
- Ask students to select the two ads from their magazine that they consider to be the most violent. They are to discuss:
  - what makes these ads violent?
  - who are these ads targeted at?
  - what is the "message" of each ad?
- Each group will present their findings to the class.



### Activity Five

In a short opinion piece, ask students to answer the following questions:

1. Are violent video games just harmless escapism or are they something more sinister?
2. Do you think that playing violent video games can make an individual more violent in real life?

### Evaluation

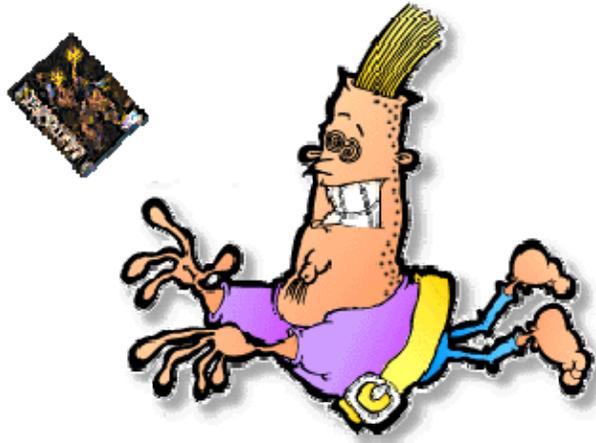
- Individual newspaper article assignment
- Individual short opinion piece
- Group video game magazine presentation



## The Lure of Video Games

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- **The Player feels a sense of challenge, control and, in time, mastery**
- **The Game gauges its level of difficulty to the player's ability**
- **The Game provides immediate and continual reinforcement**
- **The Game provides an escape from the complexity and unpredictability of real relationships and interactions.**



## Video and Computer Game Rating Systems

Most of the major video games and computer software manufacturers have adopted the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system. This rating system was implemented in September 1994, and most games released since then have the ESRB rating on the product package. Games are classified into five age-based categories that are based on the levels of sex, nudity, violence and offensive language.

The Canadian Interactive Digital Software Association (CDSA) administers the ESRB ratings in Canada. Manufacturers submit their games to rating reviewers for classification. Members of the CDSA are encouraged though not required, to submit all new products before they appear in Canadian stores.



### Early Childhood

Content suitable for children ages 3 and over. Contains no violence. Child requires reading skills, fine motor skills and a high level of thinking skills.



### Everyone

Content suitable for persons ages six and older. They may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief (for example, slapstick comedy), or some crude language.



### Teens

Content suitable for persons 13 and older. Contains all the above, plus more animated or realistic violence. May have strong language and/or suggestive themes



### Mature

Content suitable for persons ages 17 and older. These products may include more intense violence or language than products in the Teen category. In addition, these titles may also include mature sexual themes.



### Adult Only

Content suitable only for adults. These products may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adults Only products are not intended to be sold or rented to persons under the age of 18.



### Rating Pending

Product has been submitted to the ESRB and is awaiting final rating.



## Video Game Survey

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1. How often do you play video games (circle one of the following):

- < 1 hour per week
- 1- 3 hours per week
- 3 - 6 hours per week
- 6 - 10 hours per week
- > 10 hours per week



2. List your 3 favourite video games.

3. What makes these games better than others?

4. What genres (types) of games are they?

5. Which of these games do you consider the most violent? Why?



6. Which of these games do you consider the least violent? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Do you tend to play video games alone, or with friends?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. How long do you usually play a game before you want to quit? Is it difficult for you to leave the game?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. Do you ever get angry or frustrated when playing a video game? If so, what do you do about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. How do you usually feel when you finish playing?

Source: Adapted with permission from the United Church of Jesus Christ (Kids Talk TV: Inside Out) and Gloria DeGaetano (Television and the Lives of our Children.)



## Violent Video Games and Stimulus Addiction



### What is Stimulus Addiction?

When you play lots of action-packed video games, you increasingly need more powerful images in order to respond emotionally to the game. This is called *stimulus addiction*. The term "stimulus addiction" describes the habit that is formed as kids seek out more and more violent games to hold their interest. All video games, including those that are nonviolent, can become addictive. For example, a simple game like Tetris can get us "hooked" for a longer period of time than we'd like. However, violent video games magnify these characteristics by requiring the part of our brain that reacts, rather than reasons, to focus on the constant need to destroy in order to stay in the game.

