Competitive Video Games: Aggression and Community

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INTRODUCTION

The evidence is undeniable, yet individuals minimize its importance. With every passing year, video games become a bigger part of the worldwide media culture. While the industry hits its high points in the cultural landscape during the holiday shopping frenzy, followed by the Electronic Entertainment Expo trade show in June, video games are a year-round money-generating phenomenon. Games may have similarities in their business structure to the film industry, yet the game industry has amassed over $25 billion of revenue in 2010, which is no small feat ("The entertainment software," 2011). This type of expansion is likely due to the different approaches that game consoles and mobile phones now use when it comes to redefining and expanding what it means to be a video game player. Games can now be anything from an epic adventure that takes one hundred hours to complete or a small concept that kills time with its rewarding, repetitive nature. Regardless of the game type, players are taking in a wide variety of media-driven experiences every day, which translates into an industry that is making billions of dollars and continues to strive for greater cultural relevance.

This type of unprecedented success appears to have caught communication scholars, specifically those in the media studies discipline, off guard. Video games, when compared to other traditional media forms, are still in the early, formative years of their media existence. One of the earliest examples of a video game that reached mass awareness was *Pong*, which blipped its way back and forth across home television screens in the early 1970s. Since then, games have added narrative structures, the latest computer-rendered graphics, and more, all for the sake of a game's core concept of play. The progressions appear similar to the first films of the Lumiere Brothers and the changes

in the medium by the time film began to feature sound. Even though so much is changing in the video game industry, scholars often seem limited to studying the effects of games on its players, when there is much more to analyze. This is likely due to many people painting video games in a negative light, which stem from moral panics that involve youth corruption. Most of these worries come from concerned adults and focus on the trend of violent video games reaching unintended audiences under the age of eighteen.

It would seem foolish to deny the amounts of violence that exist in popular video games today. The content varies from game to game, however, and players are using the Internet more and more to communicate with each other using various methods for different purposes. A notable example of this type of communication involves players meeting other players who are interested in a particular game. These interest-driven individuals are often intrigued by video games that are competitive in nature, which have game play elements that encourage players to play these games at a very high level. It can be argued that combining violent video games with competitive video game communities produces new subjects for academic study. A drawback with most studies involving the effects of violent video games on players is that the interactions between peers playing the same game are rarely documented. Most involve specific individual effects (Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, 2010) or important interpersonal relationships, such as familial or romantic interactions (Chory & Banfield, 2009). After defining important terms, the following literature review will investigate already studied material involving violent video games, their effects on aggressiveness, and relationships formed while playing competitive video games.

DEFINITIONS

Video Game

The phrase "video game" may mean different things to different age demographics, so it is important to define the term, with regards to this literature review. A game is defined as "a universal form of recreation generally including any activity engaged in for diversion or amusement and often establishing a situation that involves a contest or rivalry" (Game, 2011). The term "game" may have different synonyms in front of it, whether it is video or computer, but it is important to distinguish that they operate based off of electronic software. Video games currently exist for consumers on multiple different media formats and markets. The first of these is dubbed as "console gaming," which represent games that are played on devices typically connected to home televisions and other similar entertainment systems. Currently, the most popular home console in terms of sales is the Nintendo Wii, with nearly 90 million units sold as of November 2011 ("Worldwide yearly chart," 2011). The Wii's allure comes from its family-focused marketing, motion controls that attempt to better immerse the player with the game, and Nintendo characters that have been well-established for years. However, most of the latest video games do not have Wii-specific versions made because of the Wii's hardware limitations. This is because the two other popular home consoles support high-definition graphics and strong processing speeds, which makes the Wii's standard-definition visuals and slower processing look poorer by comparison.

