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(Non) aggressive, (non) violent computer games – definitional challenges

Abstract

The primary goal of this research endeavor is to delineate the challenges associated with classifying computer games as "aggressive or violent". These terms are frequently invoked in media and public discourse, particularly concerning the influence of computer games on aggressive behaviours, such as those observed in mass shooting incidents. However, both a comprehensive literature review and the findings derived from this study affirm the absence of definitive criteria for characterising what truly constitutes "aggressive or violent" computer games. The data underscore the necessity for deliberation in defining the categories of aggression or violence within gaming spheres, enabling a clear demarcation between so-called aggressive or violent computer games and other types. This delineation is crucial given that most games center around competition or resolving diverse conflict scenarios, wherein various forms of aggression or violence are employed—for instance, the act of fouling a player in FIFA, a simulation of football. The research focused on computer players aged 13-14 and were selected for participation based on their behaviour related to computer games.

Keywords: computer players, (non) aggressive, (non) violent computer games.

Introduction

Media coverage, particularly concerning violent content in computer games, has introduced terms like "aggressive computer games" and "violent computer games" into public discourse. Politicians and the public often associate aggressive behaviours, such as mass shootings, with computer games that feature violence. In the well-known and high-profile "Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association (EMA)" case, the United States Supreme Court's ruling in 2011 struck down California law that restricted the sale of certain so-called "violent" video games to minors without supervision. However, the contentious issue regarding the definition of "aggressive or violent video games" remains unresolved (Supreme Court opinions, 2011). This article aims to present research results illustrating the challenges in classifying games as "aggressive" or "violent", as well as other game categories. While these terms are widely used in daily life due to media emphasis on contentious game aspects and the oversimplification of their complex content, both literature review and the study's findings reveal a lack of clear criteria for defining aggressive or violent computer games. An important perspective shedding light on the intricacies of defining, categorising, and evaluating games as aggressive or violent comes from the resolution put forth by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2020. This resolution underscores the necessity to enhance the assessment system concerning the degree and specific traits of aggression within games, considering the evolving global landscape.

> BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that APA strongly encourages the Entertainment Software Rating Board to refine the ESRB rating system specifically to reflect the levels and characteristics of violence in games in addition to the current global ratings (APA, 2020, p. 3).

These identified gaps raise concerns about drawing conclusions regarding the role of aggressive or violent computer games in shaping human behaviour. The diversity of studies and inconclusive findings make an overall assessment of their influence challenging. Some studies suggest a correlation between games and aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2001, 2002; Gentile et al., 2017; Greitemeyer, 2018; Krahé, 2014; Olejarnik & Romano, 2023; Teng et al., 2019; Yao, et al., 2019), while others refute such claims (APA, 2019, 2020; Dupee et al., 2023; DeCamp & Ferguson, 2017; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2018; Przybylski, 2022; Przybylski, & Weinstein, 2019; Vuorre et al., 2022). Attributing aggressive behaviours like shootings to computer games provides a simplified explanation compared to analysing the multifaceted factors influencing these behaviours. This article primarily addresses the absence of clear criteria for categorising games as aggressive, containing violence, or falling into other game categories (e.g., strategic, sports), which remains poorly understood. Despite limitations in the study (a small, non-probabilistic sample), it contributes to filling the gap in understanding this aspect of computer games. Obtained results, such as respondents classifying the FIFA computer game both as containing violence (8%) and as a strategic

game (14%) without PEGI markings or descriptors, confirm the difficulties in game classification. This indicates subjectivity in determining what is aggressive or violent in a game and varies among evaluators (public opinion, politicians, the PEGI system, or the players themselves). These results emphasise the need for further exploration of so-called aggressive and violent computer games. Crucially, this exploration should involve the systematization of theoretical foundations regarding the concepts of "aggression" and "violence" in this context.

