

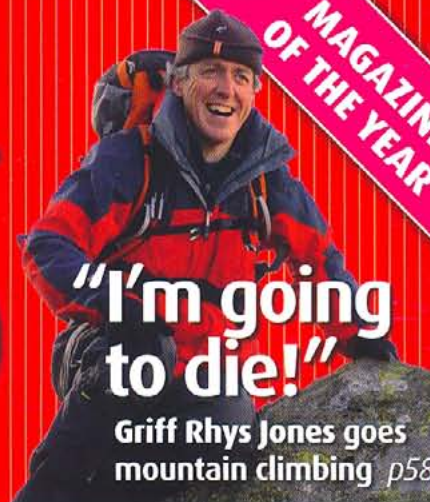
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# FOCUS

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MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR



"I'm going to die!"

Griff Rhys Jones goes mountain climbing p58

## WORLD WIDE WAR



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## Comment and analysis

Expert views on the latest developments

**This month: Craig Anderson** on why the BBFC was right to deny the violent video game *Manhunt 2* a licence for the Wii and PS3

# “The video game industry has been lax in its responsibilities”

Every well-designed video game is an excellent teacher, every player is its student. But what players learn depends on the game's content. The decision by the British Board of Film Classification to refuse *Manhunt 2* a licence sparked public debate about two related questions. Do violent video games cause real physical aggression and violence? And, if so, how should we deal with this public health threat?

As a behavioural scientist, I've dealt with the cause/effect question for over 20 years. The evidence is clear, as stated by the American Psychological Association and in recently-published studies – playing violent video games increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour. Furthermore, no wholly-immune population has ever been identified, not by age, sex, aggressiveness, nor the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality.

Such findings are not surprising to most behavioural scientists. After all, practising arithmetic will make you better at arithmetic, practising chess will make you better at chess. When playing video games, unintentional learning inevitably occurs.

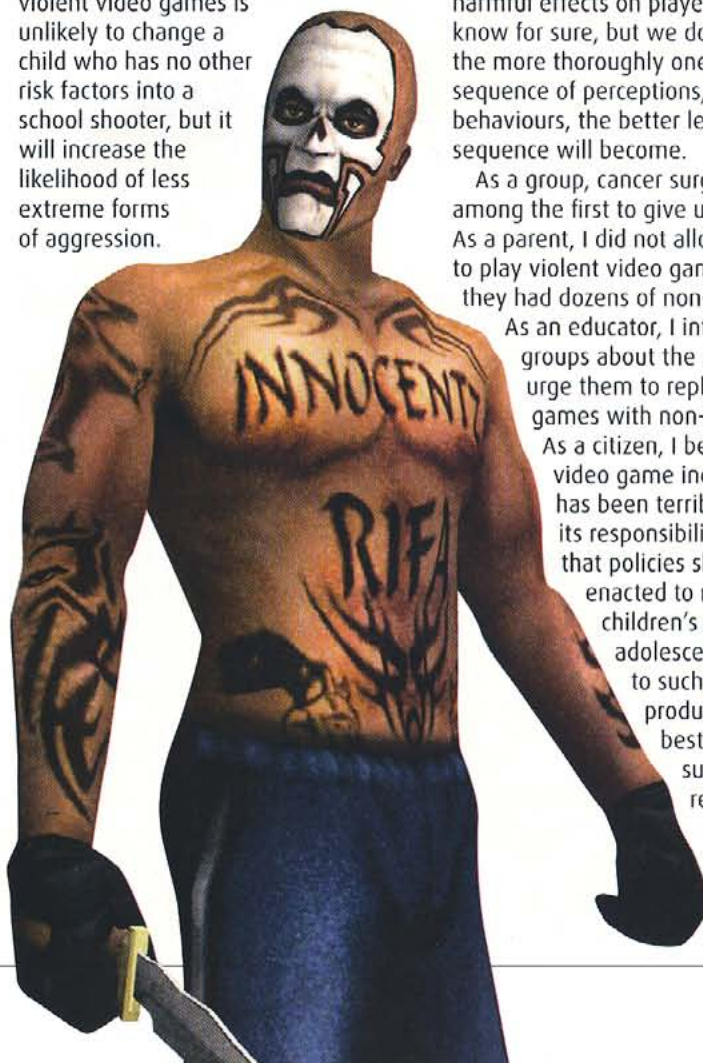
### Risky business

The extreme rhetoric concerning video games (they're all bad, they're all good) is, well, extreme. Actually, both positive and negative effects of video games have been demonstrated. Positive uses range from teaching youngsters how to manage their diabetes, to teaching them maths. Video games are even used when training pilots and combat soldiers.

Research into negative effects has focused primarily on violent games. We know a lot about these effects, but scientific facts are often overlooked in

public debates. These facts show that extreme violence, such as murder, almost always requires a convergence of 'risk factors', such as a history of violence, certain mental disorders, certain family background characteristics or extreme provocation.

About a dozen or so of these risk factors have been identified – high-level exposure to media violence is just one of them. Extremely violent behaviour requires multiple risk factors – five or more – but mild forms of aggression require fewer. Exposure to violent video games is unlikely to change a child who has no other risk factors into a school shooter, but it will increase the likelihood of less extreme forms of aggression.



The best predictor of violence in adolescence and adulthood is aggressive and violent behaviour during childhood. Thus, reducing or eliminating a child's exposure to violent video games will reduce the likelihood of that child developing a pattern of aggression.

The recent hullabaloo over *Manhunt 2* is at least partly due to its release with the Nintendo Wii, with its motion-sensitive game controller, which allows players to physically slash and stab their opponents. Does this increase the harmful effects on players? We don't know for sure, but we do know that the more thoroughly one practises a sequence of perceptions, decisions and behaviours, the better learned that sequence will become.

As a group, cancer surgeons were among the first to give up smoking. As a parent, I did not allow my children to play violent video games, though they had dozens of non-violent ones.

As an educator, I inform parent groups about the research and urge them to replace violent games with non-violent ones.

As a citizen, I believe the video game industry has been terribly lax in its responsibilities, and that policies should be enacted to reduce children's and adolescents' exposure to such harmful products. How best to accomplish such a goal requires public debate with accurate scientific input.



Craig Anderson is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Iowa State University, US. His latest book is *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (2007, OUP)