Next in sales figures is the Microsoft Xbox 360, with nearly 58 million units sold ("Worldwide yearly chart," 2011). Microsoft has great experience selling personal computers, so the Xbox 360 was created with the intent of becoming an all-encompassing

media machine. While it can play all of the latest video games, Xbox 360 prides itself on being able to use applications to stream content from video providers such as Netflix, Hulu, and ESPN, in addition to streaming content from a user's Windows-based computer. This is a similar approach to the marketing concept of the Sony PlayStation 3 (often abbreviated as PS3), which has sold about 56 million units ("Worldwide yearly chart," 2011). The PS3 streams similar video content, but was designed during its launch in 2006 as an extremely high-powered machine. This helped it usher in the Blu-Ray disc as the next form of physical media, succeeding the frequently-used DVD. Each home console maker is looking to advance to the next generation of devices within the next couple years, but as it has already been mentioned, the majority of recent video games intended for home consoles are released for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, as the Wii's technical specifications are considerably dated.

When video game players are looking to take experiences similar to home consoles with them, portable gaming devices are the answer. This section of the market is frequently dubbed as "handheld/mobile gaming" and predominantly features Nintendo and Sony as primary competitors. Nintendo's DS line of systems saw great popularity and has since been updated with the Nintendo 3DS. Sony, meanwhile, has had mild success with the PlayStation Portable (PSP) and is set to release its PlayStation Vita successor in the United States in February 2012. These kinds of traditional portable game systems vary in features and owe their success to the Nintendo Game Boy, but over the past couple years, Apple has become a major player in the mobile gaming industry. With the success of the iPhone and iPod Touch, small games are able to be played on the go on

these devices and other mobile phones. This kind of advancement is leading to an industry-wide change that few scholars are studying.

Finally, the personal computer is carving out its own niche in the video game industry with the "PC gaming" market which implements elements from both the console and mobile markets. Most games intended for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 often get released on PC as well, with retail stores selling DVDs with the install and game data on them. However, digital distribution has made strong progress over the past couple years, with Valve's Steam service as the primary choice for most game players. This type of distribution generally involves the same games as the retail releases, but involve similar or lower prices and a completely downloaded game copy. Shorter, more portable games are also given life on PC with social, web browser-based games. These titles borrow similar mechanics from games found on mobile phones and apply them to a variety of websites, the most popular being Facebook. Overall, the devices used today to play video games are rather widespread, depending on a player's overall interests.

Violence and Aggression

Violence is an element of human nature that is difficult to define, but is easy to identify. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse (as in warfare effecting illegal entry into a house)" (Violence, 2011), but when this extends to various forms of media, it becomes very complicated. It is also important to note that video games can be broken up into genres based on their content, much like films can. Yet, out of the many genres that video games can be broken down into, a certain few stand out as being particularly violent. The first-person shooter (FPS)

puts the player completely in the controlled character's perspective and tasks them with killing enemies with a variety of weapons. Fighting games rely on depleting an opponent's health bar by using either physical or special attacks. Also, the real-time strategy genre focuses on eliminating enemy forces with well-planned and timed attacks and explosions. Other genres have games that may have violent tendencies to them as well, but these kinds of games reliably depend on varying levels of violence to have the player succeed.

When it comes to violence portrayed in video games, specific kinds of content are usually highlighted as being potentially objectionable. Gunplay usually involves a real-world parallel to using weapons for death and destruction. Interestingly enough, different cultural philosophies of game design present the use of a gun in different ways. American designers typically represent the gun specifically as a tool used by the player to accomplish a specific task. On the other side of the world, Japanese developers portray the gun as an extension of the character himself, acting as a symbol for a character's will and motivation. Fighting also represents another common kind of video game violence, implementing physical attacks to gain the upper hand in a competition.

One of the most frequently studied effects from these kinds of violent video games is "aggressiveness," which in its verbal form, is the tendency to attack "the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication" (Infante & Wrigley, 1986, p. 61). Media studies scholars study these potential kinds of effects from games, as the public at large displays moral panic fears, especially regarding the medium's effect on children. Concerned adults are among the first that worry about these violent acts influencing impressionable children, particularly

because of what makes video games so unique. The sense of immersion that is inherent in video games makes studying the medium as a whole so difficult, as the player experiences a direct action-result connection with the form of entertainment. Therefore, it is important to consider research that has been done regarding this medium's effects, particularly the power that violent game content has over a player's levels of aggressiveness.

