



## Selling violent video game solutions: A look inside the APA's internal notes leading to the creation of the APA's 2005 resolution on violence in video games and interactive media<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

For decades politicians, parent groups, researchers, media outlets, professionals in various fields, and laymen have debated the effects playing violent video games have on children and adolescents. In academia, there also exists a divide as to whether violent video games cause children and adolescents to be aggressive, violent, and even engage in criminal behavior. Given inconsistencies in the data, it may be important to understand the ways and the reasons why professional organizations take a stance on the violent video game effects debate which may reflect greater expressed certitude than data can support. This piece focuses on the American Psychological Association's internal communications leading to the creation of their 2005 *Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media*. These communications reveal that in this case, the APA attempted to "sell" itself as a solution to the perceived violent video game problem. The actions leading to the 2005 resolution are then compared to the actions of the APA's 2013–2015 Task Force on Violent Media. The implications and problems associated with the APA's actions regarding violent video games are addressed and discussed below.

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### 1. Introduction to the issue

Controversy pertaining to violent video games is almost as old as the video game industry itself. In fact, as early as 1976, the game *Death Race* was pulled from the market by the game's manufacturer, which resulted from public outcry over the "death sounds" a player would hear and the appearance of their tombstone within the game when the player drove over human-like targets (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2017). As time and technology progressed, the violence depicted in video games became more realistic and life-like. At the same time, as the video game industry grew in popularity and sales, video game developers "pushed the envelope" in their attempts to depict realistic violence to increase sales. Games like *Mortal Kombat* (a fight-to-the-death game), which allowed winning players the ability to rip out their opponent's spinal cord or set them on fire (among other possible fatalities) caused public concern over the effect such games had on children and adolescents. Congressional hearings caused the video game industry to elect to self-regulate with the creation of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (Entertainment Software

Association, 1998–2016). Members of the public and political arenas viewed the decision to allow the industry to police itself as a mistake (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2017). These people had their fears realized as other video game controversies ensued. These controversies include, but are not limited to the *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2*'s level in which players act as undercover C.I.A. operatives who kill Russian civilians at an airport to gain the terrorists' trust, and the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* "hot coffee mod", which allowed players to hack the game and participate in a mini-game of sexual intercourse.

For many people, such games, which are typically referred to as *violent video games*, continue to remain cause for concern. The fears that such games cause youths to be aggressive, violent, or to even engage in criminal behavior are not unreasonable (Ferguson, 2015). For years academics have attempted to make sense of the effects violent video games have on youths and, as a result, despite many completed studies published in the academic literature on media and violence, the academic community remains divided. Professional organizations have also weighed in on the controversy. For example, the American Surgeon General's 2001 report found violent video games play a miniscule role in youth violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), yet organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) have formed resolutions like their 2005 *Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media*. This particular resolution recommends the reduction of violence in video games, because

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playing violent video games may increase aggressive behavior in youths. More recently the APA has updated the 2005 resolution with its 2015 “Resolution on Violent Video Games,” which “confirms” the link between violent video games and aggression (see also [American Psychological Association, 2015b](#)).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the actions of the APA in their 2005 resolution and compare those actions to their construction of the 2013 Task Force on Violent Media. We do this by first examining the APA’s internal communications involving the 2005 resolution and comparing these actions against how the 2015 Task Force on Violent Media responded to the violent video game controversy. We argue that, with the construction of the 2005 resolution, the APA was attempting to ‘sell’ itself as a solution to the violent video game problem and that this is something the APA continued with its 2013 Task Force on Violent Media. Next, the literature on violent video game effects is covered, as are political efforts to address the problem, including detailed information on the actions of the APA. This piece concludes by discussing the implications the actions of the APA has for a contemporary understanding of violent video games and societal responses to such perceived problems.