Aggression, Violence - Defining Concepts

Interdisciplinary concepts regarding the etiology of aggressive and violent behaviours emphasise the multifaceted nature of causes and their mutual interactions. The term "aggression" is broader than "violence" and in a literal translation signifies: aggresio (Lat.) - assault, gressus - step, movement, activity, aggr - attach, aggredior - attempt, acquire, strive, attack (Kopaliński, 2003, p. 23). Representatives from various scientific disciplines, formulating different definitions of aggression, emphasise its distinct components and determinants. In the extensive literature, three main trends in classifying aggression can be observed: firstly, psychological factors as a response to frustration of goals and needs - primarily intentions and deliberateness (Berkowitz, 1965, Dollard et al., 1939; Frączek, 2002). Secondly, biological factors - primarily instincts and drives (Freud, 1933, 1994; Lorenz, 2003) and genetic factors (Lombroso, 2006; Sheldon, 1949). The third trend relates to environmental factors - rooted in pedagogical theories (Rousseau, 1995, Locke, 2002), sociological theories (Durkheim, 1951, Merton, 1949, Becker, 1963), and social learning theory (Bandura, Ross, Ross, 1961, 1963). The typology proposed by Pyżalski (2012) points to the hierarchical relationship between the concepts of aggression, violence, and bullying. It suggests that while every form of violence constitutes aggression, not every form of aggression qualifies as violence. Violence, in this context, is a slightly narrower term that emphasizes the intentional nature of behaviors, the dominance of one party (e.g., physical, economic, psychological), and the cyclical pattern of behaviors (Olweus, 2013). However, legal frameworks concerning the definition of domestic violence make an exception by acknowledging that violence can be a one-time occurrence (Journal of Laws No. 180 item 1493, 2005).

Aggressive vs. Violent Computer Games - Definitional Challenges

> … Computer games are perhaps the richest cultural genre we have yet seen, and this challenges our search for a suitable methodological approach… (Aarseth, 2001)

Systematising the terminology related to the categorization of so-called "aggressive" and "violent" games is a difficult and complex task. The problematic issues

not only stem from the previously mentioned taxonomic difficulties but also from the ambiguous nature of the term "computer game" itself. Defining this concept relies on two main contexts. Firstly, a computer game can be defined from a technological perspective as a computer program, a set of instructions understood and executed by the processor. This broad definition enables the utilization of various types of games available in the market (Skrzypczak, 1998). Secondly, a computer game can be perceived as a form of entertainment and play, where it is identified as a specific type of computer program who's main or one of the main purposes is to provide entertainment (Chwaszcz, 2005). The multidimensional nature of technological determinants related to defining the concept of a "computer game" also arises from the fact that a computer game can be played on a screen, which can be an independent device (e.g., a television) or a component of an output device (e.g., a tablet, mobile phone, or smartphone). Additionally, possibilities stemming from the development of virtual reality (VR) increasing immersion (e.g., through VR headset) (Steuer, 1992). However, respecting the fact that all forms of games have evolved almost in parallel, and the vast majority can be played on a computer, following Juul (2010) and Kuipers (2010) the term "computer game" in this study is used as a hypernym for all the above concepts. These various perspectives allowing different interpretations of what a computer game is, introduce additional challenges in classifying games in terms of their content (including aggressive and violent content). The contention over defining an aggressive or violent computer game arises from the fact that every game contains behaviours that are conventionally defined as aggression or violence (Serpa, 2021, Adams, 2014). The cause of an aggressive act may lie in the competitive nature of games containing violence rather than violence itself (Dowsett et al., 2019). Consequently, attempting to categorise these concepts may lead to the belief that there is a flawed or non-existent shared definition of a violent game, even if the terms aggression and violence are well-defined in this context (Serpa, 2021). Despite the widespread use of these terms in everyday life, the subject literature lacks a dichotomous division into computer games as aggressive or violent, confirming inconsistencies in defining these concepts. Games are most commonly categorised as: (1) action games (encompassing shooters, fighting, adventure, robberies, car thefts), (2) adventure games (containing literary elements where the player experiences various adventures), (3) role-playing games (action RPGs, MMORPGs), (4) strategy games (tactical in nature, containing military, economic strategies), (5) simulation games (animal or vehicle simulators and their environments), (6) sports games (involving real or imaginary sports disciplines like soccer or hockey), (7) puzzle games (requiring logical thinking or skill), (8) educational games (with a strong educational-cognitive aspect) (Zajączkowski, Urbańska-Galanciak, 2009). Adams (2014) classifies games as: (1) shooter games, (2) action and arcade games, (3) platform games, (4) fighting games, (5) strategy games, (6) role-playing games, (7) sports games, (8) vehicle simulations, (9) construction and simulation games, (10) adventure games, (11) puzzle games. Only the verification of games in terms of their content confirms that acts of aggression and violence