Competition and Community

The most important element to a competitive video game is simply the fact that it is competitive. Merriam-Webster defines the act of competing as "to strive consciously or unconsciously for an objective (as position, profit, or a prize) […to] be in a state of rivalry" (Compete, 2011). Competitive games are especially intriguing from a communication and media studies perspective because human interaction is required for competition to actually exist. At higher levels of play, computer-controlled will always be outclassed by human players, so another human is essential for true competitive spirit to flourish. With two individuals engaged in play, researchers can analyze their game actions and their interpersonal relationship. Plus, as more individuals gather, they form a community based on the competitive game. These usually begin by video game players with similar passions and interests typically meeting on online forums to discuss either the game of interest or other topics. Game play between members can either be online, by using console-based services such as Xbox Live or PlayStation Network, or offline, by meeting to play the game in face-to-face interactions. Ultimately, players strive to better themselves in their game of choice so they can compete in tournaments. Players use these

tournaments as proving grounds for measuring who the better players are. With all the

definitions out of the way, it is time to analyze what research has been done regarding the

topics of interest, starting with the issues that surround violent video games.

ANALYSIS

Violent Video Game Issues

While many video games contain violent, certain popular examples attract media

attention and often have to represent the medium as a whole. *God of War III* (2010) is the

conclusion of a trilogy that has consistently used blood, gore, and brutality to sell itself.

In this series, the player assumes the role of Kratos, a man turned god who feels spited by

the gods of Olympus. By using Greek mythological influences, the game features Kratos

stabbing, slashing, and dismembering enemies on his path to personal freedom. Another

often-cited game example is *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), which has amassed notoriety

due to previous games in its franchise. These games are crime adventures that provide an

open world for players to act out a plethora of violent acts. Whether the player chooses to

steal a civilian's car, open fire on police officers, or even murder a prostitute, nothing is

off limits in the *Grand Theft Auto* games. Recently, however, the violent franchise that

has gripped the public's fascination is the *Call of Duty* franchise, particularly its *Black

Ops* installment (2010). Millions of people are more than willing to pay any amount of

money to play the latest iteration of a game that recreates a war environment, placing the

player in the perspective of a soldier.

Despite all the intense action sequences that *Call of Duty* games provide, they are

not without their share of controversial moments. Arguably, the biggest objection from

the media occurred following the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009),

regarding a level titled "No Russian." When news outlets originally reported on this

controversial content, the declarations made were often very similar. "No Russian" is

often discussed and remembered as the video game player controlling a character that

commits terrorist acts of violence by opening fire on an unsuspecting group of civilians in

a Russian airport. As damning as that claim is, it is without the context that those

believing it to be an issue of complete moral panic often leave out. First, the controlled

character in question plays the role of a CIA operative in the game's narrative. This

character's orders are to infiltrate the ranks of the Russian terrorist group by any means

necessary. He has to obey orders from the Russian antagonist because that is part of his

mission and if he disobeys, then he will be killed. The background story supports why the

game creators structured the scene and the task the way that they did. Second, the player

has the option whether or not to fire upon the group of civilians. While it can be debated

that the game has in essence "trained" the player to pull the trigger instinctively during

these game play situations, if the player chooses not to fire a single shot during the No

Russian level, the level still progresses naturally. In this instance, the player can

experience two wide-ranging emotions. If he chooses to shoot upon the crowd, the player

will likely experience a great deal of guilt for this unjustified action. However, if he does

not shoot, the development team intends for the player to feel horrified experiencing the

death and destruction in front of him. Either path draws upon a powerful emotion that is

entirely dependent on player choice. Third, at the end of the level, regardless of initial

shooting choice, the CIA operative is killed by the Russian antagonist. This especially

reinforces the concept that evil deeds rarely go unpunished, especially for the players that

decided to shoot innocent civilians. This example of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* is an extreme case, but it is a significant recent example of the power of player interaction in violent video games and how the mass media chooses to cover such a controversial issue.

