

Video Games Don't Create Killers



It is unclear whether the games trigger aggression or if aggressive children are drawn to more violent games.

Playing video games does not turn children into deranged, blood-thirsty super-killers, according to a new book by a pair of Harvard researchers.

Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson, a husband-and-wife team at Harvard Medical School, detail their views in "Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do", which came out last month and promises to reshape the debate on the effects of video games on kids.

"What I hope people realize is that there is no data to support the simple-minded concerns that video games cause violence," Kutner told Reuters.

The pair reached that conclusion after conducting a two-year study of more than 1,200 middle-school children about their attitudes towards video games.

It was a different approach than most other studies, which have focused on laboratory experiments that attempt to use actions like ringing a loud buzzer as a measure of aggression.

"What we did that had rarely been done by other researchers was actually talk to the kids. It sounds bizarre but it hadn't been done," Kutner said.

They found that playing video games was a near-universal activity among children, and was often intensely social.

But the data did show a link between playing mature-rated games and aggressive behavior. The researchers found that 51 percent of boys who played M-rated games -- the industry's equivalent of an R-rated movie, meaning suitable for ages 17 and up -- had been in a fight in the past year, compared to 28 percent of non-M-rated gamers.

The pattern was even stronger among girls, with 40 percent of

those who played M-rated games having been in a fight in the past year, compared to just 14 percent for non-M players.

Kutner and Olson said further study is needed because the data shows only a correlation, not causation. It is unclear whether the games trigger aggression or if aggressive children are drawn to more violent games.

"It's still a minority of kids who play violent video games a lot and get into fights. If you want a good description of 13-year-old kids who play violent video games, it's your local soccer team," Olson said.

The researchers also try to place video games in a larger context of popular culture. The anxiety many parents voice over video games largely mirrors the concerns raised when movies, comic books and television became popular.

"One thing I like about their approach is that they've tried to historicize the whole concept of a media controversy and that we've seen this before," said Ian Bogost, a professor at Georgia Tech known for his studies on video games.

The book urges a common-sense approach that takes stock of the entire range of a child's behavior. Frequent fighting, bad grades, and obsessive gaming can be signs for trouble.

"If you have, for example, a girl who plays 15 hours a week of exclusively violent video games, I'd be very concerned because it's very unusual," Kutner said.

"But for boys (the danger sign) is not playing video games at all, because it looks like for this generation, video games are a measure of social competence for boys."

Many video game fans have embraced the pair as champions of the industry, a label that makes them uncomfortable.

New Japanese System to Prevent Underage Smoking

Cigarette vending machines in Japan may soon start counting wrinkles, crow's feet and skin sag to see if the customer is old enough to smoke.

The legal age for smoking in Japan is 20 and as the country's 570,000 tobacco vending machines prepare for a July regulation requiring them to ensure buyers are not underage, a company has developed a system to identify age by studying facial features, Reuters said.

By having the customer look into a digital camera attached to the machine, Fujitaka Co's system will compare facial characteristics, such as wrinkles surrounding the eyes, bone structure and skin sag, to the facial

data of over 100,000 people, Hajime Yamamoto, a company spokesman said.

"With face recognition, so long as you've got some change and you are an adult, you can buy cigarettes like before. The problem of minors borrowing (identification) cards to purchase cigarettes could be avoided as well," Yamamoto said.

Underage smoking has been on a decline in Japan, but a health ministry survey in 2004 showed 13 percent of boys and 4 percent of girls in the third year of high school--those aged 17 to 18--smoked every day.

Australian Escapes White Shark Attack

An Australian man has described how he escaped from the jaws of a great white shark by poking it in the eye as it dragged him under water.

Jason Cull, 37, told reporters from his hospital bed that he saw a dark shape approaching as he swam about 80 meters (yards) off the popular Middleton beach in Western Australia on Saturday, AAP reported.

At first he thought it was one of the dolphins he had been swimming with, but realized it was a shark as the four-meter (12-foot) monster closed in, local media reported.

"It banged straight into me... and it grabbed me by the leg and dragged me under the water," said Cull, a schoolteacher and father of two.

"I just remember being dragged backwards underwater. I felt along it, I found its eye and I poked it in the eye, and that's when it let go."

A teenage surfer was killed in a shark attack last month, bringing the death toll in Australia since 2000 to 12, according to the US-based International Shark Attack File.

News in Brief

China Quake...

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Calls into the city did not go through as panicked residents quickly overloaded the telephone system. The quake affected telephone and power networks, and even state media appeared to have few details of the disaster.

The earthquake also rattled buildings in Beijing, some 930 miles to the north, less than three months before the Chinese capital was expected to be full of hundreds of thousands of foreign visitors for the Summer Olympics.

Many Beijing office towers were evacuated, including the building housing the media offices for the organizers of the Olympics, which start in August. None of the Olympic venues was damaged.

In the Taiwanese capital of Taipei, 100 miles off the southeastern Chinese coast, buildings swayed when the quake hit. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake is considered a major event, capable of causing widespread damage and injuries in populated areas. The last serious earthquake in China was in 2003, when a 6.8-magnitude quake killed 268 people in Bachu county in the west of Xinjiang. China's deadliest earthquake in modern history struck the northeastern city of Tangshan on July 28, 1976, killing 240,000 people.

EU Car Pollution Targets

Unworkable

A senior EU official said that a European Union deadline to cut carbon dioxide emissions from new cars by 2012 was unrealistic, according to an interview with a German newspaper.

Industry Commissioner Guenther Verheugen said that the proposals--under which carmakers will be fined for failing to meet emission limits by the deadline--were already likely to be delayed by the European Parliament, AFP reported.

"I fully support the Commission objective," said Verheugen, a commission vice president, but "the European automobile industry will (only), in my opinion, be able to meet the target without great difficulty from 2015."

Brussels has proposed that all cars sold in Europe in 2012, whether European-made or not, should reach an overall objective of 120-130 grams (4.2-4.6 ounces) of CO₂ emitted per kilometer (0.6 miles), as opposed to an average of 160 grams today.

The EU executive wants to penalize automakers who do not reach the goal by 2012 with a charge of 20 euros (30 dollars) per extra gram of CO₂ per car, with the penalties rising to 95 euros by 2015.

"Even the Commission knows that not all new cars will meet these standards by 2012," Verheugen continued, adding that "there are already calls from the (European) Parliament to extend the deadline to 2015."

Drug Use Rising On US Campuses

The arrest last week of 96 suspects on drug-related charges, including 75 students, after a six-month sting operation at San Diego State University is shining a fresh spotlight on the issue of growing substance abuse at America's colleges and universities.

"The drug problem on American campuses has become so extensive that more and more university police are finding they don't have the manpower to fight it by themselves," says Joseph Califano, founding chairman of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). He says the stakes have risen in recent years with so many more hard drugs being used and sold, reported the Christian Science Monitor.

Local university police have noticed a big uptick in the numbers of related crimes, such as fights, robbery, property damage, and vandalism.

Rates of daily marijuana use have more than doubled from 1993 to 2005, and use of other illegal drugs like cocaine and heroin have risen 52 percent, according to a CASA study.

Dengue in Philippines Rises by 34%

The Philippines recorded 9,176 cases of dengue fever nationwide from January 1 to April 5 this year, an increase of almost 34 percent over the same period last year, the health department said.

Deaths due to dengue fever reached 108 in the year to April 5, a sharp increase from the 74 deaths recorded in the same period last year, according to figures released by the department, AFP reported.

Majority of the victims were male with the youngest victim one month old and the oldest 87 years. Health officials did not give a reason for the increase in the number of cases.