belong to the majority of computer games (except educational games) (Markey, 2015, Adams, 2014). According to game designer Ernest Adams (2014), the essence of many games revolves around conflict, often depicted as violence in various forms and intensities, hence most games worldwide contain violence in some more or less abstract form. An example of a computer game illustrating difficulties in this area is Super Mario Sunshine. Following the previously given definitions of aggression and violence, the game Super Mario Sunshine, containing aggressive and brutal mechanics (inflicting damage and killing enemies), should be classified as an aggressive or violent game. On the other hand, Super Mario Sunshine lacks descriptors indicating the presence of violence. Establishing criteria that would determine whether a game is aggressive or violent remains problematic. According to Markey (2015), uncertainties in this matter lead to most games being categorised as containing violence since 90% of the most popular games (from 2010 to 2015) displayed some form of aggressive behaviour. The question of whether the presence of violent or aggressive content alone suffices to define a game as aggressive or violent remains unresolved. This is especially significant as the literature on the influence of games on the formation of aggressive behaviours lacks clarification on how the presence of aggressive or violent content relates to defining a game as aggressive or violent. For instance, whether games like FIFA or Super Mario Sunshine meet the criteria to be classified as violent games.

Methodology

Procedure and participants

The study's findings on how players classify computer games as containing violence or as strategic games are a pivotal part of an extensive inquiry into finding effective coping mechanisms for the challenges faced by computer gamers during gameplay. To ensure a focused sample, a Selective Survey Questionnaire (SSQ) was devised, targeting a group of 48 computer gamers. The research sample was purposefully homogeneous, aligning in age and time spent on strategic and violent computer games (e.g., shooting games).

The SSQ contained 12 questions, a mix of seven closed-ended and five open-ended inquiries. This survey helped gather socio-demographic data to understand students' engagement with computer games and assess parental roles in monitoring and control of students' engagement with computer games. Thanks to that we were able to explore popular computer game titles among students, encompassing both violent and strategic games, how long and frequent their gaming sessions are, compliance with PEGI rules, and parental oversight in this domain.

Results from the Selective Survey Questionnaire (SSQ)

In the study sample there were thirty-eight boys (M=38) and ten girls (F=10), aged 13-14. A majority, 54.2%, came from rural areas, while 45.8% lived in urban regions. All participants confirmed owning a computer and playing computer games. Notably, 62.5% acknowledged playing games with violent content, while 72.9% reported playing strategic games.

Table 1
Comparison of responses regarding computer ownership and playing computer games by surveyed individuals

Question	Response	Count	Percentage
Do you own a computer?	Yes	48	100,0
	No	0	0,0
Do you play computer games?	Yes	48	100,0
	No	0	0,0
Playing games containing violence	Yes	30	62,5
	No	18	37,5
Playing strategic games	Yes	35	72,9
	No	13	27,1

Source: own research.

The average time spent by respondents playing computer games is 118 minutes per day. Students reported they spend an average of 46 minutes on games containing violence and 59 minutes on strategic games daily.