## 2. Brief history of video game research

Many studies exist which show violent video games do have a range of negative effects for youths who play such games. The baseline for such studies is a focus on whether violent video games cause aggression (i.e., [Hollingdale & Greitemeyer, 2014](#)). For example, [Anderson et al. \(2010\)](#) concluded playing violent video games is a “causal risk factor” for aggression and decreased empathy. [Anderson and Carnagey’s \(2009\)](#) experimental studies came to a similar conclusion regarding aggression. Some researchers, such as [Adachi and Willoughby \(2013\)](#), have explained the effects of violent video games on aggression by highlighting the fact that such games are competitive in nature (yet, another controversial area in academia). Other studies have shown violent video games may increase aggression by desensitizing players to violence ([Carnagey & Anderson, 2004](#); [Engelhardt, Bartholow, Kerr, & Bushman, 2011](#)). Research has also extended the investigation of the effects of violent video games on aggression to also include delinquent behavior; however, much of this research does not identify a link between violent video games and delinquency (see [Olson et al., 2008](#); [Ward, 2010](#)). Other researchers have found that playing violent video games may have a range of negative effects on players, including increases in interpersonal mistrust ([Rothmund, Gollwitzer, Bender, & Klimmt, 2015](#)) and altered prefrontal brain activity ([Hummer et al., 2010](#))<sup>1</sup>.

Much research also exists which shows violent video games are not detrimental to children and adolescents. [Ferguson’s \(2015\)](#) meta-analysis of the effects of video games in general show video games only have a trivial impact on aggression ( $r = 0.06$ ). Other studies, including two recent pre-registered experimental studies ([Ferguson et al., 2015](#); [McCarthy et al., in press](#)) have not found evidence for links between violent video game and aggression. Some studies, such as those of [Adachi](#) described above, have concluded that it is competitiveness rather than violent content in games that fuels aggression ([Adachi & Willoughby, 2011](#)). Other studies have come to similar conclusions regarding the potential confounding effects of frustration ([Przybylski, Deci, Rigby, & Ryan, 2014](#)) difficulty ([Kneer, Elson, & Knapp, 2016](#)) and, as well, pace of action ([Elson, Breuer, Van Looy, Kneer, & Quandt, 2015](#)). Some MRI studies have not shown significant impacts on the brain ([Regenbogen, Herrmann, & Fehr, 2010](#); [Szyck et al., 2016](#).) Other studies have concluded that violent video games do not cause violent behavior ([Gunter & Daly, 2012](#)), or may even reduce violence in real-life contexts ([Markey, Markey, & French, 2015](#); [Ward, 2011](#)). Violent video games may even have prosocial effects for

young teens attempting to deal with stress or feelings of anger ([Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008](#)). Some scholars suggest other sources are to blame for youth violence in America. For example, [Sternheimer \(2007\)](#) states, “If we want to understand why young people, particularly in middle-class or otherwise stable environments, become homicidal, we need to look beyond the games they play” (p. 17).

It is reasonable to argue that, even if violent video games do not influence the majority of players, a small group may be vulnerable to negative effects. However, several attempts to example specific groups of purportedly vulnerable individuals including those with prior autism spectrum disorders ([Engelhardt, Mazurek, Hilgard, Rouder, & Bartholow, 2015](#)) or youth with depression or ADHD symptoms ([Ferguson & Olson, 2014](#)) have failed to identify a population of vulnerable youth.

### 2.1. Political environments and news coverage

Violent video games have repeatedly been criticized in the news media as sources of mass shooter violent behavior, particularly the violent behavior of school shooters. Several high-profile shootings have been linked to adolescents and young adults with a history of enjoying violent video games. For example, an online newspaper article by the *New York Times* (see [Nizza, 2007](#)) discusses how the crimes committed by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at Columbine High School in 1999 may have been a result of their parents taking away their violent video game playing privileges. Similarly, a *Daily Mail* article entitled, “Lanza’s descent to madness and murder: Sandy Hook shooter notched up 83,000 online kills including 22,000 ‘head shots’ using violent video games to train himself for his massacre” credits Lanza’s playing of “Combat Arms”, a military first-person-shooter game as the reason why he committed his violent crimes ([Bates & Pow, 2013](#))<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the 2012 shooting which took place in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theatre during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*, committed by James Holmes, is explained in a *NaturalNews.com* article by stating, “Today, young males are absolutely inundated with violent video games, violent movies, sexual molestation by TSA goons and often firsthand military training” ([Adams, 2012, n.p.](#)).

Politicians have proposed several legal challenges aimed at curtailing the ability of violent video game developers to sell their products to children. For example, a 2005 Illinois General Assembly bill calls for violent video game sales to children to be classified as a Class A Misdemeanor and punishable by a fine of \$5000.00. Other examples include a 2013 New York State Senate Act to prohibit the sale of violent video games (with a mature rating) to children. Finally, another example of political efforts to curtail adolescent play of violent video games includes *California Bill No. 1179 (2005)*, which led to the U.S. Supreme Court’s review of the constitutionality of regulating the sale of violent video games to children and adolescents (discussed in detail below). Whether politicians develop such laws out of legitimate concern for children or to appear favorable in the eyes of a public concerned about links between violent video games and violent crime, and more specifically, mass shootings in America, remains an area of contention (see [Copenhaver, 2015](#)).

