



# The Web and violence

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## 1. Introduction

It is postulated that juvenile violence is one of the biggest problems facing societies in the new millennium. Contributing factors to the problem of juvenile violence, and relating to this article, include the violence that children are watching on television, at the movies, the music they are listening to, unrestricted use of the Internet, violent video games and violent coin-up games (Chilton, 1999). A recent statement, based on 30 years of research, from four national American health organizations namely American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association and American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, concluded that a direct link does exist between violence in the media and violence by children (Vermaakgeweld lei tot meer aggressie, 2000:3). In this article the emphasis is on violent Internet games, as a form of electronic mass media, and the influence thereof on children and juveniles.

Turkle (in Green, Reid and Bigum, 1998:21) is of the opinion that computers and computer games have already become a part of how a new generation is growing up. Although this may be true, what is worrying is that children are 'losing' their lives and 'dying' over and over again. This death does not occur in reality; and not with any physical pain to endure. Rather, according to Green et al. (1998:19) these are electronic deaths, occurring vicariously on the screens of home computers.

This article explores the following aspects:

- Definitions of media violence;
- violence and media effect research;
- misleading of the player of violent video/Internet games;

- young people that are most susceptible to be influenced by media violence;
- the nature and effects of media violence on children and juveniles; and
- possible intervention strategies to prevent children from playing violent Internet games

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## 2. Definitions of media violence

Definitions of violence have been developed by various researchers over the years to guide studies on the violent content in the media. Furthermore, policy makers have also struggled with the question of what is considered violent content. Thus, what one person considers violent content another may not, and how one is affected by violent images will also vary from one person the next (Defining media violence, no date). Here follows a summary of the developmental phases of the concept 'media violence'.

As early as 1972, Dr George Gerbner, an expert on media violence in the United States, defined media violence as follows: 'the overt expression of physical force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed. The expression of injurious or lethal force had to be credible or real in the symbolic terms of the drama. Humorous and even farcical violence can be credible and real, even if it has a presumable comic effect. But idle threats, verbal abuse, or comic gestures with any real consequences were not to be considered violent.'

In 1976 the Canadian Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, known as the LaMarsh Commission, established definitions for the nature of violence and the nature of violence in the media (Defining media violence, no date). Accordingly violence is any action which intrudes painfully or harmfully into the physical, psychological or social well-being of persons or groups (Defining media violence, no date). In this regard Alloway and Gilbert (1998:98–99) postulate that a distinction between ritualistic and symbolic violence may be particularly helpful in the examination of the potential impact of video/Internet game violence on discourses of masculinity. Accordingly ritualistic violence is characteristically banal, predictable, stereotypically masculine, superficial in content and pleasure seeking. In contrast symbolic violence attempts to connect the visceral and the reflective. Thus, ritualistic violence invites the respondent to participate in the excitement of destruction, whereas symbolic violence promotes the complex, critical and intellectual engagement with the issues. Regarding video/Internet games it is further postulated that these games invite players to engage viscerally with the action, to disengage the critical faculties and to take pleasure in the substitute experiences of gratuitous violence.

With regard to violence in the media it is stated that the violence depicted in film, television, sound, print or live performance is not necessarily the same as violence in real life. Furthermore violence presented in the media may reach large numbers of people, whereas real violence may not (Defining media violence, no date).

In 1994, a proposal was made by the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs. It was suggested to alter a proposed definition of media violence or add the concept 'obscene'. Such a change was intended to prohibit the importation, sale or distribution of goods or material which has as a dominant characteristic 'the undue exploitation or glorification of horror, cruelty or violence' (Defining media violence, no date).

The above proposal was reviewed in 1996 by the Department of Justice. Concerns were raised about the legislating restriction on violent content. Proof of harm and the ability to determine a societal standard were identified as some of the considerations which make legislative changes more difficult (Defining media violence, no date).

### **3. Violence and media effect research**

The research referred to in this section of the article focuses especially on violence on television and violent video games. To date little research has been done on violent Internet games per se, and the influence thereof on children, but if one considers the interactive nature of these games there just may be a connection.