Who's affected? Boys, in particular, are vulnerable to this call to battle. Recent studies indicate that boys' moods are elevated when playing violent video games and that they feel satisfied after playing. Girls, on the other hand, feel less comfortable after playing and are less likely to choose to play again.

Current research indicates that our brains *are* affected by what we play. In a 2002 study on video's effects on teens, researchers at the Indiana University School of Medicine concluded that the brains of teenagers with certain behavior disorders and a history of aggressiveness react differently from healthy teens when they play violent video games.

What's the message? Violent video games send the following messages:

- Problems can be resolved quickly and with little personal investment.
- The best way to solve a problem is to eliminate the source of the problem.
- Problems are basically black or white, right or wrong.
- It is acceptable to immerse oneself in the video game's rule-driven reality without questioning the rules.
- Use instinctual, rather than thoughtful, responsible behaviours to react to problems.
- Personal imagination is not an important problem-solving skill.

Contrast what children learn playing violent video games, with what they learn playing maze games, puzzles, and simulation or treasure hunt video games:

- Problems are solved through patience, personal initiative, perseverance, tolerance, and flexibility.
- Gathering information requires work, and information must be carefully analyzed in order to be of help when making informed decisions.
- Defining and solving problems involves using complex skills.
- A solution in one instance might not work as a solution in another instance.



- It is important to use critical and creative thinking skills such as planning actions, organizing information, predicting outcomes, experimenting with trial solutions, evaluating ideas, and analyzing solutions and their consequences.
- Use imagination and thinking abilities to co-create, with the game's writer, inventive situations.
- Use personally-generated, thoughtful responses to solve problems.

Adapted from *Screen Smarts: A Family Guide to Media Literacy*, by Gloria DeGaetano and Kathleen Bander © 1996.



## Video Violence Too Close To Real Thing

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by David Clements

*Sterling News Service*, July 26, 1995

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DAWSON CREEK — When 14-year-old D.J. Vander Wal takes time out to relax from his hectic, summer-time schedule, he does it with a bang. D.J. plays violent video games. He is a well-adjusted teen, does well in school and has a happy home life. He's also a computer junkie. He spends hours on the Internet, fixes his computer himself and has even made a few extra bucks doing consulting work.

Along with this more serious computer work, D.J. plays a lot of video games. One of his favorites is called *DOOM*.

"There are lots of different skill levels, from 'Please Don't Hurt Me Daddy' to 'Ultra Violent'," D.J. says. "I've finished the game. The skill levels get more violent as you go up in difficulty. At some points, you probably kill about 20 to 30 people a minute."

He also enjoys *Rise of the Triad*, which he calls a spoof of violent games like *DOOM*. "It's so violent that it's a parody. Guys blow up in big, bloody explosions and there's blood everywhere. It's really funny," D.J. says.

Games like *DOOM* are at the forefront of the battle over violent video games and their effects on children. Some opponents argue the games desensitize youngsters to cruelty and may make them more likely to commit violent acts in real life.

That is what has pushed Dawson Creek's Northern Computer to start a policy of not selling violent video games to people under 18. "What finally got it going was when I read that there had been 10 cases in which youths had been charged for murder in nine days," store manager Dave Roszmann says. "That just got my blood boiling."

Roszmann admits video violence is not the only cause of youth crime, but he's sure it's part of the problem. "Today's kids spend hours in front of a television or video game," he says. "They're (the games and televisions) being used as baby-sitters, and that's where kids are getting their values." "And," says Roszmann, "if the games are not being monitored for content, the youngsters' heads are just being filled with all kinds of garbage."

The decision was an ethical one for Roszmann and his staff. They say they are willing to put up with complaints from local residents if it will prevent violent crimes by young people. "If the kids want to play excessively violent games, they can probably still get them," Roszmann concedes. "They're just not going to get it from us, unless parents buy it for them, which is their prerogative. The parents then know what their child is buying and they can monitor it."