Studies have claimed that violent video games have the potential to generate a wide range of effects in its players. One of these examples is how video game violence is shown to cause guilt in more empathetic players who act out unjustified acts of virtual violence (Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, 2010). This study in particular notes intriguing ways that video game violence can be categorized. First, games can either be competitive, which focuses on the clash and conflict between two players or teams. The alternative is cooperative play, which emphasizes the bond between teammates. Generally speaking, more violent acts in video games will result from competitive play, but players can also use cooperative means to commit such acts. Second, the authors classify violent video games as either justified or unjustified. In the experiment, they compare justified violence to a group of United Nations operatives killing terrorists, while the act of terrorists torturing helpless prisoners is considered unjustified violence. Considering that this is a made up definition for the purposes of an experiment about guilt, it works surprisingly well. Video game players that experience violent games commit acts often, but they are often framed in a justified perspective because of the game's narrative frame. Finally, a player's video game experience and skill is essential to consider when they are subjects in research about video game violence. If an experienced player plays a first-person shooter, he is more likely to stick to the task at hand and take the quickest route that completes said task. When placed in a similar situation, an inexperienced player will tend to get lost

easier and shoot at anything that moves. This clearly skews results when researchers are measuring number of violent acts as a variable.

Players also tend to shift their own self-perceptions based on the character or object they are controlling in the game (Klimmt, et al., 2010). In the experiment that supported this conclusion, subjects completed Implicit Association Tests before and after game play. This determined a subject's implied association with specific words that reflected the games used in testing. Among the tested games were a first-person shooter and a racing game. Interestingly enough, players who played the FPS title portrayed a connection with stronger influenced connections with words that had to deal with the military and strength of self. Similarly, those who played the racing game identified more with concepts of speed and other driver-related attributes. This is important research because video game players often have to identify with their character, so that thought and motion feel in sync with each other. This allows for better execution of game play against an opponent, which is a foundation of all types of games, but especially competitive ones. Further research does still need to be done to see if players are more likely to carry over these self-perceptions from the game into their real life and personal relationships.

Another study found that while video game play does not increase hostility state, a player's fundamental aggression trait is a determining factor (Eastin, 2007). This research in particular hoped to discover if competition, cooperativeness, violent in-game content, verbal abuse, and other variables were factors in the hostility displayed while subjects played a first-person shooter title. Players were given either competitive or cooperative tasks and were broken up into game sizes of two, four, and six players.

Despite all these variables, there was no measured correlation between a player's state of hostility and in-game acts of violence. However, the most significant measured relationship was between a player's aggression trait and state of hostility, which was even greater in a larger group. Using these results, Eastin speculates that with a larger game play group, a player may feel a greater sense of anonymity, thus giving him a freer reign to participate in verbal aggression. Clearly, it is critical to look at the motivations behind the communication that occurs in these kinds of video games.

A common trend in this type of video game research appears to be that when attempting to study the effects of playing video games with a high level of telepresence, results showed that video games are more complicated than most researchers consider them to be (Lachlan & Maloney, 2008). In this circumstance, telepresence is defined as "the extent to which we perceive that we are actually present in a mediated environment rather than being present in our natural physical environment" (Lachlan & Maloney, 2008, p. 286). This medium complication appears to be the result of two identifiable traits about video games. Primarily, video game content varies significantly from game to game, with no set standard when it comes to violence. Human beings consider a wide variety of acts to be violent, yet some of these considerations may even vary, based on the culture subset making the judgment. Similarly, each one of these supposed violent acts can be portrayed in a video game in some form, but much like a film, style has to be considered. A character may be portrayed as shooting a gun, but this would have a completely different perception if the game world was designed using a paintbrush-like, surrealist art style, as opposed to a realist design of New York City. In addition, because of the immersion aspect of video games, different players may experience the same game

in various ways. Games are unique compared to other media forms because of how the player has an active role in completing the experience of the game. While designers may intend for specific reactions at specific moments, they also have to consider that every game player has a different personality and will react differently to immersive media. These points are vital to consider when studies try to generalize specific effects that stem from video games as a whole.