A key study that showed the connection between media violence was the one by Eron. He followed a group of young people for 22 years and found that those who watched more television at the age of eight were more likely, at the age of 30, to have committed more serious crimes, to be more aggressive when drinking and to punish their children more harshly than others do. Other researchers have repeated Eron's study and found similar results. Another researcher, Centerwall, surveyed young male felons imprisoned for committing violent crimes. Between one-quarter and one-third reported imitating the crime techniques they saw on television (Tepperman, no date). This is not surprising when one considers that the level of violence during Saturday morning cartoons is higher than the level of violence during prime television time. Accordingly there are 20 to 25 violent acts per hour on Saturday morning versus three to five acts per hour in prime time. Furthermore the National Institute of Mental Health found that 80.3 per cent of all television programmes contain acts of violence and that children born today will witness 200 000 acts of violence on television by the time that they are 18 years old (Peterson, no date; Some things you should know about media violence and media literacy, 2000).

Regarding video games, De Waal, a student at the Simon-Fraser University Media Laboratory, studied the physiological effect of video games on the human. De Waal 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, that is the amount of electrical activity on the skin, and also players' heart rates. De Waal found galvanic skin responses and heart rates in the subjects rose differently, depending on the content of the game. There was a difference between whether the game they were playing was violent or nonviolent in terms of their amount of activation (Clements, 1995).

### **4. Misleading of the player of violent video/internet games**

According to DeGaetano and Bander (1996) violent video/Internet games send the following false messages to players:

- 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 right or wrong, black or white;
- it is acceptable to immerse oneself in the video game's rule-driven reality without questioning the rules.
- a person should use instinctual rather than thoughtful, responsible behaviours to react to problems; and
- personal imagination is not an important problem-solving skill.

These false messages are strengthened because of the distinguished feature of video gaming, namely interactivity. As the computer industry becomes more sophisticated in its productions, so do the games promise a more realistic version of events. Gaming texts therefore promote the idea of full sensory embodied experience (Alloway and Gilbert,

## 5. Young people most susceptible to media violence

According to research, there are three factors that are strong predictors of whether young people will be influenced by media violence (Tepperman, no date):

*First factor:* Identifying with one of the characters. The response will depend on which character the player identifies with. Therefore, since aggressors in the media are usually male and females are usually victims, boys will be more likely to respond with aggression and girls with fear. Studies indicate that after playing violent video games boys tend to feel satisfied but on the other hand girls feel less comfortable and are less likely to play again.

In this regard one has to include masculinity when discussing the influence of electronic media violence on children. It is suggested that video/Internet games, more so than violent movies, are directed at a male youth market which are intensely masculinist, aggressive and violent. There are many more males than females who play video games and there are more aggressive themes, male figures and male voices on screen in video games than on television. If one considers that it is mostly males that are targeted by the gaming industry, it is disturbing how the powerful and seductive images of masculinity and violent action are merging. If one evaluates the game *Mortal Combat*, the screen action is embedded in violence. The challenge of the game is for players to identify with a screen character and to fight and win another in the exercise of violent action. In this game all the characters are violent and Sonya Blade, the only female character in the cast of eight, engages in battle with male characters and specializes in eroticized violence.

Another important aspect is that dominant masculinity is constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities and in relation to women. Even in games where males are not necessarily in leading roles, there is a determination in the game to mark out differences between male and female characters where females are being sexualized and eroticized. One can derive from this that players are introduced to the pleasures of sexual domination. Given that the consumers and players of games are male, it usually means domination by men of women. For example, in the game *Virtual Valerie*, players are offered the opportunity of having Valerie perform at their pleasure. Thus, players are invited to act out their fantasies in a virtual world where sexual desires are immediately gratified (Alloway and Gilbert, 1998:95, 99, 102–105).

*Second factor:* Interpreting what they see as realistic and relevant to their own lives. What is suggested with this statement is that media violence is more likely to have a strong effect on children who are exposed to violence in their lives. Furthermore, media violence will also have a strong effect on young children, the reason being that they lack the real-life experiences to judge whether something they see on screen is realistic.

*Third factor:* Personal fantasizing about the characters in a violent game. Daydream 'reruns' will increase the influence of the violent scenes a child has watched.

It has been suggested that the two shooters responsible for the Columbine tragedy in 1999 are a good example of the susceptibility of young people to violent portrayals in the electronic media. It is speculated that the two boys were imitating the characters they played on their home computers. According to media reports the two shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, enjoyed playing the game *DOOM*, which is licensed by the United States Military to train soldiers to effectively kill. When the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which tracks

Internet hate groups, did a search they found a copy of Harris' Web site with a version of DOOM that he had customized. In his version of DOOM there are two shooters, each with extra weapons and unlimited ammunition, and the other characters in the game can't fight back (Anderson and Dill, 2000:722; It starts: action games blamed for tragedy, 1999). Indeed Harris listed, as one of his hobbies, that he is a professional DOOM and DOOM II creator, and one of the items confiscated from the shooters included DOOM paraphernalia.

There are warning signs to tell if children and juveniles have been impacted by violent electronic media content. According to the American Psychology Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics the warning signs to look out for can be broken down into the following three age groups (Young, no date).

- Toddlers and preschool children
- School-aged children
- Preteens and teenagers

Warning signs in toddlers and preschool children:

- Have many temper tantrums in a single day;
- have many aggressive outbursts, often for no reason;
- are extremely active, impulsive and fearless;
- consistently refuse to follow directions and listen to adults;
- do not seem attached to parents; and
- frequently watch violence on television, engage in play that has violent themes or are cruel towards other children.

Warning signs in school-aged children:

- Have trouble paying attention and concentrating;
- disrupt classroom activities;
- do poorly in school;
- frequently get into fights at school;
- watch many violent television shows and movies or play a lot of violent video games;
- make friends with other children known to be unruly or aggressive;
- consistently do not listen to adults;
- are cruel or violent towards pets or other animals; and
- are easily frustrated.

Warning signs in the pre-teen and teenage adolescents:

- Consistently do not listen to authority figures;
- mistreat people and seem to rely on physical violence or threats of violence to solve problems;
- do poorly in school and often skip class; and
- get suspended from school or drop out of school.

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## **6. Nature and effects of media violence on children and juveniles**

Of course most people do not become violent when they watch television or movie violence or play a violent Internet game. But they may be affected in one of the following ways:

- An aggressor effect: encouraging violent behaviour;

- a victim effect: increasing fearfulness;
- a bystander effect: leading to callousness, accepting violence as normal; and
- an appetite effect: building a desire to play more violent games (Tepperman, no date).

It is postulated that in general electronic media violence affects children in the following manner (Some things you should know about media violence and media literacy, 2000):

- Increasing aggressiveness and antisocial behaviour;
- increasing their fear of becoming victims;
- making them less sensitive to violence and to victims of violence; and
- increasing their appetite for more violence in entertainment and in real life.

The above factors can be combined to include the following two prominent effects of media violence:

- Learning of aggressive behaviour; and
- desensitization.

### **6.1 Learning of aggressive behaviour**

According to social learning theory, children may imitate the acts of aggression as seen through the electronic media (Gunter and McAleer, 1997:103; Melville-Thomas, 1985:9). It is postulated that children may learn that violence is a useful and appropriate way of solving problems. In specific laboratory settings researchers found that children can be encouraged to behave more aggressively following exposure to violent behaviour on film or television. The relationship between viewing media violence and the level of aggressiveness builds over time, with children and juveniles appearing to develop a television dependency. Furthermore, poorer academic achievers, those with less developed social skills and those who fantasize about violence tend to display greater aggressiveness. These children also tend to spend more time watching television. In addition to this, children who strongly identify with aggressive characters and perceive violence as realistic also tend to display more pronounced aggressive tendencies (Gunter and McAleer, 1997:103). In this regard one may argue that the same reaction can be expected from children playing violent Internet games, because of the interactive nature of these games.

### **6.2 Desensitization**

Clements (1995) postulates that games like DOOM are at the forefront of the battle over violent Internet games and their effect on children. It is argued that games like DOOM desensitizes children to cruelty and may make them more likely to commit violent acts in real life. Furthermore, an alarming number of children and juveniles seem to experience pleasure in their media encounters with violent entertainments and express insatiable demands for more of the violent content (Schwartz and Matzkin, 1999:117). Thus, children tend to get bored with a violent game that is played over and over. What excited them at first no longer does and therefore the manufacturer produces games with more action and more violence.

