In October 2005, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a state law that would restrict the sale or rental of video or computer games that were deemed violent, specifically, games “in which the range of options available to the player includes killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being” to anyone under 18 years old (California Civil Code – Section 1.2a. Violent Video Games). These games were classified as “violent” if the depictions of violence was “offensive to the community” or if the violence depicted was committed in an “especially heinous, cruel, or depraved” manner. Under this law, game manufacturers and distributors were required to label games with 2” x 2” stickers displaying the numeral “18” on their front covers in order to indicate who can purchase or rent these games (California Civil Code – Section 1.2a. Violent Video Games).

However, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) and the Video Software Dealers Association (VSDA), but now known as the Entertainment Merchants Association (EMA), filed a lawsuit against California saying the law was unconstitutional — and won on the basis that the law infringed upon free speech. Additionally, there were measures already placed on video games to prevent selling them to minors. This is the all too familiar lettering system of “E” for “Everyone,” “T” for “Teen,” and “M” for “Mature,” etc… Like I just mentioned, the court ruled that this law violated the First Amendment and that, while the government has a compelling interest in protecting minors, there was “not enough evidence to support the idea that the interactive nature of video games actually leads to violent behavior” (Media Coalition).

The state of California went on to appeal this ruling to the U.S. 9th circuit court of appeals, but again the state lost and the law was struck down. After some time, the state appealed to the Supreme Court, with California represented by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger — ironically no stranger to violence himself — versus the EMA. If you want the details of this case, I’m sure Professor Medvic may be able to fill in the blanks after this paper, but

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1 Reference to Helen Lovejoy in The Simpsons who often says, “Will someone please think of the children?!”
essentially the Supreme Court presented two questions to both parties: 1. Does the First Amendment bar a state from restricting the sale of violent video games to minors? And 2., if the First Amendment applies to violent video games that are sold to minors and the standard of review is strict scrutiny, is the state required to demonstrate a direct causal link between violent video games and physical or psychological harm to minors before the state can prohibit the sale of those violent video games? (Media Coalition).

Like I just mentioned, I don’t have the details of each argument, mostly because there are piles of paperwork and I am an English major/Film Minor, I like to read and watch movies in my free time, not research court cases (no offense Government majors). But I don’t have the details of this case because this paper isn’t about Schwarzenegger vs. EMA. It’s about video games, specifically, the violence. Since the mid-ninety’s when video games when from two-bit games like Pac Man to graphically realistic Manhunt 2, these games have been the target and focus of public debate. Many a concerned parent and politician are quick to point the finger at video games for causing aggressive behavior and violence in youth, blaming games for theft, murder, and school shootings (Anderson et al., 2007). Most research in the past fifty years has looked for connections between violent media and aggressive behavior by studying all sorts of populations, including youths, adults, rich, poor, criminals, non-criminals, as well as used different types of experiments from laboratory to longitudinal. And to these researchers, the debate of causality between violent media and violent behavior is over, that video games directly influences aggressive behavior and perpetuates isolation and antisocial behavior (Anderson et. al, 2007).

But, not all of the researchers agree. The strong link between video game violence and real world violence, and the conclusion that video games lead to social isolation and poor interpersonal skills, are drawn from bad or irrelevant research and simplistic news reports (Kutner and Olson, 2008). As research shows, youth violence has decreased significantly over the past decade and video games are no longer social isolating, but become a social activity among friends and peers. Matter of fact, games have become a way for children to develop prosocial skills, like cooperation and responsibility.

And that’s what this paper, and the subsequent debate all of you will engage in after I’m finished reading this, will be about: why video games? Why are video games to blame? Does playing violent video games like Postal 2 and Grand Theft Auto IV directly influence theft, murder, and school shootings? Or is it something else? Is society
misdirecting their blame to video games to ignore the real issues, like poverty, poor school systems, and domestic violence? All of this video game debate is about the children, protecting them from moral depravity and violent behavior. But are we just really thinking about ourselves? Protecting ourselves by living in denial that other risk factors are causing these violent youth issues, but blame video games instead? Are we really thinking about the children?