Academic scholars in fields such as criminology/criminal justice have devoted generous amounts of attention to studying society’s reaction to legal attempts at regulating the sale of violent video games to children and adolescents. Some scholars (i.e., [Calvert & Richards, 2006](#)) believe politicians are simply scared of the technological advances made in the production of violent video games. [Ferguson, Coulson, and Barnett \(2011\)](#) have commented that politicians are

<sup>1</sup> Some of these brain imaging studies, including the one cited, were funded by potential conflict of interest anti-media advocacy groups such as the Center for Successful Parenting.

<sup>2</sup> These claims about the Sandy Hook shooter, Adam Lanza’s gaming habits ultimately proved to be incorrect. The official investigation report (*State’s Attorney for the Judicial District of Dansbury, 2013*) concluded that Lanza mainly spent his time playing non-violent video games such as *Dance Dance Revolution*. No mention of Lanza’s alleged interest in violent online games was made in this report.

incorrect in establishing a link between both school shootings and less severe youth-perpetrated violent crimes because such a link has not been established in the research literature. The concern among many scholars is that the science of video game effects and the hyperbole surrounding it as expressed by some scholars may do considerable damage to the reputation of social science (Hall, Day, & Hall, 2011).

The political environment surrounding fear of video games and the political use of contested social science research can have real world ramifications (Ferguson, 2013). For example, the parents of three girls killed in 1997 at Health High School near Paducah, Kentucky were killed by Michael Carneal subsequently sued many violent video game manufacturers for the role parents perceived the manufacturers played in the deaths of their daughters (Calvert & Richards, 2004). In another example, in Leicester, England, Stefan Pakeerah's parents called for a ban on violent video games after Warren Leblanc (who played the violent game *Manhunt*) killed Pakeerah with a claw hammer (Wuller, 2013). Still yet, some academics criticize those who dismiss the link between violent video games and aggression/violence and contend the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown* should not dissuade law makers from attempting to regulate in some fashion other than what has already been attempted (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Williams (2006), highlighting a range of laws designed to address perceived problems associated with violent video games, has suggested that, given the history of failure of legal maneuvers to regulate violent video games, such attempts are "destined to fail" (p. 147).

### 3. Political efforts, supreme court

As noted above, many legislative efforts are based on the idea that violent video games cause aggression and many such bills even cite (i.e., Connecticut General Assembly Bill Committee Bill 328, 2013) academic research supporting such contentions. Repeatedly, court battles have concluded with decisions in favor of the video game industry. This has been both because the courts have concluded the research is unable to support the contention that violent video games cause aggression as well as because violent video games are considered analogous to the film industry, which is protected by free speech under the First Amendment (O'Holleran, 2010).

Perhaps the most important court decision determining the potential regulation and future of violent video games in America came with *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011). In this case [an appeal of the constitutionality of California Bill No. 1179 (2005)], the Supreme Court considered specifically the constitutionality of governmental attempts to regulate the sale of violent video games to minors. More specifically, the court did not find (as was highlighted in the original California bill) that violent video games cause aggression. Legal, psychology, and criminal justice scholars have criticized such governmental attempts to regulate the sale of violent video games, based on the findings of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011) and other courts reviewing similar cases. For example, O'Holleran (2010) states that courts have long-since highlighted the unconstitutionality of attempts to regulate violent video games as violations of free speech. More specifically, there is a difference in the objectionable nature of violent video game content versus pornography or obscenity, which may be regulated by the government. O'Holleran concludes that, given such attempts to regulate violent video games have repeatedly been ruled unconstitutional, "legislatures and politicians need to stop bombarding the game industry with the threat of regulation" (p. 573). Copenhaver (2015) came to a similar conclusion, and found through a qualitative document analysis study of American legislative attempts to regulate violent video games, that politicians are using violent video game regulatory attempts as pseudo-agenda. By this Copenhaver means that politicians continue to submit bills with language aimed at regulating violent video games when they know it is extremely unlikely such attempts will be ruled constitutional by the courts. Such moves are strictly aimed at making the public feel

