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Level: Grades 7-9

About the Author

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Lesson Plan

Killer Games

Overview

In this lesson, students explore the issues surrounding violent video games. The lesson begins with a review of the Entertainment Software Rating Board’s rating codes for video and computer games, and a class discussion about the appropriateness of these ratings for children and teens. Using the article “Killer Games” as a starting point, students discuss the elements that contribute to video game violence; at what age young people should be in order to play violent games; and the possible effects of violent video games on young people. As a summative activity, students write a persuasive essay (or have a class debate) refuting or affirming the idea that violent video games promote violence among youth.

Learning Outcomes

Students demonstrate:

- an understanding of the debate surrounding the influence of violent video games on young people
- 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 attitudes towards violent video games

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following student handouts:

- *Killer Games*
- *Video and Computer Games Rating Systems*
- *Video Games and TV Teach Kids to Kill*

Procedure

In Canada, most video game manufacturers have adopted the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system. This rating system categorizes games according to levels of nudity, sex, violence and offensive language. It’s important to note that although most games are rated, nothing legally prevents a young person under the age of 17 from legally purchasing an adult or mature game – many retailers routinely rent and sell adult-rated games to minors. In an informal survey conducted by an Ottawa newspaper in July 2000, two fourteen-year-old boys were

able to rent violent M-rated games from every video store they tried, with no questions asked.

- Have students read the ESRB ratings on the *Video and Computer Games Rating Systems* handout.
- Review the criteria of each rating.
- Do students agree or disagree with the rating criteria?
- What changes would they make?
- Have any students played mature or adult games?
- Did they consider themselves mature enough to play these games? Under what conditions (of age, maturity, or circumstances) would they consider it *inappropriate* for someone to play this game?
- Distribute the article *Killer Games* to students, and give them time to read through it.
- This article was written in 1994. What video games would be on this list today?
- In this article, what criteria have been considered to determine whether or not a game is violent?
- How do these criteria compare to the ESRB ratings?
- Ask students whether, based on the information they've been given, they agree with the author's conclusions regarding each game. Why or why not?
- The author – and many child development experts – stress the importance of the concept of “realistic violence” as a measure of whether a video game is suitable for young people.
 - How important is realism in the games you play?
 - Put yourself in the place of a child development expert. What might be some of your concerns about kids playing these games?
 - What effect might realistic violent games have on young children?
- In addition to the ratings, there is the additional problem of kids under 17 obtaining mature and adult games. How would you solve this problem?

Activity

- Distribute the article *Video Games and TV Teach Kids to Kill* to students.
- Have students respond to the article by writing a persuasive research essay (about five paragraphs long) in which they agree or disagree with the author's claims.
- **OR** Have students organize a class debate on the topic: "Violent video games negatively affect children and teens."

Evaluation

Persuasive essay, or class debate.

Related Resources on the Media Awareness Network Web site

- *Video Games*
A lesson about stimulus addiction and physiological responses to video games.
- *Video Games – Overview*
This section for parents features a number of articles and reports on the effects of violent video games and youth.

Killer Games - Handout

By Chris Nashawaty

Kids Extra: Entertainment Weekly, March 11, 1994

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"Everyone's got an opinion about violent video games"

Kids love them. Critics, from senior members of Congress to newspaper editorialists, see them as Public Enemy No. 1. Some people say they send the wrong message; others think they're more silly than scary. Parents, no doubt, have been left thoroughly confused by the controversy. So *Kids Extra* decided to evaluate the 10 video games that have been singled out as the most violent. Here, we settle the debate.

1. Night Trap (Sega CD)

- **Violent Content:** Ninja-like vampires stalk scantily clad coeds. Victims get drilled through the neck with a power tool.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** This full-motion video game is more lifelike than traditional animated fare; it plays like a movie and features human actors (including Dana Plato from *Different Strokes*).
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** This is intended to be a campy B-movie in video-game form, but frightened kids won't get the joke. Sega, which appropriately rated it -17 (not for players under 17) for its graphic violence and mature story line, announced in January that it would halt production of the game until the violence is scaled down and an industry-wide rating system is in place, but it will not pull games from the shelves.