While most of us in this room have played a few video games in our time, of course I direct this at the students, I don’t think Professor Medvic, when he has the spare time, plays *Grand Theft Auto*. But for those of you who didn’t grow up with video games, I want to give you a brief history of its violence. Video games first emerged in the 1970s, mostly coin-operated machines in arcades found in the mall where people, mostly teenagers, would hang out and play for hours. Some of the first games were *Pong, Space Invaders, and Asteroids* (basically, the graphics of these games were impressive at the time, but there was a lot of room for improvement). When the video games made the transition from the arcade to the home with portable consoles like Atari and Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), not only did they become readily accessible to children, but also the graphics, well, were more graphic. From the early ninety’s, most games were 16 bit consoles (which looks like today’s Gameboy), where there were rectangular characters moving through rectangular worlds with clumsy game play. But today, video games are so smooth in animation that they could be mistaken for movies, or even more impressive, mistaken for real life. Further, games became more “three-dimensional,” where the player (most likely a child) would feel as though he or she were in the game, the ones fighting, killing, and maiming (Anderson et. al, 2007). For today, I sent you four Youtube videos, *Wolfenstein 3D, Grand Theft Auto IV, Manhunt 2, and Postal 2* (which is actually at the center of the Supreme Court case). While I won’t be talking about those games specifically, I wanted to give you an idea how graphic games can get, and with developing technology, how realistic they can be.

It was only a matter of time before concerned parents saw what their children were playing (especially if their children were playing those games up and more than 42 hours a week). Parents were terrified at the levels of violence and easy access to these games (essentially what started the Supreme Court case). Definitions of what is considered “heinous,” “depraved,” and “cruel,” were thrown around, and video games faced the same censorship codes that movies were regulated by. But as I mentioned before, there already was a rating system. Nudity and
sexuality should be either avoided or handled “tastefully,” women, children, animals must be protected, and violence can’t be too “real” (Pollard, 2010). Granted, as time passes and acceptable standards for “violent images” change, so do the definitions of “heinous,” “depraved,” and “cruel.” But the same intentions for censorship are there; we must protect the children from viewing heinous acts of moral degradation.

I’m not going to define these words for you all. The real concern for parents and politicians is the possible negative effects of media violence, specifically violent video games, has on children. They have every right to be considered, though. American children and adolescents are exposed to an insane amount of media each day: children between the ages of 8 – 18 spend an average of 6 hours and 21 minutes each day using entertainment media (that’s about 42 hours a week of TV, commercial or self-recorded video, movies, video games, etc…), and this time is much longer if the children have a television in their rooms (AAP, 2009). A large portion of that absurd amount of media is violent content, either watched on TV or “virtually perpetrated” (aka, video games). By 18 years old, the average young person will have viewed an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television alone. Specifically to video games, more children than you think play the “M” rated games: 7 out of 10 children in grades 4 through 12 report playing mature rated games, with 78% of the boys actually owning these games (AAP, 2009).

With this constant exposure to media violence, there is bound to be some negative effects on children. Already there is substantial research that claims media violence, including television, movies, music, and video games, is a significant risk factor on children’s health. A policy statement on media violence released by the American Academy of Pediatrics compressed all of the relevant media effects research into an eight-page summary and concluded, after reviewing the research, that media violence can contribute to “aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed” (AAP 1495). One of leading researchers on the effects of violent video games is Craig A. Anderson, a professor and director of the Department of Psychology at Iowa State University. Anderson’s research mostly focuses on aggression, especially on the potentially harmful effects of exposure to violent entertainment media, explaining how violent video games promote violent behavior and desensitizes individuals to aggression. You cannot pick up literature on media effects without finding Anderson cited with one of his experiments and research. He’s even one of the leading researchers cited in Schwarzenegger vs. Video Software Dealers Association case. Anderson’s most significant contribution is the General Aggression
Model, which is the most current and leading theory of how media effects aggression, which borrows from social modeling theory and other cognitive theories. While collaborating with fellow researchers, Douglas A. Gentile and Katherine E. Buckely, the model suggests that aggressive behavior occurs when aggressive cognitive scripts are activated by particular environmental stimuli (aka violent media and video games). This model theorizes that repeated exposure to violent stimuli, the more aggressive scripts are formed and reinforced when the more often these scripts are used. Therefore, if a person is exposed to more violent stimuli, he is more likely to interpret neutral stimuli as violent and become more aggressive (Anderson et. al, 2007). The General Aggression Model states how video games have a very strong influence on the short-term behavior with more aggressive behavior, disregard for others, and especially, a disregard for consequences of violent actions (Anderson et. al, 2007).

As I mentioned before, the effects of violent video games on aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior is well documented. Participants who played violent video games were more likely to “produce a hostile expectation bias,” which is the tendency to “perceive harmful actions by others as intentional rather than accidental” (qtd in Greitemeyer and Osswald, 2010). Further, violent games influence aggressive affect, not only playing a violent video game increases state hostility and anxiety levels, but also positively associated with aggressive behavior (Greitemeyer and Osswald, 2010). In regards to school violence, correlational evidence showed that playing violent video games is positively related to arguing with teachers and getting into physical fights. Also, children who played more violent video games early in the school year became more aggressive (verbally and physically) (Greitemeyer and Osswald, 2010).