like legislators are doing something about mass violence in America. In this sense, the *Brown v. EMA* decisions resolved conclusively whether governments can censor, prohibit minors' access to or tax violent video games. Overall, the courts have become more protective of the video game industry's free speech rights; this trend will continue barring significant technological advances in game development (Mott, 2012). The *Brown v. EMA* decision also can be seen as a rebuke of what was then the dominant position in social science regarding violent video game effects, a rebuke that can be seen as a loss of face for guild organizations such as the American Psychological Association and American Academy of Pediatrics. Such loss of face may have provoked these organizations to take even firmer stances on the issue, once the *Brown v. EMA* decision became several years old.

### 4. Brief history of the policy statements

The following section provides background information on the formation of the APA's 2005 *Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media* and its 2015 update of the same. Beginning in March 2003, the APA's Division on Media Psychology submitted a draft of its resolution on violent video games. In May and September 2003, the APA's Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (CYF) reviewed the resolution draft and updated it in accordance with their concerns over the effects violent video games have on youth. The resolution eventually made its way through the bureaucratic steps required by the APA before language becomes policy and passed all required boards/committees. In June 2005 the Board of Directors recommended to The Council of Representatives the resolution be approved. The acceptance of the resolution replaced the APA's outdated 1985 resolution on television violence (American Psychological Association, 2005). The APA's 2015 *Resolution on Violent Video Games* (2015a) was developed from the work of the APA Task Force on Violent Media (2015c), which was formed in 2013. The task force was chaired by Mark Appelbaum, Ph.D., and consisted of the following members: Sandra Calvert, Ph.D., Kenneth Dodge, Ph.D., Sandra Graham, Ph.D., Gordon Nagayama Hall, Ph.D., Sherry Hamby, Ph.D., and Larry V. Hedges, Ph.D. The task force conducted a meta-analysis of the existing literature on the link between violent video game exposure and aggression. The studies included in the meta-analysis spanned two decades and included studies of various quantitative methodologies (APA, 2015a). The APA specifically states that the updated resolution serves to replace the 2005 resolution, in that the current resolution is up-to-date with current research and also shows a link between violent video game exposure and aggression (APA, 2015a). Therefore, the APA has openly "confirmed" the link between exposure to violent video games and aggression (APA, 2015b). Meta-analyses are scientific-perhaps their findings are irrefutable, but we show that this is not the case by examining the notes subject to the current analysis.

### 5. Analysis of 2005 Policy Statement

The following section represents an analysis of the APA's internal communications which led to the creation of their 2005 *Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media*. An analysis like this one is instructive because it helps provide a better understanding of the socio-political processes that go into the construction of a professional agency's universal position on a controversial topic such as violence in video games. As highlighted before, such knowledge is important given the real-world consequences the APA's position has on American society's understanding of the effects of video game violence. As Kraska and Neuman (2012) note in discussing the relationship between power and knowledge (what they refer to as the "knowledge/power dynamic"), those with power (as with the APA) have the privilege of deciding what is legitimate knowledge. The APA, in effect, is creating knowledge on a controversial topic and affecting how the problem is understood; therefore, the goal of this section is to provide



a lucid commentary on the events guiding this highly controversial (and yet still influential) knowledge construction process. All references made in this section are made regarding Agenda Item No. 21 from the APA's Council on Representatives' August 17th and 21st, 2005, meetings (unless otherwise noted). All following references fall under Section XII on *Public Interest*.

The information analyzed here was provided to one of the authors of this paper by Dr. Steve Breckler, then serving as the APA's Science Directorate executive director. The data were provided spontaneously during the time when the APA was considering what would become the 2013–2015 task force on video games. The materials included the resolution itself as well as deliberations on the resolution from invested stakeholders at the APA, including several divisions, APA's Council on Legal Issues (who recommended initially against the resolution), the board of directors, and the council of representatives. The council of representatives ultimately is the voting body responsible for approving the resolution.