2. Mortal Kombat (Super Nintendo Entertainment System and Sega)

- **Violent Content:** The most infamous title in the hand-to-hand fighting category is bloodless on SNES; the Sega version has an unpublished, but widely known, "secret" blood code that players can punch in. This allows them to rip out their opponent's still-beating heart, decapitate him, or pull out his bloody spinal cord.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Very: both versions use live-action video animation.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** If your children don't have the blood code, Mortal Kombat is your basic fighting game. But unless they live under a rock, your kids have the code.

3. Lethal Enforcers (Sega CD)

- **Violent Content** Although the game has little blood, it *is* violent and comes with a large pistol called the Justifier that players fire at the screen.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Yes; the game uses photo-realist images of actors pointing guns.

- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** Definitely. Sega has rated the game a justly deserved -17. Lethal Enforcers puts a gun in kids' hands and teaches them to shoot first and ask questions later.

4. Ground Zero Texas (Sega CD)

- **Violent Content:** This shooting game has players blowing away human-looking aliens in a Texas border town.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Full-motion video footage makes this the most true-to-life game on the list.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** There's no blood, but kids *are* shooting at real people and watching them die.

5. Splatterhouse-3 (Sega)

- **Violent Content:** A hockey-masked man trying to save his family wields knives and cleavers against flesh-eating ghouls; gallons of blood.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Typical game animation, with harrowing graphics of the wife fearing for her life.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** Worse. Although the blood is cartoonish, the slasher story could be troubling for younger kids.

6. Prize Fighter (Sega CD)

- **Violent Content:** This boxing video game doesn't show blood or actual violence – except boxing, of course.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** The game's selling point (picture-perfect graphics) is the very thing that makes it problematic for children under 13.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** The best litmus test: Do you let kids watch boxing on TV?

7. Street Fighter II (SNES and Sega)

- **Violent Content:** The grand-daddy of hand-to-hand fighting games features flying head-buttings, torching, and electrocutions.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Not especially.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** Not really. For kids ages 13 and up, the creativity and challenge of Street Fighter II make it the best of its class.

8. Terminator 2: The Arcade Game (Sega)

- **Violent Content:** A very standard shooting-game tie-in to a very violent film. The problem here is the Menacer – a shoulder-mounted gun used in place of a joystick.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** No; graphics are run-of-the-mill.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** Worse. Learning how to fire the Menacer isn't a skill a child needs to develop. It is possible, though, to pay T2 with the joystick instead of the gun.

9. Mutant League Football (Sega)

- **Violent Content:** The field is dotted with land mines, players get to kill the referee after a bad call, and deaths are listed as a halftime statistic.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Average animation, with a cartoonishly high body count.
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** Older kids may find it a funny twist on the basic sports game, but it may be too much for the younger children.

10. Clayfighter (SNES)

- **Violent Content:** Not much in this toned-down fighting game.
- **Is the Violence Realistic?** Nah – the warriors are wacky digitized characters (Bad Mr. Frosty, Blue Suede Goo).
- **Is It as Bad as It Sounds?** Far from it. Although still a brawling game, this clever newcomer is a more suitable alternative for parents who don't want to expose their kids to too much violence.

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 (CIDSA) administers the ESRB ratings in Canada. Manufacturers submit their games to rating reviewers for classification. Members of the CIDSA 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.

For more information see:

- Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)
www.esrb.org/
- Canadian Interactive Digital Software Association (CIDSA)
www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/profiles/industry/cidsa_profile.cfm



Video Games and TV Teach to Kill

May 11, 1999 - Former psychology professor David Grossman is forcing media companies to be accountable for the messages they are spreading to children.

Grossman compares soldiers in training to children watching T.V. Both, he says, are "taught to reject old values and accept that the world is a dark and dangerous place."

Grossman targets video games in particular, which he says are increasingly sophisticated and often attempt to simulate military warfare. Combined with overwhelmingly violent television shows, the result is a desensitizing of viewers - particularly children.

Grossman makes further comparisons between exposure to media violence and cigarette smoking. As he puts it, "The television industry has gained its market share through an addictive and toxic ingredient."

Grossman says he looks forward to the day when media companies are subject to the same criticism as tobacco companies. He hopes that preventative measures will be put in place to ensure that incidents of youth violence, such as the recent one in Littleton, Colorado, do not occur.

As Grossman says, "We're not just teaching kids to kill. We're teaching them to like it."

Grossman has written two books examining the link between media violence and violence in real life - his first, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, was a best-seller when released in 1995. His second book, *Teaching Kids to Kill*, will be published in the latter part of 1999.

Source: *National Post*, May 11, 1999