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'M' is for menace

By L. Brent Bozell III

Many American parents worry their children are too glassy-eyed before their video game consoles and can't even find the door to play outside even as the weather gets terrific. Johnny comes home from a blase day at school and runs up the stairs to his room to the best part of his day: mowing down cops or drug dealers in his virtual world.

Psychologist Douglas Gentile of the National Institute for Media and the Family has found children learn well from repeated violent video game playing, but not good lessons. Instead, children have more aggressive thoughts and behaviors after the desensitization of digitized butchery.

Mr. Gentile's latest research on students -- in grades three to five, grades eight and nine, and the early college years -- found those who play multiple violent games are more aggressive than those who play a mix of different video games.

He also found those who play these games constantly, every day, even in small doses, are more aggressive than those who play in fewer, larger chunks of time.

Mr. Gentile's conclusion about what violent video games can do to children is chilling: "Excellent teachers provide multiple approaches to a concept which helps children transfer knowledge to the real world. They help children practice a little each day rather than cramming, and they get children excited and hooked on learning. Violent video games use all of these techniques, and our children are learning from them."

These trends have stirred great concern in state legislatures. Recently, there has been a resurgence in bills to ban the sale of violent games to minors. Lawmakers in California, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Michigan have proposed fines for retailers selling games rated "M" to those under 18. Sales of video games were at record highs last year, reaching \$7.3 billion. The NPD Group, a research firm, found even though game sales are rising, the sales share of "M" games (for "mature" audiences) is rising faster: 16 percent of all games sold in 2004 were rated "M," compared to 12 percent in 2003 and 13 percent in 2002.

Illinois' Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich is pushing passage of the Safe Games Illinois Act, citing a new game out last month called "NARC" as the worst of the violent breed: "I've gotten to know quite a few video games over the last few months, but this may be the worst I've seen. When kids play 'NARC,' they spend their free time pretending to be drug addicts and learning how to hurt people. Right now, children can easily get their hands on 'NARC,' and other games just like it."

The game simulates drug use as well as violence. Players become narcotics officers who can arrest drug dealers and use the confiscated drugs to boost the progress of their game. Smoking marijuana slows game and gives the player more reaction time. Using an Ecstasy tablet creates a mellow atmosphere that can pacify aggressive foes.

Using LSD changes the appearance of the other characters, making it easier to distinguish enemy targets. Using crack increases the damage a player can inflict. It also causes the game controller to vibrate, simulating the actual physical effects of taking the drug.

Doesn't this sound like a great way for your kids to spend a sunny afternoon? This is why one satisfied customer on Amazon.com urged: "If you are looking for a few hours of non-pharmaceutical recreation, get this game. If you are under 14 -- ask your parents -- then get this game."

Over the last few years, drug use has become an increasingly popular theme in adult video games. In March, the New York Times reported more than half of the 40 video games cited for drug content by the Entertainment Software Rating Board were released in the last three years.

The trend just gets hotter. Take Two Interactive, publisher of the atrocious "Grand Theft Auto" series, recently announced a cocaine-inspired title will be released this year called "Snow." According to a company news release, the game "will challenge players to oversee every aspect of the drug trade."

Vivendi Universal is creating a game based on the film "Scarface," famous for its ultraviolence and cocaine abuse plot line. The company has also announced "Bulletproof," a game starring the likeness of the rapper and ex-crack dealer 50 Cent blazing "a bloody path through New York's drug underworld."

Is this the virtual reality that America's children should daily inhabit? Isn't it bad enough some children live in a real world of drugs and violence? Is it any wonder politicians and parents are mobilizing? It is becoming increasingly obvious that the "M" video-game rating should really stand for

"Menace" to society.

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