It is critical to consider the self-imposed controls over content that the video game industry has implemented, though. Specifically, the industry has a content rating system in place, dubbed the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, or ESRB ("ESRB ratings," 2011). Among the more common ratings are E, E-10+, T, and M, as each letter signifies an intended audience and general content estimation, particularly regarding violence levels. Games rated "E for Everyone" generally do not have violence at all and are meant for all ages. The E-10+ is a variation on "E for Everyone" that has been added in the last several years and represents "Everyone Ages Ten and Up." These games may have mild, comic violence and are not recommended for children under ten, as a precaution. When a game receives a "T for Teen" rating, that game has some violence and suggestive themes in them. These games are recommended for players that are at least thirteen years old, as the violence is still usually artistic or fantastical in nature.

The examples of violent video games previously cited in this literature review were all given the "M for Mature" rating and it is not too difficult to see why. Mature-rated games are the targets of video game violence discussion because of their strong violence, sexual, and language content. They are recommended for players that are at least seventeen years old, which is enforced far more than any other content rating. On

polar opposites of the rating scale, there also exist early child and adult only ratings, but games hardly ever receive these ratings because of the minimal marketability that the game would ultimately have (Becker-Olsen & Norberg, 2010). Overall, the ESRB represents a way to inform consumers, primarily parents, about the content that a video game may include.

Ultimately, blame is still frequently placed on the industry for a minor's exposure to violent content, yet parents rarely take responsibility in controlling the violent gaming habits of their own children. A study showed that 45% of parents did not even know that games contain rating and content descriptions, specifically what the ESRB provides (Stroud & Chernin, 2008). Other observations from this research included an overall concern in the system's accuracy, a lack of parental research outside of the ESRB for the games they bought their children, and a 40% concern that children were playing games inappropriate for their age group. Yet, for the parents that were fully aware of ESRB's purpose, they reported impressions of limiting the violence exposed to their children and also feeling like a responsible parent. Essentially, the research shows that when parents realize the industry rules that are in place and then assume enough responsibility to follow them, the content ratings work exactly as planned. However, an unfortunate side-effect of this content negligence is that parents still frequently view video games as merely a toy to keep their children occupied. The viewpoint of games as a distraction or babysitter seems questionable when presented with mature, violent content. It would be interesting to see a study that gauges parental reactions regarding having their child view a war-filled movie and experience a video game with similar content.

There is little blame to place on retailers that sell these violent games, since they have restrictions in place to prevent sales to minors. Many retail chains check for identification to make sure the purchaser is at least seventeen years old, when the purchase in question contains a mature-rated game. This is actually a very similar procedure that takes place when a minor wishes to see a rated-R film in a theater, which is another example of an industry-imposed rating system. The problem that few researchers and analysts study is that children still play violent video games because parents commonly purchase mature-rated games for their children. Whether the reason behind this action is due to apathy or ignorance, the parental consent on the purchase circumvents the restrictions the industry puts in place. Parents can show responsibility, however, by watching their children play violent video games to see what they are playing. With first-hand experience, they can be a better judge regarding the appropriateness of content, in addition to bonding with the child over the game. As it has been explained, several issues exist regarding the nature of violent video games and their studied effects on players. This media form communicates with players through a sense of immersion, as each player will experience a game differently. A study regarding aggressiveness stemming from violent video game play would be valuable, particularly in its implementation with competitive video game play.

Competitive Video Game Issues

Competitive video games are very compelling to many players and it is not difficult to see why. Players get enjoyment out of competition, both physically and mentally, just like athletes do in sports. The sense of excitement with suspense and

reward is similar to an athletic event, which generates the same chemical responses in the brain. As a result, positive outcomes do wonders for a player's emotion and self-esteem. That is because competitive video games can be an area where a player can excel, with practice. If a player wishes to improve his skills in a game, for whatever reason, the game itself can be a source of happiness and identity for a video game player. The video game itself can provide experiences that are unique compared to any other activity because of its immersion fact. When a player experiences the virtual engagement that only a game can provide, a variety of positive effects can occur, as players can shift their self-perceptions in a positive way as well (Klimmt, et al., 2010). For example, if a player controls a muscular character in a fighting game, this sense of immersion may give the player a self-perceived sense of strength.

