

Media**wise** Video Game Report Card

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This MediaWise Video Game Report Card is the eighth issued by the National Institute on Media and the Family, an independent, non-partisan, non-sectarian, non-profit organization. The Report Card provides a snapshot of the interactive gaming industry with a focus on issues related to child welfare. The full Report Card is available at www.mediafamily.org.

Introduction

*"The games of a people reveal a great deal about them."
Marshall McLuhan*

Video and computer games continue to grow in popularity among children and youth. We completed the largest student survey ever and found that 87% of youth in grades four through twelve now play video games with 96% of boys playing regularly. This bodes well for the continued growth of the industry, and a balanced diet of good games can certainly be a positive part of children's lives. Nevertheless, as games become more engaging and popular, concerns about their impact on youth become more urgent.

The concerns fall into two categories:

1. The easy access that boys have to increasingly ultra-violent M-rated games and the popularity of the most violent games with that group.
2. The growing issue of screen time as it relates to the obesity epidemic.

Video Game Violence and Youth

For the past eight years, we have consistently expressed concern about a subset of ultra-violent games. Last year we focused attention on the top selling *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, in which gratuitous violence toward women and police is rewarded and discrimination against the Haitian community is encouraged. This year a national survey showed that 70% of American teenage boys have played that game and that they are more likely to have been in a fight than those who have not played. This year's example of a "killographic" game is *Manhunt*. (If pornographic is the "graphic depiction of sex," then "killographic" should enter our vocabulary to describe the "graphic depiction of brutal violence.") This year's

report card shows that children and youth still have easy access to such “killographic games.”

The Obesity Epidemic

Awareness about the urgency of the obesity epidemic among American youth has exploded in America’s consciousness during the past year. Public health leaders have named it a public health emergency. Rates of obesity among children have tripled over the past thirty years.

What does this have to do with video games? The answer to that question is the same reason Dr. Walsh has agreed to serve on the national board of the Coalition for a Healthy and Active America. It is clear that a major contributor to the youth obesity epidemic is the increasingly sedentary lifestyle of American youth due to the dramatic increase in “screen time.” Several statistics are telling.

- Caloric intake among American youth is only up 1% since 1990.
- Physical activity is down 13% since 1990.
- Screen time has increased 33% during the same period.

Screen time, of course, is not restricted to electronic games. At the present time the average American child spends 25 hours a week watching TV, 9 hours playing video games and an additional 3.5 in front of the computer screen. The total of 37.5 hours per week is the equivalent of a full time job.

It is not the responsibility of the gaming industry to solve the obesity epidemic but it is clear that in order to successfully address this public health emergency, kids need to spend less time in front of screens and more time exercising. There is a great amount of parent education needed about the link between screen time and health. In addition, there is both an opportunity and challenge for the industry to develop games that involve physical activity so that young players exercise more than their thumbs.

Areas Covered in the 2002 Report Card

- Student Survey.
- Ratings.
- Retailer survey.
- Retailer enforcement
- Research update.
- List of recommended games and games to avoid.

Student Survey

During this year we conducted the largest student survey in the history of the report card. 778 students in grades four through twelve representing public and private schools in urban, suburban and rural areas throughout the country took part. The average age was 13.5. Key findings included:

- 87% of students play games regularly.
- Games are more popular with boys (96% play) than girls (78% play).
- Only 50% of parents understand the ratings according to students.
- 87% of boys play M-rated games as do 46% of girls.
- 78% of boys report that M-rated games are among their top five favorites, and 40% say their favorite game is rated M.
- 77% of boys own M-rated games with one in five reporting that they purchased an M-rated game without their parent's knowledge.
- Only one out of five students report that their parents have ever prevented them from purchasing a game because of its rating.

This survey clearly shows that M-rated games are very popular with boys, that they are easily accessible, and that many parents don't understand the ratings and are unaware of the content of the games their children play.

The implications of this large survey show that retail enforcement and parent education need improvement. Parent education, however, is not enough if they do not understand the need to observe the ratings. Parent education about the ratings need to include the answer to the question "Why pay attention to ratings?"

Ratings

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) kept the commitment it made last year to review and revise its ratings system. We recognize and applaud their openness and the integrity of their work. We believe that the video game ratings have set the current standard for media ratings. We will continue to monitor the accuracy of the revised rating system.