One issue related to the 2005 resolution evidence in the resolution itself, and discussions of it, is that the APA relied on a fairly narrow range of research studies, including only studies that supported the resolution. Often, this included work that had already come under criticism from scholars or the courts considering legislative efforts to regulate violent games. For example, the resolution cites multiple studies conducted by a relatively small group of authors (e.g. [Anderson & Bushman, 2002](#)), whose work had been repeatedly criticized by many researchers in the academic community ([Ferguson, 2002](#); [Freedman, 2002](#); [Gauntlett, 2005](#); [Savage, 2004](#)). Contemporaneous with the APA resolution in the case of *ESA, VSDA and IRMA v. Blagojevich, Madigan and Devine (2005)*, the court faulted the state of Illinois for using research from only a narrow band of scholars, and faulted the testimony of one of those scholars for ignoring research inconsistent with his view. Furthermore, some of later work by the same scholars was used as the basis for [California Bill No. 1179 \(2005\)](#), which escalated the issue of violent video game regulation to the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet, in reviewing the scientific literature proposed to support the state of California's legal right to regulate sales of violent video games to minors, the Supreme Court decided such research did not suggest violent video games causes adolescent aggression. Also, the resolution cites evidence from a 1972 Surgeon General's report on the relationship between social behavior and television, which means 30-year-old data were used to support the official position of the APA in 2005 (the resolution ignored that a later, 2001 Surgeon's General's report minimized the role of media in promoting youth violence).

On page 219, the Committee on Women in Psychology (Exhibit 9) expressed in a memo to the Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (CYF) that an earlier version of the resolution was weak because it relied on unpublished work. Also, in December 2004, the APA's Board of Directors reviewed a September 2004, version of the resolution and criticized it for too often referencing the scholars who comprised the resolution-creating work group. Finally, the APA suggests in Exhibit 14 that, "in recent years the level of violence in American society and the level of violence portrayed in television, film, and video have escalated markedly" (p. 233). [Eisen and Roeder \(2015\)](#) demonstrate that since the early 1990s the violent crime rate in the U.S. has plunged dramatically with only a brief up-tick in the early to mid-2000s. To suggest that violent crime in the U.S. had "escalated markedly" by 2004–2005 was inaccurate (e.g., [Childstats.gov, 2016](#)).

Second, the resolution was created by the APA among a great deal of internal conflict. Several examples pulled from the August 17th and 21st, 2005, Council of Representatives' Agenda Item No. 21 document are indicative of a disconnect between many different groups and committees as to what the official position of the APA should be on violent video games and aggression; whether a position should even be taken was also a matter of discussion. For example (and perhaps most damning), is the fact that The Committee on Legal Issues did not initially support the resolution because of First Amendment Constitutional

considerations related to free speech. Furthermore, The Committee on Legal Issues did not believe the body of research on the relationship between violent video games and violence was as solid or developed as the body of research on other forms of media and violence (see pp. 189 & 222). Also, the Committee on Division/APA Relations did not feel as if all divisions were initially consulted in original drafts of the resolution, which led to the encouragement for involvement of more divisions in the creation of the resolution (see p. 219). Moreover, the original draft was mostly reflective of the interests of the Council of Representatives. Additionally, after original drafts of the resolution were put together, the APA went back and reduced some of the "certainist" terms used to describe the nature of violent video game play in relation to aggression. For example, on page 209, words and phrases like "appears to be" and "suggests" were included to soften the certainty of the statements the APA was making on the relationship between violent media and aggression. Also, the Committee on Women in Psychology appear to have pushed their own agenda, encouraging the inclusion of more language and research to highlight the sexist nature of violent video games. If we move beyond the internal conflict inherent to the creation of the resolution we can see external conflict, as well, in that the resolution states on page 205 that there is a consensus in the psychological community about the effects of violent video games on aggression. As has been mentioned above, a consensus does not exist in the psychological community or the broader academic community on the relationship between violent video games and aggression (see [Quandt et al., 2015](#)).

Third, the APA's internal communications leading to the 2005 resolution appears to propose a "marketing plan" for advancing the social standing of the APA as an organization. One example of such a strategy can be seen on page 190. The agenda notes read that The (CYF), "recommended revisions to clarify and strengthen the resolution. It was noted that it is important that the resolution be compelling, timeless, and that it articulate what the discipline of psychology can uniquely contribute to this area" (n.p.). What this means is that the resolution appears to have been created, in part, as a way for the APA to engage in self-promotion of its perceived abilities to address the perceived violent video game link with societal aggression and violence.