Researchers have also studied the effects of more graphic forms of violence on especially young men in their late teens and early twenties. The results show that repeated exposure to films portraying violence, especially with a sexual context where women are victims, was found to shift the attitudes of the young men to be less sympathetic towards rape victims and more lenient in their judgements about alleged rapists. Thus repeated exposure to graphic depictions of violence may lead viewers/players to adjust their emotional reactions to it. These altered judgements and emotional reactions may be carried over into judgements made

about victims of violence in more realistic settings (Gunter and McAleer, 1997:105). This may be true of violent Internet games where, firstly, there is only one female character who is mainly subordinate to the leading masculine characters and, secondly, the female character uses erotic violence to fight against this masculine character.

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## **7. Possible intervention strategies to prevent children from playing violent Internet games**

There are various methods available to parents and other interest groups (such as teachers) to limit the time that children spend on the Internet and violent content children may be exposed to.

Firstly, children have to be taught about exploitation, pornography, hate literature and excessive violence so that they know how to react when they see this material (Cybersafe kids: a parent's guide, no date).

Secondly, the computer can be placed in a visible area of the home where it would be easier to monitor the time and content of the Internet connection. In an interview with children, the overall reaction was that it is the parents' responsibility to monitor and regulate the use of the Internet. Parents should be aware of the following signs that may help them determine whether access to the Internet should be denied:

- When a child becomes uneasy or defensive when a parent walks into a room or lingers in the room, since this could be a sign that the child is seeing/doing something forbidden;
- when a child plays Internet games obsessively, that is if he/she is playing almost 24 hours a day; and
- when playing Internet games takes time away from other activities (Clements, 1995; Cybersafe kids: a parent's guide, no date; Do you think the Web should be censored so you can't see harmful material?, 1997–2000; Young, no date).

Thirdly, because of the easy access to the Internet, children can get any game they want without their parents knowing about it. In this regard parents can make use of parental control features to block access to violent games or access to more violent aspects of a game. However, the biggest problem with these control features is that children can use them to lock parents out, so they don't know what the children are playing (Clements, 1995; Cybersafe kids: a parent's guide, no date).

Fourthly, and most importantly, children should be taught media literacy skills. In this regard parents can help children distinguish between fantasy and reality, teach children that real life violence has consequences, help children understand how they are being targeted by Internet games manufacturers and ask them how they feel after playing a violent game (refer to the different responses given by boys and girls after playing violent games) (Clements, 1995; Some things you should know about media violence and media literacy).

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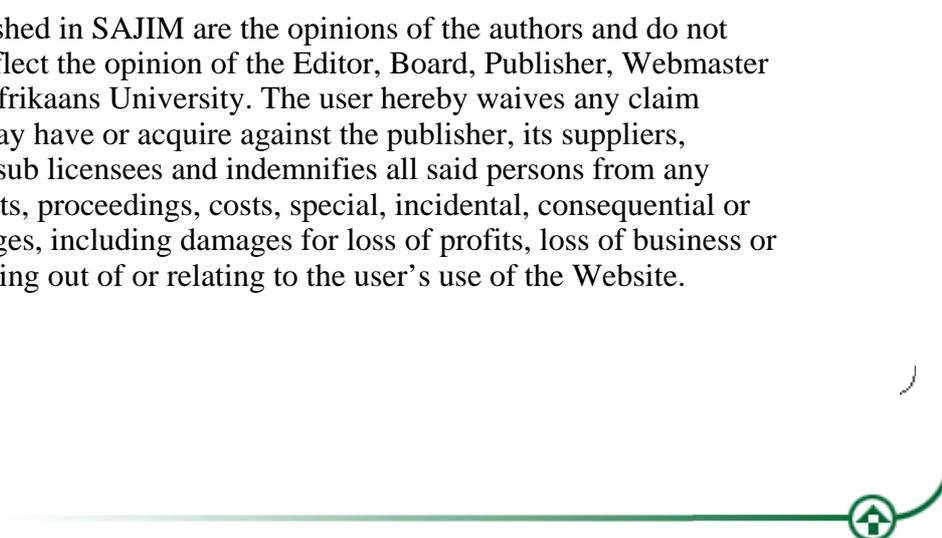
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