There remains, however, one area of concern. While we agree with the overwhelming majority of the ratings, we believe that the non-use of the rating AO (adults only) is a problem. According to the ESRB the AO rating is used when games "include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence." A game like *Manhunt* would certainly fit that description and yet it is rated M. In addition, the distinction between AO as not appropriate for persons under 18 and M as not appropriate for persons under 17 is impossible to decipher. This is not a trivial issue because most major retailers will not sell AO games. Publishers therefore manipulate the criteria to avoid the dreaded AO rating. The result is that no games receive a final rating of AO. We believe that games like *Manhunt*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, *Extreme Beach Volleyball* and others deserve the "Adults Only" rating.

We also applaud the ESRB for the aggressive plans they have initiated to educate the public about the ratings system. We believe that an effective education effort must include information that motivates parents to use the ratings.

Grade for ESRB..... B

Ratings Education

We conducted a telephone survey of 47 video game rental or retail stores in large and small cities throughout 13 states. Of the 47 stores, 22 primarily sell computer and video games, 20 primarily rent, and 5 sell and rent about equally. 97% the stores surveyed are part of a chain of stores. The findings include:

- Only 55% of stores educate the public about ratings. This is an increase from 42% in 2002 and 33% in 2001. Interestingly, stores that rent do a much better job at education than stores that sell. (70% versus 36%)
- Only 49% formally train their personnel in the ratings. This is up from 27% last year.
- 79% of the stores surveyed report that they have a policy prohibiting the sale of M-rated games to youth under seventeen.

The ESRB has announced a major new collaboration with retailers to educate the public that will go into full effect in 2004. We anticipate an improvement in these scores in the ninth report card next year.

Grade for ratings education C

Retailer Enforcement

Policies about Ratings

Our advocacy for ratings enforcement policies has made notable progress. This year we see a more distinct difference between retailers with policies versus those without.

We must note that the majority of retailers (56%) belonging to the Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association (IEMA) have a policy preventing children younger than 17 from renting or buying games rated M. As this year's secret shopper survey found, access to M-rated games by minors is dramatically different between stores with a policy and those without policies.

The Institute had children between the ages of 7 and 14 attempt to purchase M-rated games in stores with and without policies. Children were successful 100% of the time buying M-rated games in stores without policies. They were only successful 30% of the time in stores with policies.

It is very clear that retailer implementation and enforcement of a verifiable policy is essential to keeping violent adult games from children.

Grade for ratings enforcement by retailers with policies B
Grade for ratings enforcement by retailers without policies F

Parental Involvement

It is clear that there needs to be greater education for parents about the positive and negative effects of video games on children as well as education about video game ratings. Most parents are not aware of game content and they receive mixed messages about the importance of ratings. On the one hand they are encouraged to use the ratings while on the other hand the industry claims that the violent games do not affect children. The effective message, therefore, to parents is “Pay attention to the ratings but it’s not a big deal.” Parent education needs to include motivation to monitor the amount of game play and the need to avoid M-rated games for children.

Because the National Institute on Media and the Family desires to be a part of the solution for positive change we have partnered with and will continue to seek partnership with key various organizations. Current partnerships include the Coalition for a Healthy and Active America, an effort to fight and reduce childhood obesity. We are willing to work with retail and trade industry groups to foster positive change. also willing to work with both retail and game industry trade groups to work toward positive change.

Recommendations

1. Eliminate double messages to parents and educate them about why it is important to monitor game play and observe the ratings. The reasons should be based on scientific evidence about both the potential benefits of educational games and the potential harm of violent games.
2. Retailers without policies should adopt and enforce *verifiable* policies that prevent children and teens from buying M-rated games without parental permission.
3. Retailers with policies should diligently enforce them.
4. The ESRB should apply the AO rating in accordance with their own guidelines.
5. The Advertising Review Council should continue to enforce guidelines for marketing and advertising.

Research Update

Douglas A. Gentile & David A. Walsh

This year, several studies documenting the effects of video games were released. Some showed positive effects (e.g., playing games can improve visual attention skills) and others showed negative effects (e.g., violent games increase aggression). This update will focus primarily on the growing evidence regarding violent games.

Dr. Craig Anderson of Iowa State University has combined the findings of all the studies on violent video games to date and finds several significant effects. Playing violent video games leads to increased aggressive thoughts, feelings, and actions (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Examples of new studies emerging this year from around the world follow.

