
Restricted Content: Ethical Issues with Researching Minor's Video Game Habits

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Abstract

It has long been known that young people play games rated above their chronological age. The media has reported concerns around young people and children playing such video games due to the potential effects of the violent and mature content [7]. During a study collecting gaming data from adolescents in a secondary school, we began to reflect on the ethical and therefore methodological issue of researching game play as adolescents disclosed playing games rated higher than their chronological age. The aim of this paper is to outline the issue of content in video games, including the development of the rating systems. It will then discuss the situational ethics of researching video game play with adolescents and children.

Author Keywords

Video games; ethics; methodology.

ACM Classification Keywords

Human Factors, Measurement.

Introduction

As researchers in psychology examining the effects of video game play and moral development, collecting data from young people is vital for the research. One of

the reasons that this is key is that around a third of video game players are aged under 18 [12]. Research with these age groups has found young people are playing violent video games; it was reported 86% of an adolescent sample aged 13-14 years old were playing violent video games, which included games that were rated higher than their chronological age, such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA) [15, 19]. Furthermore, the violent content of video games has been suggested to be a fundamental part of the motivation for adolescents to play video games [10]. Controversial content in these video games includes for example nudity, prostitution, using guns, drug dealing and driving recklessly featured in the GTA series [19]. This is therefore an important area to research, however doing so also raises a number of ethical issues about how to study a behaviour that minors should not be engaging in.

Underage players

There has been much media attention about children and adolescents playing video games which are rated higher than their age and the consequence this may have [7]. Thus the Entertainment Software Rating Board [13] was created in the USA to oversee the content in video games and to protect children and adolescents from inappropriate content [20]. Other rating systems were also introduced including Pan European Games Information (PEGI) [18] and the Video Standard Council (VSC) [22] which have been used in Europe. The problem with using the film rating system such as VSC with video games is that films and games require a different level of involvement, agency and interactivity [17]. Agency is defined as the level of control or choice that players have in video games [14]. It is the difference between watching someone kill

a character and a player personally pressing a button to kill a character. PEGI uses an age rating accompanied by pictures representing content, such as a picture of a fist for violence. Furthermore, consoles also have the option for a parental control setting [18]. These rating systems have been criticised for producing conflicting and confusing ratings about video game content [5, 11, 21]. Subsequently PEGI has been merged with VSC to create one rating system and this system has been integrated into UK law, known as the Games Rating Authority [22].

Although these rating systems are in place, it would appear that children and adolescents are still playing video games rated higher than their chronological age. Furthermore, given the popularity of GTA, being in the top 10 game for number of units sold for the last three years in a row, it would seem likely that at least some underage players could be playing this game [12]. Recently head teachers of both secondary and primary schools have been reported as seeking to stop parents allowing their children to play 18 rated games, by claiming they would report parents to the police and social services [16]. This has led to much debate around underage video game players and how to stop them accessing these games. This game play is of concern due to the potential developmental risks associated to exposure to this content. Much research has covered the concerns over the violent video game content and its effects [4]. Additionally, the mature rated content could also be of risk for the player's wellbeing, through being exposed to this inappropriate content. An example of such content is games that include taking drugs and driving recklessly.

This issue of parents allowing their children to play these types of games has been repeatedly highlighted by the media [2, 7]. A recent report discusses parents' attempts to restrict access to 18 rated games and highlights how they can be made to feel penalised by their children, as their children refer to their peers playing these games [1]. In addition, parents do not necessarily have control over what games their children play if they are at the home of one of their friends, where the parents may have different attitudes. The report also suggested that parents feel that violent and more mature games are marketed as being more desirable [1]. Not only does this issue affect families and schools, it also poses an ethical and methodological issue for researchers conducting data collection with this age group.

Ethical issues encountered

Our research is examining the relationship between adolescent's game play and their moral development (using a measure of moral maturity through written reasoning). The issues discussed above raise questions about how researchers should conduct studies with this age group and implications of the information about game play that is gathered. It is a difficult situation as children and adolescents are engaging in activities in which they should not be.

