

Donald Trump on Violence in Video Games: “This Is Violent, Isn’t It?” Is There a Connection Between “Video Game Violence” and “Real Violence”?

President Trump invites top executives from the gaming industry, some of their critics, and members of Congress

By [Dr. Rudolf Hänsel](#)

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*On March 8, 2018, President Trump invited top executives from the gaming industry, some of their critics, and members of Congress for a meeting to discuss violence in video games. Since the president’s comments on the questionable products of the gaming industry were unusually critical, the reporting of the meeting in the White House in the German-speaking as well as US-American media was correspondingly negative. **Lt. Col. Dave Grossman**, one of the world’s leading experts in the field of human aggression, was also invited to present his research results. But the press has hushed them up.*

The extent of violence in video games shapes the thoughts of young people.

Long before his election as US President and a few days after the shots at Parkland High School in Florida, Trump had commented on the negative effects of screen violence on children and adolescents:

“I hear that more and more people are saying that the extent of violence in games really shapes the minds of young people.” (1)

Also during the White House meeting, he expressed concern about the violent nature of these games, he asked many questions to those present according to the Washington Post and listened attentively to the arguments from all sides (2). He is also a father of a nearly twelve-year-old son.

Right at the beginning of the one-hour non-public meeting, the President presented the participants with a short video game compilation of extremely bloody and brutal scenes. This supercut was later published in the official YouTube account of the White House. After the video ended, Trump asked the group: “This is violent, isn’t it?” Then the games industry lobbyists admitted:

“There is some programming that contains just absolute mind-boggling violence.” (3)

But this exaggerated illustration of violence – such as the physically accurate mapping of the destruction of bones and organs – is also controversial within the games industry and

games media.

In the course of the conversation it was then about more robust age restrictions, that is, an availability only at age 21 as in alcohol and tobacco. Furthermore, possible state restrictions on content were discussed and voluntary measures that could be done by the games industry itself. In doing so, the President encouraged game developers to “explore things they can do on their own to make things healthier in society” (4).

In a White House statement after the meeting it was said:

“President Trump acknowledged that some studies have revealed that there is a connection between video game violence and real violence.” (5)

A congressman also spoke up and wrote:

“The president’s approach to leave no stone unturned is reasonable, and similar meetings with the film industry about film violence should also be held.” (6)

Also, the observation of the President of the US Media Research Council is worth mentioning:

“I think”, he said, “the President is deeply disturbed by some of the things you see in these video games that are so brutal and unfit for children. And I think that bothers him.” (7)

“The White House Meeting on Video Game Violence was Unproductive and Bizarre.”

Because of the many critical comments on video violence that could not please the powerful representatives of the gaming industry, the tone of the coverage of the round table discussion was very negative. For example, it was claimed “The White House Meeting on Video Game Violence was Unproductive and Bizarre” (8). But what decisions could be expected from a one-hour conversation? “Bizarre” is how supporters of violence-glorifying video games found the screening of bloody video clips. The main criticism of the journalists, however, was that the White House event was only a deliberate distraction from the real causes of recurrent rampage in the US, the feeble arms control measures.

The lobbyists in the games industry were particularly annoyed that the “conservative critics” claimed that media impact research demonstrated a causal link between the excessive playing of violence-glorifying video games (killer games) and the growth of aggressive thoughts and aggressive behavior of adolescents. Such studies, according to the lobby group, do not exist. Such statements caused partly outraged reactions because one did not want to be misused as a scapegoat (9).

Dave Grossman was also able to present his research results.

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman is an internationally recognized scholar. He is one of the world’s foremost experts in the field of human aggression, the roots of violence, and violent crime.

In his last book *Assassination Generation. Video Games, Aggression, and the Psychology of Killing*, there are new research results that go beyond those he has published in his previous books, *On Killing*, *On Combat*, and *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*.

For the understanding of his new book, he writes in the introduction:

“Over the years, I’ve delved into the body of scientific data and discovered the existence of a ‚safety catch‘ in humankind that inherently exists in healthy members of our species to prevent them from killing or seriously injuring one another. I studied how to work around this safety catch in military and police training. As I did so, I was continually plagued by one question: If it is so difficult to turn off the safety catch and teach our soldiers to kill in the face of deadly threats, how is it that acts of criminal violence are often committed with seeming ease?” (S. 5f.)

This expert was mentioned in the reports of the German-speaking media just at Heise without attribution as a book author, “according to whom video games train killers” (10). Even in the US media available to me, he was mentioned by name only on an online portal as someone better known for teaching police officers military tactics (11). His research results were nowhere mentioned.

Dave Grossman is a longtime friend of mine. He told me, that in the White House round-table discussion, he was able to present the President and others present with his firm position on the effects of video game violence.

Science has the duty to protect children and adolescents from becoming victims and perpetrators!

The games industry as well as the film and television industry do not take note of the proven results of the media impact research. Either they ignore them or they attack them. They often even twist and distort them. They come through with their attitude, because the power is on their side and the opinion of the society is ambiguous and divided. The annual revenue of the games industry in the US alone in 2017 was more than \$ 36 billion. This corresponds to an increase of 18 percent over the previous year.

The (reputable) science remains the only independent body that can criticize the powerful mass media organizations and the games industry. It has a control task. Science has the duty to protect the powerless, especially children and adolescents, from becoming victims and perpetrators. Despite overwhelming research results, science does not adopt a uniform attitude towards the powerful organizations that fight with all the resources at their disposal. Many scientists believe that they can distinguish themselves and have the publicity on their side, by representing opinions that encourage the mass media and the games industry in their wrong attitude (13).

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Dr. Rudolf Hansel is an educationalist and psychologist and expert in the prevention of youth violence, school violence and media violence. More information at www.psychologische-menschenkenntnis.de.

Notes

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