Table 2
Comparison of responses regarding time spent playing computer games by the surveyed individuals

Question	Count	Mean (minutes)	Standard Deviation
Time spent daily playing computer games	47	118	69,03
Time spent daily playing games containing violence	41	46	51,12
Time spent daily playing strategic games	44	59	57,87

Source: own research.

A comparable distribution of data was observed concerning adherence to PEGI labeling rules. Over half of the respondents declared compliance with these rules (52.1%), while just under half (43.8%) stated non-compliance. Two participants did not provide an answer to this question. Almost all respondents (91.7%) mentioned that parents know the games their child plays, with two participants not responding

to this question. Simultaneously, a significant majority (85.4%) indicated that parents monitor the time spent playing computer games, though again, two participants did not respond to this question.

The most popular types of computer games among the surveyed individuals

The Selective Survey Questionnaire allowed for obtaining information regarding the most popular types of computer games played by students. Participants were asked to list the names of games containing violence (e.g., shooters) that they play most frequently, as well as strategic games (names of strategic computer games played most often). The most popular computer game titles among the respondents include: League of Legends (LOL) (11%), FIFA (11%), Battlefield (8%), Counter Strike (CS) (5%), Might & Magic: Duel of Champions (5%), Farming Simulator/Crane Simulator (5%), Call of Duty (4%), Tibia (4%), Minecraft (3%), Grand Theft Auto (GTA) (3%), Age of Empires (3%), Anno 2070 (2%), Heroes (of Neverth/VI) (2%).

It's noteworthy that when respondents filled out the selective survey in open-ended questions regarding the categories of games they play (those containing violence or strategic games), they mentioned the same game titles: (1) League of Legends, (2) Battlefield, (3) FIFA, (4) Call of Duty, (5) Might & Magic: Duel of Champions, (6) Tibia. The listed computer game examples could be categorised both as strategic (requiring logical thinking) and violent (containing acts of aggression and violence). Therefore, the computer game titles classified by respondents as containing violence include: (1) League of Legends, (2) Battlefield, (3) FIFA, (4) Call of Duty, (5) Might & Magic: Duel of Champions, (6) Farming Simulator/Crane Simulator, (7) Tibia, (8) Counter Strike, (9) Minecraft, (10) Grand Theft Auto. Simultaneously, the majority of these titles were categorised by respondents as strategic games: (1) League of Legends, (2) Battlefield, (3) FIFA, (4) Call of Duty, (5) Might & Magic: Duel of Champions, (6) Tibia, (7) Age of Empires, (8) Anno 2070. Exceptions were the games CS, GTA, and Minecraft classified solely by respondents as containing violence, and Age of Empires, Anno 2070 classified solely as strategic games.

According to PEGI classifications, League of Legends and Age of Empires are strategic, free online network games designed for ages 12 and up, allowing interaction with other players in an online mode. Moreover, League of Legends is classified as a fantasy game. FIFA and Farming Simulator/Crane Simulator are games for ages 3 and up, allowing interactions with other players. Minecraft, Tibia, Anno 2070, and Might & Magic: Duel of Champions are games for ages 7 and up, containing violence and fear, allowing interactions in online mode. Battlefield, Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto are games for ages 18 and up, containing violence, vulgar language, and allowing interactions in online mode. Counter Strike is designed for ages 16 and up, containing violence and enabling interactions in online mode. It's intriguing that Coun-

ter Strike, labeled as containing "only" violence and not vulgar language, the age category was lowered, raising questions about the applied age category difference – allowing participation in acts containing violence at "only" 16 years old while using vulgar language at "only" 18 years old.

Limitations of the study

A limitation of this study is the small sample size (N=48) and the nature of its selection, which was not probabilistic. This stems from the fact that the obtained results are part of a broader study (pedagogical experiment) assuming a small sample size and purposeful sample selection. These limitations hinder generalization based on the gathered data. Nevertheless, the empirical data confirming the lack of clear criteria and difficulties in classifying games as aggressive, violent, or strategic may lay the groundwork for proposing new hypotheses and conducting research involving a larger and more representative research sample.