Per the agenda items leading up to the resolution, one can see the first draft of the resolution was written in March of 2003. This followed several school shootings, beginning with Frontier Junior High in Moses Lake, Washington on February 2, 1996, to Santana High School in Santee, California on March 5, 2001. During this time important milestones preceding the resolution took place. For example, school shootings took place, such as the shooting at Columbine High School in which 13 individuals were killed (see [Fox, Levin, & Quinet, 2012](#), p. 117), and legal battles occurred in which parents of children like those in Paducah, Kentucky argued video game developers' were responsible in such shootings. Political attempts at gun control, regulation of violent video game sales, and academia itself were unable to address the problems associated with violent video games; therefore, it seems the APA felt, as an organization, it was able to answer the call.

Much of the language used by the APA arguably is of a "me too" variety. For example, in discussing the relevance of the violent video game issue to psychology and society as a whole, the "justification" (see p. 204) for stepping in to address the problem at that point was the fact that the APA had long since been invested in providing research and policy on violent media. The interactive nature of violent video games is used as justification for the learning theory approach used to study such a contemporary problem [[Bandura, 1977](#); [Berkowitz, 1993](#) are cited repeatedly throughout the resolution agenda]. Finally, even some committees themselves arguably used the process to advance their own agendas. For example, The (CYF) pushed to "strengthen" the original language at its May 2003, meeting (p. 190) and it was chaired by Dale Kunkle, a well-known advocate for concerns about media (e.g., [Kunkel, 2007](#); [Kunkel et al., 2002](#)). Furthermore, some of the policy recommendations (discussed in more detail below) coming

from the resolution (i.e., monitoring the activities of children who might play violent games) are consistent with the ideology of the CYF.

Finally, many of the policy recommendations made in the resolution by the APA are impractical, faulty in logic, and potentially unconstitutional. For example, they recommended video game developers should warn players about how many specific violent incidents they will play through if they purchase and play a particular game. This is impossible given the non-linear nature of online game play, which was already quite popular at the time the resolution was released. They also recommended voluntary regulation as a way to curtail problems associated with violent video games. In this sense, the APA advocates that video game developers self-censor violent content, an outcome so unlikely and unreasonable both on scientific and constitutional grounds as to arguably appear naive. The APA also recommended educational classes in school. These are unlikely to be feasible, in part, due to the already high demands on the school day, lack of clarity about how “media literacy” would work, and the potential that discouraging youth from engaging with certain content would have an inverse effect (an argument which has been made about other educational programs in the schools, such as D.A.R.E., *Lilienfeld, 2007*). Finally, the APA Board of Scientific Affairs (p. 217) recommended the creation of an APA “seal of approval” to be placed on violent video games. Such a recommendation further places the APA directly involved in video game regulation (additional evidence of the “self-promoting” aspects of the resolution highlighted above). However, such a move would likely garner unwanted attention from free speech activists or legal challenges. Moreover, the APA seems largely unaware or unconcerned that a content rating system already exists in the form of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB<sup>3</sup>), which is expected to act as a form of self-policing to regulate the video game development industry (a stance the APA would seem to tacitly champion; see argument above). Specifically, the resolution states the APA should, “advocate for the development and dissemination of a content based rating system that accurately reflects the content of video games and interactive media” (2005, n.p.). However, just such a system was already in place through the ESRB system since 1994.

Thus, although the 2005 resolution undoubtedly had elements of good faith, the credibility of the resolution is undone both by the APA’s apparent lack of awareness of video games themselves (as evidenced by the apparent unawareness of or lack of concern with the ESRB system), and their apparent efforts to use the controversial issue to promote psychology and the APA itself. Further, the 2005s *citation bias* (selectively reporting only research supporting the resolution and ignoring research that would contradict it) damages the APA’s credibility as an independent evaluator of the evidence and the validity of any conclusions they offer.

## 6. Analysis of 2015 Task Force

In 2013, the APA formed the American Psychological Association Task Force on Violent Media. The Task Force was charged with investigating the effects of violent video games on adolescent aggression and crime. The Task Force was concerned with the vast technological changes that had taken place in the world of violent video games since the 2005 resolution was crafted. The result of the Task Force’s efforts was an August 13, 2015, press release “confirming” the link between violent video games and aggression in youth (See *American Psychological Association, 2015b*), although the APA acknowledged that the link could not be extended to violent behavior.