And if you listen to popular news reports, then this is no surprise to you. Society is quick to blame video games for the horrible acts of violence committed by adolescents. News reports were quick to see the violent video games like Manhunt 2 and Grand Theft Auto IV and put two and two together. The attorney for Lee Malvo, otherwise known as the “DC Sniper,” claimed that the teen murderer taught himself how to kill by playing Halo (Kutner and Olson, 2008). In the wake of the Columbine Shootings, investigators revealed that the teenager shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were computer gamers, and many a psychologist will suggest that their interest in “bloody shoot-‘em-up” games taught them how to kill (Kutner and Olson, 2008). These are just two cases where video games are blamed for youth tragedies, but they’re the ones everyone remembers.
Okay, so there’s some evidence that violent video games have some negative effects on children. But, there’s something not right here. Look around the room. Look at the students. I guarantee that most of the students, if not all, grew up playing video games, violent ones I’m sure. I’m positive that at least a hand full of us still play regularly, and if not us specifically, than our roommates are probably playing right now. But look at us, we’re not exactly disgruntled youth. We may be tired and frustrated by our schoolwork, but we’re not angry. We’re not bitter. We’re certainly not aggressive (unless it’s in a debate). There’s something wrong here. If the statistics are accurate, and the research is full-proof, then why are we not stealing school supplies from your offices, Professors? Breaking into cars parked along Race Ave? Most importantly, why are we not shooting up the school? Yes, when I ask these questions, I understand how ridiculous they sound. We are all well-adjusted and rational young adults. So clearly, not everyone who plays violent video games become aggressive and violent.

Of course, this is the largest criticism of the negative effects of violent video games that video game violence connects to real life violence. While there are misunderstandings from the effects research, some of it is just spinning of the statistics by politicians and researchers. In fact, much of the information in the press about the effects of video games is just wrong (Kutner & Olson, 2008). Returning to the “D.C. Sniper,” teen shooter, Lee, admitted that he trained by shooting a real gun at paper plates. While the video game Halo is a shooting game, you are killing alien bugs with futuristic guns, which, contrary to popular belief, is not an effective way to train a real sniper. Also, Lee had a history of antisocial and criminal behavior, which is one of the best indicators of potential violent behavior (Kutner and Olson, 2008). And it is also unlikely that video games played a significant role in the tragedy at Columbine; Klebold was depressed and suicidal, and Harris was a sociopath (Kutner and Olson, 2008). Actually, there is very little connection between school violence and video game violence. The U.S. Secret Service studied the profiles of student perpetrators of school violence from 1974 to 2000 who the press linked to video game violence to discover that only one in eight school shooters showed any interest in violent video games, and only one in four liked violent movies (Kutner and Olson, 2008). But most importantly, youth violence has actually decreased over the past decade. Violent juvenile crime in the United States peaked in 1993 and has been declining ever since, and this includes school violence (Kutner and Olson, 2008). Juvenile arrests for “murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assaults” fell 44%, which were the lowest juvenile arrest rate or violent crimes since 1983, and juvenile
arrests peaked at 3,790 in 1993, but by 2004, arrests plummeted down to 71% to 1,110 arrests (Kutner and Olson, 2008).

While there are over hundreds of studies done on the violent effects of video games, neither the quantity nor the quality of these studies provide concrete conclusions. Nearly every study suffers from unclear definitions of “violence” and “aggression,” ambiguous measurements by using questionable measures of “aggression,” and overgeneralization of the data and tried to apply it to real world situations (Ferguson, 2004). One of the largest criticisms toward violent media effects research is the definitions used in experiments. What do these researchers actually mean by “violence”? What is “aggression”? Since “violence” can be difficult to study both practically and ethically, most experiments substitute “aggression,” assuming that these two constructs are close enough that the same factors that influence aggression will also influence violence (Ferguson, 2004). Further, these studies don’t test or study for criminal behavior in participants: in some correlational research, there is an attempt to measure the relationship between media violence exposure and some measure of “aggressive behavior, thoughts, or emotions, but not criminal behavior” (Ferguson, 2004). But this experimental research usually involves studying the impact that a brief exposure to media violence on aggressive behavior, which usually means pushing or shocking an opponent in a time test (Ferguson, 2004). In these experiments, it is implied that examining the relationship between media violence exposure and aggressive behavior can imply a link between media violence and real violence (Ferguson, 2004).

