

A generation schooled and skilled in graphic violence

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Educational experts are watching closely the impact of violent video games on a generation of school children, particularly boys.

In Max Payne 3, an ultra-realistic action video game that apes the slow-motion bullet effects notable in the films of Hong Kong action director John Woo, one shoot-out scene zooms in on the slow-motion flight of a bullet before cutting to another shot of the bullet bloodily bursting out the back of its target's head.

Aesthetically, it's mesmerising to watch. At the same time, the violence is notably realistic and graphic. In Australia, the game is rated MA15+ for strong violence, coarse language and sex scenes, meaning high school students aged 15 and over are legally permitted to buy it, hire it or play it.



Shocking: Grand Theft Auto V has levels of violence, including rape, that many parents are unaware their teenagers are exposed to. *Supplied*

Judy Crowe, president of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, says violent video games are part of the spectrum of violent media necessitating schools' duty to educate young people about the differences between the fantasy world and the real world.

"Schools do appreciate that their students live in a wider world than is the school, and are exposed to influences beyond school," she says. "Sometimes, as a consequence of those influences, behaviours are exhibited at school. And that's certainly the sense we have about the exposure children have to video games. How that impacts upon their attitudes is something that occurs unconsciously, which is a way a lot of learning takes place."

Debates about the harmful effects of violent video games on teenage school kids are prone to descending into anarchy. Paul Zappa, director of NIRODAH, specialists in school counselling services and programs tailored to proactively combat bullying and

violent behaviour in schools and the wider community, has heard many competing viewpoints. He says while there's conjecture about the exact threat a game like Grand Theft Auto (modified versions of Grand Theft Auto depict virtual rapes and gamers in the regular version have sex with prostitutes and shoot them afterwards) might or might not pose to society, he is mindful of the impact young video gamers' attitudes have on violence culture.

VicHealth's 2013 paper Australia's Attitudes to Violence Against Women states that attitudes contribute to violence against women specifically because they influence expectations of what is acceptable behaviour. It adds that community attitudes affect people's response to violence, whether it's the victims themselves, friends, law enforcement professionals, employers or policy makers.

What's concerning, it shows, is that significant numbers of Australians have attitudes that excuse, trivialise, minimalise or shift blame with regard to violence specifically against women. While Zappa says he doesn't make assumptions about the impact video games might have on attitudes towards violence, he says he adopts a "common sense" approach with his own children's engagement with media and entertainment.

His daughter participates in hip-hop dancing and he'll talk to her about the poor selection of some of the songs her teacher opts for, which feature words like "whore".

"Because I'm the parent and I've heard the song, I have that discussion with her and hopefully she takes that in and it makes her aware of that.

"Whereas the thing about the games is, I don't know that there are a lot of parents sitting down with their kids and playing Grand Theft Auto, and doing it in moderation. So the kids are left to just take it in

and put it somewhere without anyone saying, 'You know that that's not how it really is?' That sort of discussion."

Respectful Relationships Education: Violence Prevention and Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools is a 2009 Department of Education and early childhood development paper that made recommendations to educate Victorian high school students about violence on the grounds that schools were potential settings for violence perpetration and victimisation.

Elizabeth Handsley, president of the Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM) and professor of law at Flinders University, says media violence exacerbates the problem of promoting respectful relationships and violence prevention in schools.

"As a society, we're trying to become more aware of violence – especially violence against women – and to try to address that. And yet we've got some very strong media messages our children are receiving about violence being heroic, being an appropriate way of resolving conflict and being trivial or not having any serious consequences."

Gender, Age and the Perceived Causes, Nature and Extent of Domestic and Dating Violence in Australian Society, a 2015 University of NSW study, found male high school students were most likely to agree with gender stereotypes and attitudes supportive of violence.

Crowe, also principal of Melbourne Girls College until last year, says schools typically address the issue of video game violence in a preventative way.

"It's by running activities for parents about the influence that these

games can have and exposure to material on the internet generally can have," she says. "It's quite common in secondary schools for there to be activities conducted by the school for parents about the consequence of this sort of exposure."

Student exposure to graphic video game violence is an evolving issue. The games themselves are a far cry from the blocky days of Pac Man. Game developers are ears-deep in the quest to master photo-realism (a push that is making games increasingly vivid, cinematic and lifelike) and hyper-realistic games exhibit aesthetics that exaggerate and fetishise the perpetration of violence.

Students also have more devices to play violent video games.

"Students are now bringing their own devices into school," Crowe says. "Whereas in the past, schools had the very strong ability to monitor what students were exposed to at school, the issue now is that because students have their own iPhones and devices, the ability of the school to manage what is on those devices is lessened – particularly when they are personally owned by kids."

Schools vary in their approach to violence prevention and the promotion of respectful relationships, according to 2014 department of education and early childhood development paper Building Respectful Relationships: Stepping Out Against Gender-Based Violence. Some respond to problems case-by-case; others have specific policies; many augment their curriculums to improve students' understanding of sexual assault and domestic violence and to introduce media literacy, sexual negotiation and consent.

Emily Maguire, policy and program manager, children and young people at Our Watch, advocates for the prevention of violence against women and children. She says respectful relationships programs in schools should equip young people with the know-how

to detect and respond appropriately to the misogyny and violence in video games and across the board.

"What we need to do is ensure we're giving young people the skills and framework so they can critique those things but also make their own choices about how to reject those social norms pushed on them on a regular basis," she says.

Zappa says NIRODAH is trying to change the level of awareness teachers have about respectful relationships and violence prevention. Pre-service teachers exposure to respectful relationships and violence prevention education is patchy at best.

"There's no mandatory relationships education training," he says. "We've just met with RMIT and we're hoping we might make a little crack in there."

Families have a part to play in managing their children's exposure to violent video games but Handsley points out their attitudes to violence in media will vary.

"A lot of parents are gamers themselves and they're right into that stuff anyway," she says.

Although the violence in MA15+ video games can be strong, Handsley adds it's not hard for many under-age high school students to get their hands on R18+ video games, given they have older siblings and friends who can assist.

According to Zappa, when he shows teachers the actual content in a game like Grand Theft Auto, it's often to their dismay and surprise.

"I reckon the majority of staff are in shock," he says. "Some of them say, 'Oh my god, my son plays Grand Theft Auto. I had no idea!'"

Maguire points out it's worthwhile asking whether society is better off with video games that sexualise women and contain violence supportive messages.

"In some respects, what we want to do is create a society where no one makes those games," she says. "That's the ultimate aim: No one makes movies that show rape is cool or funny or that women really want it when they say 'no', or make video games that make these sorts of hyper-sexualised violence.

"But in reality that world is a really long long way away."