Certain popular titles are even played at the professional level. Many of these are from the first-person shooter genre, such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), which is set in a modern war-like setting. *Halo: Reach* (2010) has players shooting aliens in a futuristic setting, while *Gears of War 3* (2011) also has players shooting aliens, but with more of an apocalyptic tone. Another popular genre that is played professionally is the fighting genre. *Super Street Fighter IV* (2010) has human characters fighting in a variety of martial arts styles and *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* (2011) relies on superheroes and classic gaming icons fighting with over-the-top attacks. *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (2008) deviates slightly from the fighting game norm, as Nintendo all-star characters try to knock each other off of platformed stages. Finally, real-time strategy games are also very popular at the professional level. *Starcraft II* (2010) pits alien squadrons against each other, while *League of Legends* (2009) requires team-based play with heroes clashing

against each other. One may notice that each of these genres and games involve at least some element of violence, which poses an intriguing correlation that will be discussed later.

When these video games are played at the professional level, many structural similarities exist when compared to professional athletics. There is a clear winner and loser in this competitive structure, which creates different factors that contribute to spectator stress (Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2009). This particular research involved analyzing spectator reactions during the highly-competitive University of Michigan vs. Ohio State University football game in 2006. Figures were gathered by measuring factors such as whether not the subject was rooting for a certain team, the level of commitment to a certain team, the likelihood of a certain team to win, score difference, and more. Results showed that as the game's score difference margin and time remaining decreased, stress levels rose. In addition, those with vested interests maintained much higher suspense levels than those who were neutral observers. With all of these elements in play, it is easy to see the parallels between a football game and a competitive video game, such as one from the fighting genre. Also, these kinds of video games require skill and deep understanding in order to execute and succeed. New players are not able to jump in and play at the same level as those who are more experienced, which makes the training and hard work rewarding for those who have invested hours of time into the game.

From a broadcast perspective, video game matches certainly have the potential to be displayed in a format in which large audiences can become spectators. Many professionally-run tournaments air their event in full on video streaming websites, since these tournaments have not gained broadcast television support yet. This service has

benefits compared to television, however, since these live streams are accompanied with a chat room where fans can communicate in text with the broadcasters and each other. To add to the professional value of the tournament's stream, most matches are accompanied with play-by-play and color commentary by veterans in the games competitive scene. In addition, as far as the competing players are concerned, studies of sports matches have shown that profiles of players or teams are more important than local affiliation is (Solberg & Hammervold, 2004). The study in question used European football tournaments to come to this conclusion, as the higher profile teams typically attract the best ratings, even though the local team contributes strongly to ratings as well. This kind of analysis is beneficial because for professional gaming to reach a full audience and to build a greater community, broadcasting matches in some form in the future will be necessary. Thus, it can be argued that the compilation of these factors portrays how similar competitive video games can be to professional athletics from a spectator standpoint.

In an episode from the acclaimed web series *Extra Credits*, Daniel Floyd takes a look at the media studies viewpoints regarding competitive video games. From there, he generates reasonable arguments for why these games do not reach the same cultural appeal that sports do (2011). One of the largest problems for video games is that games suffer from a lack of consistency over time. Because the medium is still relatively new, combined with rapidly evolving technology, change is constant. In addition, the business model of the industry is similar to that of the film industry, in that when a game or film makes a lot of money, a sequel is usually right around the corner to capitalize on the success. Sequels are lethal to the consistency of the competitive video game scene, as

these newer games bring about changes to what has already been established. A prime example of this is *Marvel vs Capcom 3* (2011), which appeared to be a competitive game mainstay, until developer Capcom released *Ultimate Marvel vs Capcom 3* (2011) nine months later, introducing a surprisingly large amount of game play changes. Many players had to adjust to these new elements, completely abandoning most of the progress they made from learning the original game. As a result, when the core mechanics of video games change, they are not kept consistent over generations they way they are with traditional games or sports. Parents can pass these traditional games down to their children and so on because the fundamentals stay the same, which cannot be said about video games.