Minors sharing their game play habits

In our work with minors we found that many of them were very passionate about their gaming habits and wanted to share experiences and likes with the researcher. In our study participants reported frequently playing video games (average 14 hours a week) and having started to play video games at a young age, taken together this could further increase

the risk of wellbeing and exposure of inappropriate content. We observed in our studies that participants often asked the teacher if it was OK to write an 18-rated game as their favourite games. Participants were also sharing these inappropriate gaming habits with others around them, in hearing range of the researcher. This could encourage peers to play these games. Thus on the one hand detailed information about game playing is invaluable for research; however, on the other hand, the participants are reporting game play which could have potential legal implications for those who bought the game allowing underage play.

The participant's willingness to engage with the study and to share game play could have been unintentionally encouraged by the researcher, as the adolescents could have recognised the researcher's passion for gaming and wanted to reciprocate. Even though the researcher's game play habits were not explicitly communicated, the participants may have still recognised this. This has implications on how researchers represent themselves in this context; a balance needs to be struck between being objective and neutral, with being enthusiastic and speaking to adolescents in language that they will engage with. We observed that the younger participants (aged 11-13 years) were the most open with the researcher. This could be due to their level of development and the way they communicate with adults. This has implications for researchers, in that extra consideration is needed for younger participants. The issues are even more sensitive when researchers observe game playing with younger participants; especially as more research has been suggested with children under the age of 10 years

[4]. Guidance is needed to support researchers if the reported game play is inappropriate.

Parental involvement

When collecting data shortly after an article reporting head teachers threatening to take action [16], it appeared that parents were deterred from allowing their children to take part in research. The number of completed consent forms was compared before and after the article publication, and it had dropped significantly after publication. Also, parents had told the teacher they felt uncomfortable because of the article. Thus media attention in this area can also be problematic for researchers. This highlights the importance of providing parents with reassurances about how the results will be used and to ensure anonymity is discussed. The American Psychological Association [4] highlights the importance of scientific findings empowering the public to make informed choices. However, a balance needs to be created between informing parents without making them feel judged if their children are playing games rated above their age.

Legal implications

It should be noted that it is not illegal for minors to play games rated as 18 or over, but is illegal for these games to be sold to players under the age stated [6]. Parallels can be drawn between research exploring other activities which have legal age limits, such as buying and drinking alcohol. One way in which illegal activities, such as drinking alcohol have been researched in the past is to maintain complete anonymity; including from the start of the consent process where no identifying data is collected. However, this has its own problems in terms of

verifiability and ensuring participants are who they say they are.

Policy

There may be situations where the researcher needs to use their own judgment of appropriateness and integrity, as stated in the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines [8]. Extra consideration may be needed when studying children's gaming habits due to this age group being much younger and potentially more vulnerable and susceptible as represented by the large gap between their chronological age and rating of games being played. There are implications for the ethical bodies and boards providing approval for research, for example does more ethical consideration need to be taken before researchers ask young people and children about their gaming habits? The BPS offers additional guidance on research which is mediated through the internet [9]. This includes the principle of maximising benefits and minimising harm; the researcher would not be increasing harm or risk by asking about gaming habits (compared to the adolescent's own experiences with these games). The University Research Ethics Code of Practice was followed during the procedure of data collection within our own research.

The APA [4] has discussed the role of stakeholders (including parents and the games industry) to decide what action should be taken regarding the underage playing of violent video games. They suggested that the role of non-profit groups providing support for parents with an open dialogue with gaming companies and regulatory bodies has the potential to be the best way to deal with underage players [3]. As a general point it would seem that education for both parents and

young players is important. Finally, other forms of media have experienced similar issues, such as watching and buying films [10]. Even though, as highlighted previously, there are differences between video games and films, examining how other mediums have dealt with underage users could be beneficial.

Key issues for further discussion

The following themes and topics have been highlighted and we hope they will stimulate interesting discussion in the workshop. How much responsibility does the researcher have over the data collected and how best should the data be managed? Does anonymising the data allow the researcher to remove themselves from being responsible for the type of data collected? How much at risk are adolescents from exposure to over-age content and what are the effects of exposure to this content? Should underage game play have further legal implications for parents or those responsible for providing the game? How can we acknowledge and support the role of both legal and ethical practices? How can we support stakeholders involved in the research including parents, teachers and adolescents?

Summary

This article aims to address the ethical issues surrounding underage gaming habits of children and adolescents and how researchers should approach this issue. In summary, we suggest that ensuring data anonymity and researchers using their integrity is the best way to deal with the issue but we propose it needs more consideration. The legal implications must be considered; along with the role of different types of stakeholder such as parents and teachers.

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