

M-rated video games contain unlabeled violence, sexual themes

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According to a study led by Associate Professor Kimberly Thompson of the Kids Risk Project at Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), 81% of a random sample of Mature-rated video games included content that was not noted on the game box. This is the first independent, quantitative study to characterize content in M-rated games related to violence, blood, sexual themes, substances, profanity, and gambling observed in game play.

The study appears in the April 3 Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine Special Issue on the effects of media on children and adolescents published by the American Medical Association.

"Parents and physicians need to recognize that M-rated video games popular with children and adolescents contain a wide range of often unlabeled content, exposing young people to messages that may negatively influence their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors," said Thompson, Associate Professor of Risk Analysis and Decision Science at HSPH.

Also included in this special issue are articles by HSPH faculty member Michael Rich and senior research scientist Jean Wiecha. In the study "When Children Eat What They Watch," lead author Wiecha concludes that increases in television viewing are associated with increased caloric intake among children. In Rich's study, "Is Television Viewing Associated With Social Isolation?" the researchers find that the more time children spend viewing violent programs, the less time they spend

with their friends.

The video game study authors, Thompson, Karen Tepichin, and Kevin Haninger, researchers at HSPH, used a random sample of 25% of the 147 video games for current consoles rated M by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), indicating the intended audience is for ages 17 and older. After quantifying game content related to violence, blood, sexual themes, substances, profanity, and gambling, they compared the content observed in an hour of game play to the ESRB content descriptors provided to consumers on the game box. These results confirm that the presence of an ESRB content descriptor means that game players likely will find the indicated content in the game but that parents should not interpret the absence of a content descriptor to mean the absence of content.

The study found that the ESRB--a self-regulatory body created by the computer and video game industry--inconsistently assigned content descriptors to some games but not to others with the same content. Based on these observations along with recent limited evidence showing that many children and adolescents play M-rated games, the study authors suggest that parents and physicians should play an active role in discussing game content with kids.

"It's time for the industry to provide complete, consistent, and clear information about what is really in games so that parents can make more informed decisions when selecting games for and with their children," said Thompson. She warns that even though the M-rating might imply restricted access to these games, the existing, limited evidence suggests that many children and adolescents are playing M-rated games. The authors note that the Federal Trade Commission reported that, "In 2002 consumers purchased nearly 40 percent of M-rated video games for children younger than 17 years. The Federal Trade Commission also reported that 69 percent of unaccompanied children aged 13 to 16 years

participating in its mystery shopper survey successfully purchased M-rated video games."

Although they urge parents to check and use the ESRB ratings, the authors believe the current rating process needs improvement. Currently, the ESRB does not require manufacturers to submit an entire finished game prior to assigning the age-based rating and the content descriptors. Without that requirement, the ESRB is unable to play the games before rating them. "Given the high prevalence of unlabeled content, we encourage the ESRB to make playing the games an integral part of the rating process," said Tepichin. Further, since much of the unlabeled content occurs within the first hour of game play, she encourages parents to play the games with their kids and discuss content. Haninger emphasizes the need for "greater transparency and public accountability of the rating process," which the authors believe will help consumers maintain confidence in the accuracy of the information provided.

The study found that nearly all of the games contained violence and blood. While the authors observed measurably less game play involving violence in M-rated games than games rated T (for "Teen"), they found significantly stronger depictions of violence in M-rated games. These games are more likely to contain blood, profanity, and substances, to depict more severe injuries to human and nonhuman characters, and to have a higher rate of human deaths than T-rated video games.

The authors suggest that parents and physicians should pay careful attention to the actual content of any M-rated video game that their children or patients might play, particularly since the M-rating indicates that the intended audience is for ages 17 and above. The results of this study also suggest that discussions about restricting children's access to violent games should take into account the fact that both T-rated and M-rated games contain significant amounts of violence.

Source: Harvard School of Public Health

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