Another flaw in the cultural appeal of video games is that video games are simply not as accessible as sports. Gaming is still understandably seen as a hobby, instead of a profession, so few people actually dream of achieving fame through playing video games. This is an entirely different perspective, compared to the millions of children who have aspirations of becoming a famous athlete in their favorite sport when they grow up. Also, high-level video game play is complicated for the common spectator to understand. Not only would the spectator have to understand the basics of the particular video game, but also all of its minute aspects that players take advantage of in professional play. Many comparisons can be made with Texas Hold'em Poker, as online poker websites and an adaptable television format helped expand poker's spectator accessibility. Finally, competitive video games are currently not designed by developers for the mass-market spectator. Instead, the target audience is the game player that demands a complex, deep design. It is a delicate balance to maintain a deep design for competitive players and a

simple enough concept for spectators to understand. Unfortunately for the mass cultural appeal of video games, development studios have not yet figured out how to fully implement this type of design choice.

When comparing professional video games to athletics, it is also important to consider the human element. If spectators consider the players to be nameless and faceless, there is no investment or motivation to care as deeply as people do about sports. For example, studies have been done regarding patriotism acting as a strong element to attract large viewing audiences (Nüesch & Franck, 2009). European football is used as another example here, as the research indicates that viewers are not only drawn to their national teams, but also to high-ranking teams as well. The competitiveness of the game was not as essential of a factor, as it was initially hypothesized, meaning that spectators are more likely to watch the most local and highest-rated teams and players. Understanding has now been established regarding competitive video games, their appeal to game players, and reasons for their current place in society. Now, it is time to investigate how players communicate with their peers under the framework of violent video games and aggression.

Interpersonal Competitor Interactions

Different methods of play exist for competitive players to interact with each other. As online connectivity increases, more players rely on the Internet for their video game needs. A study by Tang analyzed the progress of online interpersonal relationships, and while her subjects were spouses of Chinese seafarers, the friendship steps are remarkably similar (2010). Player interactions usually start on forums and message boards, where

sharing interests usually sparks a connection. Messages are posted in threads or in private messages, but these are disjointed over time, as days can pass before a reply is sent. From there, a mutual decision occurs to share contact information in order to bring the communication to chat client for a more real-time conversation. Some subtextual cues such as tone are lost in these exchanges, but each individual is allowed more time to craft a response, compared to if they were interacting face-to-face. Over the past several years, video chat has become more accessible to online users, which simulates a face-to-face encounter from many miles away. When the in-person meeting ultimately occurs, a clear relationship strengthening is evident over the course of these steps (Tang, 2010). Players can also communicate with each other by playing video games, usually over gaming services such as Xbox Live, PlayStation Network, and Steam for PC. Voice chat is an option with these services, so if players mutually decide to do so, similar in-person vocal cues are activated.

Playing games offline is certainly an option as well, but this is usually supplemented by some semblance of an online component first. According to a study, a couple intriguing effects occur during offline communication, after similar online experiences. Offline, players become less trusting of other people, but were more trusting of other age groups (Williams, 2006). This was likely because players are exposed to a lot of negative actions online from other players who believe themselves to be anonymous. However, positive experiences with a surprisingly wider range of age groups can lead to the greater trust in those demographics. Also, positive offline effects include increased friendship closeness and a greater willingness for community outreach (Williams, 2006). Overall, the authors had a mixed, but mostly negative outlook on their

study as a whole. Williams was intrigued by the positive, community-connected effects, which likely was a result of cooperative play online extending into real life situations. However, while the strengthening of personal relationships online makes sense, Williams saw the diminishing of extended social networks as a big problem. There is great concern, according to the author, regarding the lack of face-to-face interactions, as if players were starting to build a shell, while maintaining their familial and close friend relationships. These issues seemed to primarily arise from games that were exceptionally engaging in an online space, removing the in-person interaction, which leaves that route of communication open for consideration.

