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### The Underlying Theme of Undertale: Violence in Games

After the terror of the Columbine High School shooting many searched for an answer to the question, “Why?”. As the media covered the horrific shooting, evidence showed that the perpetrators, Dylan and Eric, frequented games such as *DOOM* and *Wolfenstein*. There, a hypothetical correlation between violence in video games and violence in youth was formed. However, skeptics rebuked the rash notion that video games were the causation, or even a correlation to the massacre. Politicians and scientists scrambled to test the theory that video games caused violence in youth. The following explores the findings of those studies and their subsequent studies. The 2015 role-playing game *Undertale*, written and developed by Toby Fox, will be used to synthesize the accuracy of the information. Therefore, to what extent, do violent video games have on the behavior and development of youth?

Significantly, fictional violence is a developmental norm; whereas non-fictional violence is not a developmental norm. For example, children of all cultures grow up listening to fairy tales and epics regarding heroes and villains. Some of these tales include, but are not limited to: China’s *Journey to the West*, Germany’s *Sleeping Beauty*, and Greece’s *Odyssey*. However, many children do not grow up experiencing violence. Forms of violence include, but are not limited to, parental abuse, domestic violence, war, and terrorism.

In *Undertale*, Toriel states “When you encounter a monster, you will enter a FIGHT.” This is a common step in video game tutorials which require you to fight or use force to

progress. In fact, “youth often eagerly seek out violent fictional narratives, from fairy tales to video games...” (DeCamp 2017). However, youth rarely seek out real-world violence. Real world violence causes emotional damage, such as fear, trauma, and depression. Fictional violence however, does not elicit these responses in youth. Rather, there is a distinct separation between watching violence and experiencing violence. Consubstantially, media violence does not have an immediate impact on the physical environment of a youth, whereas real-world violence does (DeCamp 2017). For example, watching a building in “Hotland” burn down, does not leave the same impression as watching an arsonist burn down a physical elementary school.

Furthermore, aggression is a multivariant construct (Kirsh 2003), therefore, many factors must be taken into account, such as early exposure to violence and rash behavior. The risk of violence is also only accessible once certain criteria have been met, such as a setting and a provocation. For example, ostracization at school meets the contextual criteria for a violent situation to flourish. The world of *Undertale* creates a situation as well, monsters after the player’s soul. However, the situation is fictional, no monster is really threatening to take the physical player’s physical soul. Therefore, there is no elicited emotional response from the player, such as the aforementioned fear, depression, and trauma. Conclusively, fictional video games most likely cannot provide the player with the emotional stimulus needed to enter a stage of fight or flight. The extent to which fictional violence causes aggression or negative emotional responses in youth is non-significant to negative.

However, some claim violent media, even fictional, is a health hazard. Senator Brownback (R. Kan) stated “violent entertainment is a public health hazard.” (Vastag 2004). Craig Anderson Ph.D., campaigned against video games, and assisted in a July 2000 study between the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and the

American Academy of Pediatrics. The coalition concluded that all violent media, including video games, contributed to violent behaviors and aggression in youth. Children, especially between the ages of four and twelve, will imitate what they see on television. For example, in 2008, Codey Porter, age ten, died in a sandbox while imitating his favorite *Naruto* character, Gaara. The child was buried headfirst in the sandbox, where he eventually suffocated.

Immediately, the conclusion that all forms of media contribute to violence, is to be questioned. The science behind the statement, required to even make the statement, is by nature unethical. One would have to define all controls, such as family life, moral alignment, and exposure to real-world violence (DeCamp 2017). Due to the unethical nature of the science required to come to this conclusion, it can be inferred that this statement was made outside of the reach of evidence (Ferguson 2014). Even Johnathan Freedman, Ph.D., called the statement “irresponsible” (Vastag 2004). Therefore, the aforementioned is an example of a political and fear-based conclusion, lacking sufficient evidence to support its claims.

Regardless, research supports the idea that the context of aggression in game, determines the play style of the game. For example, in the game *Undertale*, Toriel advises the player to “strike up a friendly conversation”, and wait for her to “resolve the conflict”. However, the player has the option of disregarding Toriel’s advice in favor of violence. Therefore, violence in the game *Undertale* is initially discouraged. However, if violence is used, before the final boss fight, a secret boss fight will be initiated. The player will be judged according to his sin of using violence and charged to defeat the ultimate boss. The context of *Undertale* is that violence breeds more violence, and all violence has consequences. The effect caused by violent scenes on youth is dependent on the context of the violent scenes (Sakamoto 2008). For example, if a player takes on the role of a character who is proud to serve his nation, and is given a “justified”

reason for violence, the player is more likely to use violence. However, when given an unjust character, players may be more apprehensive and have reservations to use violence (Gao 2017).

The importance of studying video game aggression is not the frequency by which aggression is used, rather the motivation behind it (Sauer 2015). Therefore, moral alignment determines how the game is played. Those with a utilitarian alignment are more likely to sacrifice one for the good of all. One particular study saw that those with a utilitarian alignment sacrificed one man for the potential of ending a war between two races. Whereas those who support deontology saved the one man, because his life was just as worthy as everyone else's (Ellithorpe 2015). Therefore, the moral alignment of a player determines the action taken. The effect of video game violence on youth is non-significant, as it is the concept of moral alignment that dictates the decisions in a game.

