

Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do

By Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olson

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The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning

Katie Salen, editor

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Video games currently occupy the hot seat in the furor around the impact of media on minors. As is the case with the other historically contested media forms—dime novels, comic books, pop music, film, and television—video games have the ability to entertain and educate. Some think their interactive nature can make them more engaging and therefore more “dangerous” than the other media forms. As with comic books and animation, popular opinion treats video games as entertainment for kids, despite the fact the average age of video game enthusiasts over the past few years is in the mid-thirties.

Two recent books exemplify opposite ends of the spectrum in the critical review of video games as a medium. *Grand Theft Childhood*, written for a popular audience but based on the results of a 2004 federally funded study from Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media, examines questions surrounding video games that relate children and violence. *The Ecology of Games*, a collection of academic papers on the educational power of games, is one of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s series on Digital Media and Learning. Both are good resources for those interested in the study of play, both broaden the understanding of video games as a medium, and both help establish them as a subject for serious academic research and analysis.

The ground-breaking study behind *Grand Theft Childhood* was funded by a \$1.5-million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. Authors Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olson, a husband and wife team, pursued a wide research agenda, collecting written surveys from more than 1,200 middle-school students and over 500 parents in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. The authors also interviewed dozens of teen and preteen children and their parents and conducted

a review of the findings and conclusions of past research. They make the latter is just as compelling as the former when they point out that much of the research data quoted by game critics has been miscited data on the media in general, questionable research by organizations with significant conflicts of interest, or flat-out junk science.

Thus *Grand Theft Childhood* is not just a recitation of the authors' own research findings. They provide a strong account the relevant media history on children and "corrupting media influences." They point out that the most sensational instances of violence others claim was caused by video games are instead violent acts committed by individuals with significant psychological problems, acts extremely rare when viewed in the context of the number of people who play videogames.

Kutner and Olsen offer a wide range of interesting and often surprising insights. They find, for example, that teen-rated games showing violent acts without the messy, unpalatable results of the violence may be doing more harm by minimizing the consequences of the acts than mature-rated games. While the conventional wisdom holds that girls in general do not enjoy violent games but do enjoy story-based games, their study found a surprisingly high number of responses that contradicted both these widely held beliefs. While they did not find a strong correlation between kids playing violent video games and outright physical violence, they did find a relationship to bullying and other lesser negative schoolyard behavior. They caution that more study is required here.

While written for a lay audience, the authors dedicate a chapter to the design and execution of their study for those interested in such details. They also offer recommendations to parents that will surprise no one involved with children or with the media in general. They advise parents to be aware of the games their kids play, to keep an eye on their Internet-based game play (more truly violent, sexual and antisocial games can be found on the Internet), to teach their kids to be media savvy, and to focus on the more significant trouble spots in childhood and adolescence.

The book is well written and engaging and valuable to an audience of lay people and experts alike.

Over the past few years the MacArthur Foundation has engaged in a significant research effort in digital media and learning. This effort looks at a wide range of technologies and

strategies in education including the use of iPods in schools, digital storytelling, the Web and, of course, video games. One of these efforts commissioned a series of six books on such topics as Identity and credibility. *The Ecology of Games* is one in this series and, like all of them, can be downloaded section by section for free or purchased in full as a hard copy.

Katie Salen, a game and interactive designer and director of Graduate Studies in Design and Technology, Parsons School of Design, edited the volume on the *Ecology of Games*. Salen's introduction offers a solid grounding in histories of play, games, media, and society's response to all three. It introduces not only the topics covered by the rest of book in more detail but also the concept of a media ecology—first described by the late media critic Neal Postman—in relation to video games.

The volume is organized in three parts: “Learning Ecologies,” “Hidden Agendas,” and “Gaming Literacies.” The authors are a mix of well-known gaming theorists and educators (James Paul Gee, Kurt Squire, Mizuko Ito, and Ian Bogost), industrial practitioners (Jane McGonigal and Corey Ondrejka), and new voices. While learning is a subtext and subtitle to the collection, the volume is dedicated not merely to education in its institutionalized K-12 sense; informal learning looms almost as large as formal education, if not larger.

James Paul Gee, the linguistics and literacy studies professor who champions video games as learning tools, contributes one of his clear and convincing pieces, entitled “Learning and Games.” As usual, his offering is well grounded in learning science, human development, and education, arguing that games provide students experience in forming and testing hypotheses (and many other benefits). Steven Berlin Johnson explores similar ground in the engaging “Everything Bad is Good for You.”

Mizuko Ito provides an excellent survey of educational video game genres through an ethnographic lens in her piece, “Education vs. Entertainment: A Cultural History of Children's Software.” Many of the products she covers are “educational or Edutainment” packages designed to teach a specific skill set or content area, games such as *JumpStart* or *Math Blaster*. Others are more “construction set” types, such *SimCity* or *Tycoon*. These packages are often criticized for being too closed or targeted, so Ito's work is especially interesting when compared with Kurt Squire's chapter, “Open-Ended Videogames: A Model for Developing Learning for the Interactive Age.”

Squire wrote his dissertation on the use of *Civilization* (a game in which players can repeat or rewrite history) as a tool for learning. He has continued his research in this arena. He compares *Civilization's* exploratory nature with that of the open-ended and often reviled *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (GTA)*. The open nature of both games allows for the shaping of multiple learning experiences and end goals depending on the lenses and interests the player brings to the table. Squire discovered that students up and down the socio-economic scale claimed the violence in *GTA* had little or no impact on the players, and he quotes from several interviews, including a student who found his greatest interest in the game to be detailing and modifying the cars it showcased. While some *Civilization* players in fact used the game to replay history, others saw it as an opportunity to expand into new territories or treated it like a *SimCity* game, nurturing their civilizations as pets.

Some of Squire's chapter does touch on race and identity within *GTA* and *Civilization* but these subjects serve as much more of the focus of Anne Everett and S. Craig Watkin's piece "The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games." This chapter looks at stereotypical representations within some violent video games and at discussions and interactions on the games' fan sites. The discussions included a wide range of comments on the social aspects of game, from those that were clearly racist to those that were tolerant and inclusive. Like most authors in the volume, Everett and Watkins stress the early nature of the results of their research and call for more work on the topic.

Although the true ecology of games is a much larger topic, this book nevertheless provides an excellent overview of a more narrow ecology, one located at the intersection of games and learning.

In short, I highly recommend both *Grand Theft Childhood* and *The Ecology of Games*.

–Stephen Jacobs, *Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY*