Editorial

Videogames: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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I HAVE BEEN VERY CONFLICTED as I sit down to write this issue's editorial. Initially I had planned to write about this being the first issue of our second year in publishing the *Games for Health Journal*. And while on the topic, I do want to thank Associate Editors Debra Lieberman and Tom Baranowski as well as Editorial Coordinator Karen Cloud-Hansen for all of their work. Many authors and reviewers have contributed greatly to a very successful first year for the *Journal*.

For exactly 1 month today, a 600-pound gorilla has been accompanying me at my PC. At this exact time on December 12, 2012, a madman with military weapons entered a school full of innocent people and began killing 26 young children and dedicated educators and finally ended his own miserable life so he would not have to face the consequences of his senseless, cowardly acts. The gorilla has been waiting for me to decide whether I would use my pulpit to address the link between videogames and violence.

The gorilla is, of course, the fact that we are associated with both sides of videogames and health. Our community is using games to improve health and well-being, yet when I talk to people outside of our community, I am almost always asked about the dark side of videogames. People are amazed by the good being done, from physician training to improving medical compliance to recognizing posttraumatic stress disorder, but inevitably conversations turn toward the dark side, and questions are raised about violent games and the latest massacre.

The gorilla has looked over my shoulder as I researched the Internet for reason and content to use if I open this can of worms. Here is some of what I have found:

As early as 1984 the Surgeon General of the United States, C. Everett Koop, felt there was nothing constructive in videogames: "Everything is kill, eliminate, destroy." Social psychologist Phillip Zambardo echoed this notion at the time: "Beat him, burn him, zap him is the message rather than bargaining and cooperating. Most games feed into masculine fantasies of control, power, and destruction."[1]

The impact of videogames has been described as follows: Children who played a violent videogame later showed more aggression[2]; videogames might foster anger or aggression[3]; exposure to videogame violence increases aggressive behavior and other aggression-related phenomena[4]; after playing videogames, young people exhibit measurable decreases in prosocial and helping behaviors and increases in aggressive thoughts and violent retaliation to provocation[5]; playing violent videogames on the Internet was associated with greater tolerance of violence, a lower empathic attitude, and more aggressive behavior[6] ; and consensus has been reached in the state of the science that a strong and consistent relationship exists between viewing violent media and increased levels of anxiety, desensitization, and aggressive thoughts and behaviors among young people.[7]

On the other hand, Dr. Chris Ferguson, an associate professor of psychology at Texas A&M International University, has recently conducted a series of multiyear studies of young people, 11–18 years old, to find out if violent videogames affect their psyches. His conclusion: There is no evidence that exposure to violent videogames leads to violent behavior. "Violent videogames and violent media exposure is [are] not connected to mass shootings," Ferguson said. "There's a risk that, as a society, we focus on the wrong issue. We distract from the real issues like mental health and gun control."[8]

Over 150 articles have been submitted to the *Games for Health Journal*. Many have researched behavior modification using videogames. None has looked at issues related to the citations above connecting videogames to violent behaviors, although research going back to the 1980s suggests such a relationship.

We enjoy the benefits of some videogames; we must acknowledge that the value and contribution of videogames in general are being tainted by the uncertainty of potential impacts of violent videogames. We need to better understand the impacts of violent videogames because to ignore them is irresponsible. Additionally, if we wish to use the benefits of videogames for behavior modification, aren't there opportunities to learn if and how violent games so powerfully influence behavior that humans are motivated to commit such horrendous acts as Columbine and Newtown? What is it about those games that have such a profound impact on the actions of even a tiny fraction of our society? How can we define and use that power to achieve positive results?

The increasing number of scientists and the expanding universal body of knowledge lead to increasingly more specialized work. It is no longer that we cannot see the forest for the trees; we cannot see the stems within the leaves of the tree. The issue of whether or not violent videogames influence the behavior of players needs to be acknowledged as a topic of health games. Although your particular work may be far removed from "Worlds of Warcraft," you have chosen to use a tool for a particular task. The fact that the same type of tool, although different, may bring direct harm to its users and horrible secondary harm to innocent people cannot be ignored.

I believe the purview of the *Games for Health Journal* should include research into the impacts of all types of games on all types of outcomes. We have just begun looking at all of the

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maladies and conditions videogames can help. To quote Associate Editor Debra Lieberman, "I can't imagine a health field where games cannot be a valuable tool."

I need to disempower the gorilla from embarrassing me and making me feel guilty that somehow a better knowledge of videogames can prevent another Newtown or Columbine. So I am asking you, "What, if anything, can and should the *Games for Health Journal* do to better understand videogames and violence?"

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