Other local businesses have already taken steps to limit the access of youth to violent video games. Leon and Marlies Claus, who own and operate The Jolly Gamesman, say they will not rent violent games to children. "I think the parents appreciate that, Marlies said. "We have kids too, so we understand."

Members of the scientific community have long studied the effects of violence in the media on those who observe it. Brent de Waal, a Ph.D. student at Simon-Fraser University's Media Lab, expanded those studies last summer to include video games. De Wal sat a group of ten 16-year-olds in front of several violent video games and measured their physiological responses. He monitored galvanic skin response; the amount of electrical activity on the skin; and also players' heart rates.



"We consider TV to be a passive medium," de Waal says. "With video games an interactive medium, I wanted to know whether that was more involving and how we could measure that or describe that."

De Waal found heart rates and galvanic skin responses in the subjects rose differently, depending on the content of the game. "When they were playing, there was quite a difference between whether the game they was violent or non-violent in terms of their amount of activation," he says.

The physiological response is an almost euphoric rush, de Waal says, an "adrenaline hit." He says this rush is most attractive to adolescent boys. "They're really the engine of the video game industry," De Waal explains, "and when they buy video games, they tend to buy violent ones more often than others."

"Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of these games is how accustomed the kids get to the subject matter," de Waal says. While he is reluctant to draw a link between the carnage of video games and real-life violence, he says video kids are becoming desensitized to death. "Within the game condition, there's a definite cycle that can be described as desensitization -- they get bored with the game. What excited them at first no longer does that, so the manufacturer produce games with more action and more violence in an attempt to get kids to buy," he says. "I think that should be a concern for people raising kids. When they are spending such a large chunk of time in a violent context that they become desensitized to it."

Manufacturers are also trying to outdo themselves to make the games closer to the real-life experience of killing. "The history of video games is to make things more lifelike, and faster," de Waal says, noting the imminent release of Nintendo's Virtual Boy, a virtual reality headset which envelopes the player in the video game world.

Nintendo already has plans for a boxing game, and that's a concern for de Waal. "I think that's really problematic," he says. "My concern is that the media environment surrounding kids is based primarily around violence. We have all these systems of play which are centred on one thing; violence," he says. "Video game designers will tell you that you need conflict for a game to succeed, and without that tension, the games just aren't very much fun."

"The appeal of combative games has many elements to it," adds de Waal. "Part of it is the peer pressure, part of it is that the parents don't like it. It's a well-defined space away from the parents, and it's something that the players have absolute mastery over, that no one else can get to."

For de Waal, banning the violent matter is not the solution. "Because of easy access to the Internet," he says, "kids can already get any game they want without their parents knowing about it. The same goes for games where the parents can block access to more violent aspects of the games; the kids can use them to lock the parents out, so they don't know what they're playing."

"For me, it's really a question of media literacy and getting the kids involved, helping them to understand what's going on with video games and helping them understand how heavily they're being targeted by the manufacturers. The amount of research and marketing is phenomenal and kids should know that the attempt is to maximize profits."

De Waal says parents should watch their kids and monitor the time they spend with games. "I think the biggest concern is if your child plays obsessively, if he or she is playing 24 hours a day, when it takes away time from other activities, and doesn't taper off."

Fourteen-year-old D.J. agrees. "I try not to spend too much time on any one thing. I try not to spend too much time in front of the TV or sit in front of the computer for hours," he says, noting that the games haven't made him a more violent person.



**Video Violence Too Close To Real Thing — Questions**

Answer the following in full sentences.

1. Do you think that kids are desensitized to violence when they play violent video games? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree that there is a link between youth crime and video violence? What other factors might contribute to this problem?
3. Do you agree with the decision by the merchants of Dawson Creek to refuse to sell violent video games to people under the age of 18? Explain your answer.
4. Dr. Brent de Waal describes adolescent boys as "the engine of the video game industry." How does the video game industry target this group in its ads and games?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the statement "you need conflict for a game to succeed, and without that tension, the games just aren't very fun." Can you think of any successful games which are fun that are not based on conflict and tension? What elements make these games interesting?
6. What do you think is the best solution to the problem of video violence?