This was the problem with Anderson and fellow researcher’s work: they tried to extrapolate their laboratory findings onto real world situations. They tested 161 9–12 year-olds and 354 college students, who were each randomly assigned to play either violent or nonviolent video game. In this context, violence in the games is defined as intentional harm to video game character who is motivated to avoid harm, while non-violence is defined by nice music, charming, relaxing, etc… After the participants played their games, they played another computer game in which they set punishment levels (obnoxious noise blasts) to another person participating in this study (but there was no one actually receiving the blasts), thereby measuring aggression (Anderson et. al, 2007). (Explain) Anderson and others found that participants who played the violent video games punished their “opponents” with significantly more high-noise blasts than those who played the nonviolent games (Anderson et. al, 2007). But, Anderson and
others use this laboratory experiment to shed light on real world behavior. They fail to differentiate between aggression and violence, and their logic assumes that the subjects in this experiment would react the same aggressive way both in and outside of the lab (Kutner and Olson, 2008). Would someone who delivers a brief blast really be aggressive in real life? Stab someone? Get into a fight just because they gave a brief blast of noise?

One of the key problems with media violence effects research is the failure to take into account key variables that may explain both why individuals are attracted to violent media (especially video games) and why they behave violently (Ferguson, 2009). These are often called “Third Variables,” which include factors like personality, family history, socioeconomic status, gender, age, and biology (the list can go on for pages) (Ferguson, 2009). These other risk factors are equally important to youth violence, but probably the most important is parental involvement. Being exposed to “harsh and inconsistent parenting” is the most important environmental factor (Steinberg qtd in Kutner and Olson, 2008). Hitting, verbal abuse and other forms of violence inside home are strong predictors of children and adolescents acting violently toward others (Kutner and Olson, 2008). How much a parent is involved in a child’s life will greatly effect how they perceive and react to violence.

On a slightly different note, not all violent video games are bad, there are some benefits to playing violent video games. A famous theory that’s tossed around a lot is the Catharsis theory where people purge their aggression by releasing it indirectly through non-violent means, like playing video games rather than fighting (Anderson et al, 2007). Typically, academic research on video games focus on the social isolation that children experience when they are cooped up in their rooms playing for roughly 42 hours a week. However, for many young teens, friendship was a major factor for playing violent video games. Games are largely becoming a community event because online gaming has opened up options to play with friends. Further, children are learning how to cooperate when playing multiplayer modes, building bonds and healthy friendships when they play Halo and Left 4 Dead (Kutner and Olson, 2008).

Then why video games? Why are they being blamed for the adolescent crimes by news reports, angry parents, and politicians? Like everything in America, it has to deal with politics. People are easy to jump onto the anti violent video bandwagon because it’s easy to get on; blame the “entertainment industry” for corrupting our “innocent youth.” But this isn’t the only time parents and politicians have attacked media violence. Public concern
about the portrayal and influence of violence and crime in the media rises and falls in a distinctive cycle. Whenever a new medium is developed, from movies to the Internet, different moral pressure groups pick the issue up and there is an outbreak of censorship episodes, prosecutions, and legislative inquiries in order to restrict it (Cawelti, 2004). Two things always happen when a medium is under attack: 1. the medium announces a self-regulating system to reduce violent content or develops a more acceptable presentation of violence, and 2. a series of scientific research is carried, both anti and pro violence. Ultimately, the research shows that the relationship between media violence and violent behavior is more complex than we anticipated (Cawelti, 2004). These two developments tend to defuse the situation until another new medium comes that starts this cycle over again (Cawelti, 2004).

I can understand why video games are the concern today: I showed you those Youtube clips. You saw how the animation has changed so much (from Wolfenstein 3d’s rectangular graphics to Grand Theft Auto IV’s identical mapping of New York City). Have you seen the latest video games? Batman: Arkham City? L.A. Noir? Dead Space 2? The animation is stunning, but the violence is heinous. It is cruel. It is depraved. I’ve seen some horrible stuff done in video games, and I’ll admit, I’ve done some unspeakable things playing those games, too. But what are we really gaining by attacking video game violence? If not video games, then what next? By focusing on such an easy target as violent video games, parents, social activists and public policy makers tend to ignore the much more powerful and significant causes of youth violence that have already been well established, including a range of social, behavioral, economic, biological, and mental health factors (Kutner and Olson, 2008). And it has to do with those third variables I mentioned earlier, personality, family, biology, but most important family. Parents are the key to preventing youth violence, not banning violent video games. If your child is playing close to 42 hours a week of Grand Theft Auto, which perpetuates social isolation and fosters violent ideas, then why not step in? The first defense against child and adolescent violence is in the household. Henry Jenkins, an American Media Scholar, summed it up pretty nicely when he said, “The moral panic over violent video games is doubly harmful. It has led adult authorities to be more suspicious and hostile to many kids who already feel cut off from the system. It also misdirects energy away from eliminating the actual causes of youth violence and allows problems to continue to fester” (qtd in Kutner and Olson, 2008). Are we really focusing on the issue at hand? By attacking video game violence, are we really thinking about the children?
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