Two studies were reported at the conference of the International Simulation and Gaming Association in Japan. Shibuya & Sakamoto (2003) asked 5th graders to name their most favorite games. Of the top 41 games, 85% contained violent actions. Furthermore, violence was rewarded in almost all (94%) of the games that contained violence, and was committed by an attractive perpetrator in over half (54%). These features have been shown to increase children's imitation of aggressive actions with violent television shows.

Ihori, Sakamoto, Kobayashi, & Kimura (2003) reported on a short-term longitudinal study of 807 5th and 6th grade students. They found that the amount of video game play early in the school year was related to physical aggression later in the school year.

Two studies were reported at the Society for Research in Child Development conference this year. Anderson & Buckley (2003) had 300 children (aged 9-12) and youths (17+) play a violent game (E- or T-rated) or a matched non-violent game. Those who played the violent game exhibited more aggressive behavior after playing than those who played the non-violent game. This was true for both naturally aggressive players as well as non-aggressive players. Furthermore, violent video game exposure was a significant predictor of aggressive personality even after controlling for sex, violent TV and movie exposure, and amount of time spent with TV, movies, and video games. Anderson reports that this may be evidence that violent video games have a greater effect than violent TV or movies.

Gentile, Linder, & Walsh (2003) reported a short-term longitudinal study with 206 3rd-5th grade children. Children who consumed the most media violence (video games, TV, and movies) early in the school year were rated by their peers as more verbally and physically aggressive later in the school year (controlling for sex and prior verbal or physical aggression).

As gaming platforms have become more powerful, violent games have become more violent and more realistic. If playing violent games leads to aggressive behaviors (as the research shows), then we should expect two related issues: (1) we should expect that playing games with more extreme violence should have a larger effect, and (2) we should expect that the size of that effect should be getting larger over time. Both of these are true. In experimental studies, those with more violence caused more aggressive behaviors after playing (Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, studies conducted in more recent years show a much larger correlation between violent game play and aggressive behaviors (Gentile & Anderson, 2003).

It is important to note two related issues. First, although many studies do show a causal relationship between violent game exposure and aggressive behavior, researchers do not believe that violent video games are the only or most important cause of aggressive behavior. There are many other causes of aggressive behavior. Second, however, the size of the effect is not trivial. The size of the relation between violent video game play and aggressive behavior is larger than the size of the relation between second-hand smoke and lung cancer, or that between lead exposure and decreased IQ in children (Gentile, 2003). Notice that we as a country have made many expensive policy changes for these scientifically-documented effects, but have yet to begin to address issues of media violence exposure seriously.

Perhaps part of the reason for this is that many concerned parties have fallen back on saying "it's the parents' responsibility." Certainly parents have an important role in their children's media use. Studies have shown that if parents were more involved in their children's media use, children were less likely to play violent games and less likely to behave aggressively (Anderson & Buckley, 2003; Gentile, Linder, & Walsh, 2003; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, in press). Yet, as shown in our survey with schoolchildren, most parents do not understand all of the video game ratings, and many children have purchased M-rated games without their parents' awareness.

Therefore, the video game industry and the rental/retail industries can support parents by:

1. Continuing to help educate parents about the ratings,
2. Beginning to educate the public about why the ratings are important to pay attention to (e.g., violent games increase aggression, educational games increase educational skills), and
3. Making and enforcing policies to prevent children under 17 from purchasing M-rated games without parent permission.

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Summary

ESRB Ratings	B
Ratings Education	C
Retailers with Policies	B
Retailers without Policies	F
Screen time related to overweight	F

MediaWise Video Game Report Card

Game Lists:

Rating:

Parent Alert! Games to avoid for your children and Teens

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Manhunt | M |
| 2. Road Kill | M |
| 3. Outlaw Volleyball | M |
| 4. Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball | M |
| 5. Def Jam Vendetta | T |
| 6. True Crime: Streets of L.A. | M |
| 7. Backyard Wrestling: Don't try this at home | M |
| 8. Max Payne 2 | M |
| 9. Postal 2 | M |

MediaWise Recommended Games for 2003

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. SimCity 4 | E |
| 2. Zelda: The Windwaker | E |
| 3. SSX 3 | E |
| 4. NBA Street Vol. 2 | E |
| 5. Top Spin | E |
| 6. Rise of Nations | T |
| 7. Madden 2004 | E |
| 8. Flight Simulator 2004 | E |
| 9. Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga | E |
| 10. Rayman 3 | E |