With the updated 2015 resolution on violent video games, the APA further dug in its heels in its stance against violent video games, at least on the issue of aggressive outcomes, providing in this resolution much more references to actual concrete research studies conducted on the link between violent video games and aggression. Previously

the APA had made its case against violent video games based mostly on a body of research on the relationship between violent media, in general (or television viewing more specifically), and aggression. Again, the APA recommends children be given media literacy training to reduce their exposure to violent video games and calls into question the accuracy of the ESRB’s content rating system. Ultimately, the APA states it will support federal government and philanthropic organizational research on a variety of violent video game topics, including but not limited to: how media literacy can mitigate violent video game effects, differences in negative outcomes for males and females who play violent video games, and the relationship between negative outcomes and exposure to violent video games.

Despite the APA’s increased confidence on the validity of the relationship between violent video games and aggression, the Task Force’s actions and their study results have been the subject of much controversy. After the Task Force composition was announced, this prompted a group of 230 concerned scholars to encourage the APA to discontinue its use of universal statements or resolutions on violent video games effects (see *N.A., 2013*). Concerns about the task force were also raised by individual scholars both in scholarly outlets (e.g., *Quintero-Johnson, Banks, Bowman, Carveth, & Lachlan, 2014*) as well as in news media coverage of the final task force report, which tended to be negative (e.g., *Wofford, 2015*). Concerns voiced included that the Task Force appeared to be “stacked” with members who had publically taken anti-video game positions in the past (with at least one member having a conflict of interest, which arguably should have constituted removal of the individual from the Task Force<sup>4</sup>), without this being balanced with more skeptical scholars. Other concerns included the Task Force’s inconsistent selection processes regarding studies included in the meta-analysis (many studies exist which meet the six inclusion criteria that the APA determined were necessary for a study to be included in the meta-analysis, although only 18 studies were eventually analyzed<sup>5</sup>), and the motive behind the APA’s creation of the Task Force, which Dr. Appelbaum suggests was done to give the appearance that the APA can “fix” problems like violence theorized to be caused by video games (*Wofford, 2015*). Further, the Task Force did not appear to address some of the major controversies in the field in a meaningful way. For instance, no mention was made about the widespread problem of unstandardized and non-valid aggression measures that may be a source of questionable researcher practices and false positive results (*Elson, Mohseni, Breuer, Scharnow, & Quandt, 2014*). Likewise, the Task Force identified evidence for publication bias in the field, but largely ignored this as inconsequential. Further concerns about possible confounds in the research (e.g., *Adachi & Willoughby, 2011*) were largely dismissed. As such, the Task Force report did little to address the significant controversies in this research field.

To gain a better understanding of the actions of the Task Force and decisions made in their review process, the authors attempted to contact Laura Fasig, the Director of the CYF office of the APA. Each author’s email requesting information on how studies were selected for inclusion in the meta-analyses, data from this meta-analysis, and how task force members were selected were ignored. The authors attempted to reach out to the chair of the task force committee, as well, and were referred back to the Director of the CYF, who, subsequently did not respond to this request either. The authors’ proposed to provide a comparison of the APA’s actions that went into the creation of the 2005 resolution, and the 2015 Task Force’s creation, that had led to the 2015 update of the 2005 resolution. Without such documents, a comparison of this nature is not possible; however, the history of the creation of the 2005

<sup>3</sup> The ESRB system appears to receive only brief mention in the documents under consideration by the APA Council of Representatives.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Calvert, a Professor in the Psychology Department at Georgetown University, had previously published a paper on the relationship between violent video games and aggression. The Chair of the Task Force, Mark Applebaum had stated that researchers conducting research on violent video games and concerning behaviors could not participate in the activities of the Task Force (*Wofford, 2015*).

<sup>5</sup> This number includes one study (*Schmierbach, 2010*) that does not, in fact, appear to meet inclusion criteria, having no contrast between violent and non-violent games.

resolution and its significance to the Task Force's recent actions and the APA's update of the 2005 resolution are still noteworthy, nonetheless.

## 7. Conclusion

It was the goal of this piece to provide insight into the process of how a professional organization, here the APA, can come to take a definitive, although perhaps misguided stance on a contemporary controversy involving a social phenomenon like violent video games. Through inspecting the APA's internal communications leading to the creation of its 2005 resolution against violent video games and comparing such actions to the APA's creation of a Task Force on Violent Video Games one can understand how the work of such a task force helped to solidify the organization's position on this topic. Furthermore, one can see that when organizations take a stance on controversial topics under the guise of science, the intent would be to promote the field in the eyes of the public as a fix for a perceived social problem.

