

Empathy, Morality, and the Effects of Violent Video Games

André Melzer, University of Luxembourg

The effects of violence in video games have been widely investigated (Happ & Melzer, 2014). However, research on whether or not playing violent video games causes adverse effects on aggression and antisocial behavior has led to fierce debates among scientists and in the general public. Findings from the Luxembourg lab on empathy and morality support the notion that the effects of video game violence (VGV) are best understood within a model of risk and resilience factors, including characteristics of medium, player and situation.

A first series of studies confirmed the moderating role of empathy (Happ, Melzer, & Steffgen, 2013). When game characters were induced as warm and empathic, game violence was perceived as less justified, irrespective of the morality of the game character. However, empathy had differential effects on hostile perception, depending on character morality. Neutral faces were perceived as less aggressive after playing the Superman character, but more hostile after playing the evil Joker. Inducing empathy also had differential effects depending on the nature of the video game (Happ, Melzer, & Steffgen, 2015). Empathy decreased antisocial and increased prosocial behavior after a prosocial game (Study 1) or when participants played a positive character in an antisocial game (Study 2). However, empathy increased antisocial behavior and reduced prosocial behavior after playing a mean character in an antisocial game (Study 1 & 2).

Regarding the moral implications of VGV, it was found that games that involve violence against humans might pose a threat to one's moral self (Gollwitzer & Melzer, 2012). This was especially true for inexperienced players, who reported greater moral distress and selected more hygiene products as a symbolic act of moral cleansing than frequent video game players.