To prepare for big, competitive events, players have to train to hone their skills in a specific game. This means that players spend more time with fellow competitors from their local area. These meetings are usually organized online using any of the previously described methods of communication and generally result in closer bonds of friendship. Higher level play needs better competition to foster and continue growth, which gives players additional motivation to establish these in-person meetings. While competitors are often male, females also compete at a high level. While the interpersonal communication between the two sexes may reflect traditional norms, competitive communication is not typically affected by gender (Sullivan, 2004). In this study, Sullivan dictated how male and female athletes communicated with each other on all-male or all-female teams while playing gender-neutral sports. By analyzing specific elements of communication, he came to the conclusion that there were no notable differences between the communication methods of the two genders. Therefore, the result may imply that, when applied to competitive video games that also require a cooperative

element, there should minimal difference if the teammates are male or female. For a hobby that is often perceived as male dominated, this would be reasonable evidence for the success of potential female competitors.

When tournaments take place, placing well is the ultimate goal for competitive video game players. Tournaments are the only way for competitive video game players to make money playing the game, so the odds of profiting are actually very low. When most people consider the time-cost analysis in the industry's current state, the amount of time invested may not seem that worth it overall. However, winning a tournament has more benefits than just financial ones. Victory gains respectability and fame amongst gaming peers locally, but also can lead to the potential of national and global peer attention. All things considered, game players have fun whenever they are competing. Whether they are with their friends or if they happen to be winning, both options are powerful incentives for players continue down the path of the professional player.

Overall, through training and tournament interaction, players may develop interpersonal relationships in a variety of ways. Sometimes, opponents are considered to be obstacles along the path to success, resulting in an irrelevant relationship. These usually involve players that are meeting for the first time at a tournament, usually right as they are about to play against each other. There is no incentive for friendship at that moment, but a closer relationship may develop as interaction occurrences increase at future events. Opponents may also become rivals over a period of time, which usually involves an inherent form of respect. Rivalries in competitive gaming usually do not involve an element of hatred, as both players understand that they need each other to improve their own skills. The most ideal interpersonal bond is a friendship that emerges

from game play. As it has already been discussed, these kinds of friendships are based on a passion for the game and can grow further from there.

It is important to not always frame these friendships in terms of the game, however. Dependence on the game is shown to have a negative relationship with familial, romantic, and other interpersonal relationships (Chory & Banfield, 2009). The research used to make this conclusion relied on the concept of relational maintenance, which encompassed the different ways that individuals attempt to keep their interpersonal relationships in good standing. Some of the different aspects that this concept can be broken down into include positivity, openness, assurance, and more. After analysis of television and video game reliance, results showed that for the most part, media dependence was directly tied to the limiting of relational maintenance, with the edge of greater effect going to video games. Chory and Banfield believed this to be the case by explaining that those dependent on media invest a great deal of time in what they are reliant on, allowing for less effort to be put towards the relationship. While the flow of television programming is very powerful in absorbing this time, video games struggle with this more because of its interactive, immersive element. The authors noted, however, that these were findings based on a sample size that did not appear to have any severe media dependence issues. Still, it is intriguing evidence to put towards an argument about competitive video game players, especially with all the time that goes into practicing their game of choice.

With the literature review completed, what summaries and conclusions can be made? Violent video games are rather common and studies have claimed a wide variety of effects. Video game violence is shown to cause guilt in more empathetic players who

act out unjustified acts of virtual violence (Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, 2010) and players tend to shift their own self-perceptions based on the character or object they are controlling in the game (Klimmt, et al., 2010). In addition, a player's fundamental aggression trait is a determining factor his state of hostility (Eastin, 2007). These conclusions help form the basis for how players interact with the medium and the potential effects on aggression those may have. Specific games that rely on this violent content tend to be competitive in nature, causing players to invest a lot of play time in the hopes of success. There are several motivations for a competitive player to do so, but one of the most important aspects is friendship that results from the competition. Players typically meet online and develop friendships over a course of several steps (Tang, 2010) that lead to in-person meetings for training or tournaments. One of the challenges that existed throughout this study was the lack of academic material regarding competitive and professional video games. This is likely because the phenomenon has taken off in the past few years, with further expansion of online connectivity and promotional distribution through social networks and video streaming sites. Therefore, this research looks to couple theories already established on the affects of violent video game play and incorporate it into competitive interpersonal relationships.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What correlation, if any, exists between competitive video game play with violent content and a player's aggression?

RQ2: What role does aggression play in the interpersonal relationships that are forged through competitive video game play?

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