Here, it is important to point out why task forces are often unhelpful towards achieving outcomes that work towards the public good. First, as can be seen from the examples highlighted above, task forces are sometimes comprised of individuals who hold to certain ideological stances on controversial issues, which causes their judgment on those social issues to be subjective or biased. This is not to imply bad faith on the part of these individuals, only that failure to solicit a range of viewpoints on a controversial issue may result in groupthink. Furthermore, we argue that individuals may be chosen for task forces by those in power in organizations such as the APA to ensure that a predetermined conclusion is reached. Additionally, many individuals placed on such task forces do not have direct experience with whatever phenomenon about which they are expected to assign a professional opinion despite that such opinions often have significant policy and social consequences. In this case, many researchers assigned to investigate the effects violent video games have on adolescents have relatively little experience playing violent video games themselves. Such a lack of experience is problematic, because older individuals (the people who do not typically play violent games) often have more negative attitudes about violent video games. Yet, once exposed to violent games, older adults hold more favorable attitudes towards violent games than they did previously (Ferguson, Nielsen, & Maguire, 2016; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2016). Other contemporary research in this area suggests individuals are more likely to believe violent video games cause aggression if they have not been exposed to violent video games (Przybylski, 2014) and will harm others who play violent video games much more than themselves (Wan & Youn, 2004).

Researchers are not unique regarding their lack of experience with violent video games, in that politicians (see Calvert & Richards, 2006) and judges often have little experience with violent video games, as well. As such, the biases that afflict the decision making of other groups of older adults may also be common among task force members. After the Supreme Court's 2011 ruling in the *Brown* case, the Washington Post released a story suggesting that some of the Supreme Court Justices had no clue about some the information presented to them during the proceedings related to the case. Justice Antonin Scalia admitted to not knowing what *Mortal Kombat* was, a game often considered one of the most violent on the market (and is immensely popular, as well). Additionally, Justices Elena Kagan, and Stephen Breyer had to play violent video games to help them make a decision in the *Brown* case, given their little experience with such leisure activities (see Barbash, 2015).

To hear such stories is troubling, given the number of states calling for the creation of task forces to study the effects of violent video games after the Newtown Connecticut shooting. At least in one instance, a Massachusetts Senate Bill (No. 168, 2013) called for task force commission members to sit down and actually play violent video games. Interestingly, Calvert and Richards (2005) contend it will take a generation of future politicians "weaned" on violent video games to come to the conclusion that violent video games are not harmful to young people. Also, task forces constructed to study violent video games do not work

because the individuals given such appointments often have an ideological agenda (Ferguson, 2013), which goes much deeper than their commitment to solving key social problems. For example, Copenhaver (2015) provides a dramaturgical analysis of how politicians have repeatedly attempted to pass unconstitutional bills as "pseudo-agenda" to "address the violent video game problem", all in hopes of gaining votes. Calvert and Richards (2006) state that politicians repeatedly attempt to pass laws which they know will inevitably be challenged in court and that such measures are attempted for "good politics and sensational soundbites" (p. 79). Finally, task forces designed to study the effects of violent video games detract from a true understanding of some of the more often-cited factors related to violence in the U.S. (i.e., poverty, mental illness, access to guns). What is worse is that detracting attention from some of the above cited problems prevents the public from hearing, discussing, and voting on workable solutions to violence in America, and to school shootings, in particular. For, as Kappeler (2004) writes, criminal justice myths (here the myth that violent video games cause aggression) influence what is both thinkable and unthinkable.

The APA's actions leading to their creation of their 2005 resolution, the creation of the 2013 task force, and the 2015 update to the 2005 resolution are based on decisions that may be considered problematic and biased. By this statement, it is meant that the APA's actions have not been based on a fair and systematic approach to assessing the true effect of violent video games on children. Other reviews of the effects violent games have on children have been conducted by other parties; those parties engaged in more neutral assessments of the task with which they were charged. For example, the Supreme Court, as mentioned above, examined the scientific findings of both believers and non-believers of the supposed effect of violent video games on aggression to make its decision in the *Brown* case, as did the governments of Australia (2010), Sweden (2010), and even the anti-media advocacy group *Common Sense Media* (2013). Ultimately the "appeal to authority" logical fallacy offered by task force reports, whatever the source, may do less to illuminate the truth behind scientific findings, and more to illuminate the social, moral, and political agendas of those organizations offering those reports.

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