Results

From the obtained data regarding the classification of computer games both as containing violence and as strategic games, at least two conclusions can be drawn. The first is closely related to theoretical conditions, as the study's results confirm the absence of clear criteria defining the concept of a "violent" computer game in the subject literature (beyond their common usage in everyday language). The difficulties in defining these categories mentioned at the outset prevented a clear determination of what being an aggressive or violent game means. On one hand, the participants' subjective approach in classifying these games regarding elements of aggression or violence appearing in almost every known category of computer games is unsurprising. However, it's essential to note that the lack of clarity in their classification was also reflected in the empirical results, providing a basis for considering new research directions in this field. The second conclusion derived from the data regarding the time spent on computer games by the respondents is that students declared an average of around two hours (118 minutes) daily playing computer games. From this overall figure, they allocated approximately an hour (59 minutes) to strategic games and just under an hour (46 minutes) to computer games containing elements of violence. Nevertheless, it's crucial to emphasise that most games were simultaneously classified by them as both containing violence and as strategic games. Therefore, the overall result of 118 minutes of average time spent on playing computer games encompasses participation in both strategic and violent games, where both categories refer to games involving acts of aggression and violence. For the purpose of this article, aggressive and violent games will be used interchangeably.

Conclusions

The undertaken explorations align with the field of media pedagogy, focusing on developing media literacy skills, including the ability to critically evaluate media. Identified difficulties in categorising computer games indicate the need for further explorations in this aspect. Particularly intriguing would be to explore how game classifications impact their reception among diverse social groups and examining the perspectives of parents, educators, media, and players. Continuing research focusing on analysing the scale of subjectivity could contribute to understanding these classification differences, considering social, cultural, and age-related differences. The paradigm shift concerning the impact of games containing acts of aggression and violence on human behaviour remains open and multidimensional, consistently eliciting emotions and polarising positions on this issue. Speaking about the role of computer games in shaping aggressive behaviour without organising concepts related to the nature of so-called aggressive, violent computer games carries several potential threats. Focusing on games as a medium shaping aggressive behaviour can lead to oversimplification of the problem and narrowing the perspective on the actual causes of these behaviours. Consequently, it might stigmatise the entire gaming culture and, most dangerously, divert attention from who holds responsibility for education and upbringing.

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(Nie) agresywne, (nie) brutalne gry komputerowe – wyzwania definicyjne

Streszczenie

Głównym celem badań jest określenie wyzwań związanych z klasyfikowaniem gier komputerowych jako "agresywnych lub pełnych przemocy". Terminy te często pojawiają się w mediach i debatach publicznych, szczególnie w kontekście wpływu gier komputerowych na zachowania agresywne, takie jak te obserwowane w masowych strzelaninach. Jednak zarówno obszerny przegląd literatury, jak i wyniki uzyskane w ramach tych badań potwierdzają brak jednoznacznych kryteriów charakteryzujących, które gry komputerowe są "agresywne lub pełne przemocy". Dane podkreślają konieczność dyskusji nad definicją kategorii agresji lub przemocy w grach, aby umożliwić jasne rozróżnienie pomiędzy tak zwanymi agresywnymi lub brutalnymi grami komputerowymi a innymi typami. Rozróżnienie to jest kluczowe, ponieważ większość gier opiera się na rywalizacji lub rozwiązywaniu konfliktów, w których wykorzystywane są różne formy agresji lub przemocy, na przykład faul w symulacji piłki nożnej, jaką jest FIFA. Badania skupiły się na graczach komputerowych w wieku 13-14 lat, którzy zostali wybrani do udziału w badaniu w oparciu o ich zachowania związane z grami komputerowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: gracze komputerowi, (nie)agresywne gry komputerowe, (nie)brutalne gry komputerowe.