

Video Games Don't Make Kids Violent

Despite grave concerns that violent video games lead to aggression, the research suggests otherwise

By [Christopher J. Ferguson](#) Dec. 07, 2011 - TIMES



It's the holiday season and that means that kids by the millions are asking Santa for the opportunity to blow away enemy soldiers and aliens on the Xbox or PlayStation. Should parents be worried about buying such gifts? Violent video games (VVG) are now an established part of our culture; recent releases of games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* and *Skyrim* have been setting sales records for media releases (topping even blockbuster movies) and garnishing lavish reviews for their artistic merits. Ten years ago, scholars and politicians raised the possibility that such games might contribute to school shootings or other youth violence. What happened to these concerns?

Quite simply, the research just hasn't panned out. For one thing, even while video game sales have skyrocketed, youth violence plummeted to its lowest levels in 40 years according to [government statistics](#).

Secondly, it has been increasingly recognized that much of the early research on VVG linking them to increased aggression was problematic: most studies used outcome measures that had nothing to do with real-life aggression and failed to control carefully for other important variables, such as family violence, mental health issues or even gender in many studies (boys both play more VVG and are more aggressive.) This was something the U.S. Supreme Court recognized when, after considering California's attempt to ban the sale of VVG to minors in *Brown v. EMA*, it [stated](#) on June 27, 2011, "These studies have been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason."

More recent research has *not* found that children who play VVG are more violent than other kids, nor harmed in any other identifiable fashion. A recent longitudinal study of my own, following 165 10- to 14-year-old boys and girls over a three-year period, now [in press](#) with *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, finds no long-term link between VVG and youth aggression or dating violence. Another recent longitudinal study with young German children published in *Media Psychology* by Maria von Salisch and colleagues similarly found [no links](#) between VVG and aggression. Other scholars have found, as have Andrew Przybylski and colleagues writing in the [Review of General Psychology](#), that matching video game conditions more carefully in experimental studies with how they are played in real life makes VVG's effects on aggression essentially vanish. Since most video game experiments only have players play for short periods of time, often for as little as 10 minutes, and violent games tend to be more difficult to learn and have more complex controls than non-violent games, it appears that many participants in these experiments may simply have been frustrated by being cut off so quickly before they even learned how to play, rather than by the violent content of the game. Letting them play long enough to learn the game, or simply providing violent and non-violent games of equal complexity, erases the effects. In fact, experimental research led by my graduate student Jose Valadez found that both violent and non-violent games [tend to relax](#) people over time, not anger them.

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Our modern fears over VVGs appear to be in line with prior moral panics over media as diverse as jazz music, comic books and *Harry Potter*. Granted, too much passive activity, including video games, can contribute to obesity. Like anything else, gaming should be enjoyed in moderation, balanced with outdoor activity and allowing enough time for family and schoolwork. A very small number of kids, [about 3%](#), exhibit signs of pathological gaming. But regarding concerns about aggression, it appears to be that, fairly early on, children learn to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and their brains don't treat these phenomena the same. Santa Claus is a prime example. Despite not only their parents but all of society conspiring to lie to children about the reality of this fellow (complete with old men in red capes at the mall as "evidence"), children can reason out the improbability of his existence by the mid-elementary years. With those kinds of reasoning powers, kids can handle a video game that doesn't even claim to be real.