A counterclaim presented is that youth, regardless of context, will do whatever it takes to win a game. In the 2015 American Psychological Association study, it was determined that video games "reduced prosocial behavior [and] empathy" (Vastag 2004). Therefore, when presented with the option of violence or stealth, the child will choose violence. Violence is an opportunity to "mow down" obstacles in their way; rather than being patient and sneaking their way through. This procured evidence contradicts the notion that context determines aggression, not the game itself. Youth, therefore, have no option to choose violence or no violence.

However, a particular study showed that those with more experience in games, bypassed enemies and used stealth more frequently than those without experience. Those without experience were more likely to shoot anything and everything that moved for fear of being attacked, while those with experience avoided unnecessary battles (Ellithorpe 2015). The notion that the context of violence in a game determines aggression is therefore supported by evidence.

The player does, in fact, have the choice to use violence or stealth. Furthermore, the video game *Undertale* allows the player to use no violence, or as much violence as they want to complete the game. Therefore, the context of violence is completely optional, allowing the player full control.

Ineffective parenting and lack of attention lead to aggression; and defiance in the classroom and the home. Children of parents who set time limits and checked the content of games before purchase were less likely to argue with adults (Vastag 2004). Furthermore, Susan Calvert PhD stated “when you have an adult...to translate messages, the kids get them better.”. Parents can take an active role in discouraging violence, teaching children what is acceptable and unacceptable in the real-world. Parents who fail to handle defiant behavior in an effective manner, also leave their child susceptible to further defiance, leading to aggressive behaviors (DeCamp 2017).

The game *Undertale* features two types of parenting. The first type exemplified by Toriel, is the ideal, pacifistic parenting style. After rescuing Frisk from The Fall, she tells her “When you encounter a monster, you will enter a FIGHT. While you are in a FIGHT, strike up a friendly conversation. Stall for time, I will come to resolve the conflict.”. Toriel has already taught the child, Frisk, not to use violence to retaliate. Rather, every conflict can be resolved using a friendly conversation. The second type of parenting exemplified is the not so ideal, retaliation style. Asgore reacts to violence with more violence, rather than taking time to listen and find a resolution. Unlike his wife Toriel, Asgore teaches his son Asriel, that violence is the answer. Violence can only be resolved with more violence. Asriel the direct foil to Frisk, uses his power to attack Asgore and Frisk. In the end, he is defeated and flees before the merciful Frisk.

Likewise, personality and the tendency to become aggressive outside of stimuli also determine aggression, post-game stimulus. Personality factors such as low self-esteem and trait

hostility have all been linked to aggression and aggressive behavioral tendencies (Kirsh 2003). Even educational factors, such as a low educational level or dropping out of school have been linked with violent tendencies. Even though school shooting perpetrators have been male adolescents, violent responses to video game stimulus are not one-sided. Both males and females react with the same range of variants under video game stimulus. Reviewing data gathered, it can be theorized that the interactive video game experience can be a combination of the game itself, one's personality, and one's susceptibility to becoming immersed in the digital world (Lachlan 2008). For example, *Undertale* characters will treat Frisk like a criminal and fear her if the player decides to fight monsters. If the player is indifferent to the repercussions of murder in the game, they may very well continue to play the Genocide route. However, if the player is concerned with being perceived as a good person, the player will not choose the Genocide route. Personality, then, determines the play style and amount of aggression in the game. The extent to which video games affect the behaviors of children is, likewise, non-significant, as there are a multitude of other factors in regards to behavior.

The consequences of this research question are integral to the attribution of violent games to youth violence. For example, after the Columbine High School Massacre, the defense attributed the violent actions of the boys to their violent games. Furthermore, the notion was raised that Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooting perpetrator, had logged many hours on *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. Therefore, another relationship was formed between a male aggressor and violent video games. In the recent, 2018, Parkland school shooting, the perpetrator, Cruz, was also accused of playing hours of violent video games. The Trump administration, currently in session as of February 2018, has taken this pattern of violent games and aggressors into account. However, in the case of the Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, video games played no role.

In fact, his roommate recalled that he “thought it was weird” Cho did not play video games. With conflicting circumstances, a blanket statement cannot be formed. Therefore, research into circumstance and motivation must be accounted for.

In regard to the possible correlation between violent video games and its effect on the behaviors of youth, one can determine that there is no substantial evidence leaning either way. Each study has determined that there is non-significant evidence of a correlation between violent games and aggression in youth. Therefore, one instead must look to other factors that cannot be controlled and tested in a lab, such as: family, environment, and exposure to real-world violence and aggression. Scientific conclusions should only determine what their evidence has the power to (Ferguson 2014). When statements and correlations are made out of fear, politics, and faulty science, an ignorant populace is fostered. When the situation arises, one should take all factors into account such as development, personality, environment, and family structure; before turning to evidence yet to be conclusive. Ultimately, the science behind violent video games and their effects on the behavior of youth is still inconclusive. There is still much to learn, and still more that may never be researched, as it is unethical. Therefore, one cannot conclude that there is, or is not, a correlation between violent games and youth behaviors. (Word Count 2066)

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