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vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

SARAH M. COYNE *Brigham Young University*

DEAN BUSBY *Brigham Young University**

BRAD J. BUSHMAN *The Ohio State University***

DOUGLAS A. GENTILE *Iowa State University****

ROBERT RIDGE *Brigham Young University*****

LAURA STOCKDALE *Brigham Young University******

Gaming in the Game of Love: Effects of Video Games on Conflict in Couples

The current study assessed how playing video games can influence conflict and aggression in relationships. A sample of 1,333 heterosexual couples reported their video game playing habits, conflict regarding the media, and physical and relational aggression (both self and partner directed). Results showed that for men (but not women), time spent playing video games was associated with increased conflict

over the amount of time spent using media, as well as the content of those media. Conflict over the media, in turn, was associated with increased physical and relational aggression in the relationship. Thus, conflict over the media offers one explanation for why video game play may increase aggression in romantic relationships.

Brigham Young University, School of Family Life, JFSB 2087, Provo, UT 84602 (smcoyne@byu.edu).

*Brigham Young University, School of Family Life, JFSB 2086C, Provo, UT 84602.

**The Ohio State University, School of Communication, 3127 Derby Hall, 154 N Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210.

***Iowa State University, Department of Psychology, W202 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, IA 50011.

****Brigham Young University, Department of Psychology, SWKT 1034, Provo, UT 84602.

*****Brigham Young University, School of Family Life, JFSB 2080, Provo, UT 84602.

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My wife started playing [World of Warcraft] in about December of 2007. Two weeks before our 38th wedding anniversary she came to my room and told me she was leaving me. She wanted to find “something different.” That something different turn[ed] out to be WOW. . . . I am destroyed by a video game and have no idea how to proceed. (Anonymous post from gamerwidow.com)

In a close relationship it seems like there are many things to fight about, including the media. Couples’ daily conversation regularly includes discussion related to the media (Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo, 2005). Although couples report using media together and independently, they also report that when this happens it can be a source of conflict.

For example, one interview study found that couples had watched television together about 5 days in the previous week, but two thirds reported that it was also a cause of frustration (Walker, 1996). Another study found that many couples use media as a way to connect with each other (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011). Specifically, it found that texting can increase positive communication in relationships, especially when the texts expressed affection. This study focuses specifically on the role of playing video games on conflict in relationships, an area that has received little attention in previous research.

There are some hints in previous research that the media can harm relationships. One experiment (Kenrick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989), for example, found that men who looked at centerfolds from adult magazines judged other women, including their own wives, to be less attractive than did men who had not looked at the centerfolds. Similarly, another study found that men became less satisfied with their sexual relationships after viewing sexually explicit movies (Zillmann, 1989). These effects are not unique to men either. Another study found that women reported being less satisfied with their current intimate relationship to the extent that they consumed popular romantic media, such as in books and television programs (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). Other research has shown that youth who watch premium cable television are more likely to be involved in casual relationships at last intercourse than in committed ones (Bersamin, Bourdeau, Fisher, & Grube, 2010). Casual, as opposed to committed, sex may be significantly affected by television exposure. Research has shown that the more television adolescents watched, the more accepting they were of expressing sexual desire in dating situations (Eggermont, 2006). Even after controlling for overall TV viewing, exposure to reality TV was associated with a “game playing” and cunning view of relationships among viewers (Cherry, 2010). Taken together, these studies suggest that traditional media (books, television, movies, magazines) may play an important role in the romantic lives of consumers.

But what about exposure to newer media, such as video games? Video games are very popular, and their popularity is increasing over time. Video game sales surpassed movie sales in 2005 and music sales in 2007 (Scanlon, 2007). Excessive gaming appears to reduce behaviors

that are valuable for relational maintenance, at least in college students (Chory & Banfield, 2009). This is likely to be a displacement effect: Time spent with TV and video games reduces time spent on relationship-enhancing activities such as shared household tasks. Indeed, unlike some other forms of media, video games often demand the player’s full attention. For example, a couple can discuss a TV program or film together during commercials or while the program is paused if they have a digital video recording device. Pausing a video game is not as easy because it disrupts game play, especially online game play with other people.

It is possible, however, that video games may actually increase conflict. For example, one study (Ahlstrom, Lundberg, Zabriskie, Eggett, & Lindsay, 2012) found that playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMPORGs) was related to conflict among married couples, especially when one individual played video games and the other did not. In turn, arguments over gaming were associated with decreased marital satisfaction. Additionally, websites, such as *GamerWidow.com*, provide anecdotal data from partners of video game players (referred to as “gamer widows” regardless of whether the partner is female or male), suggesting that video gaming may be a serious source of discontent among romantic couples. For example, one gamer widow wrote

My fiance [sic] and I have been living together for 2 1/2 years. . . . Today I asked him to get off the computer because his grandmother made arrangements days ago to come this afternoon for a visit to bring by baby gifts. . . . I told him to get off the computer and he got really mean with me. I was so upset I left. . . . I came home after a few hours and gave him the Great Ultimatum—me or WoW [World of Warcraft]. I wasn’t too surprised when he walked out.

The preceding anecdote, as well as the one at the beginning of this article, suggests not only that an unwillingness to stop playing video games may pose a serious threat to a romantic relationship, but also a mechanism by which the threat may be realized: interpersonal aggression. In other words, the story suggests that what is perceived to be excessive video game playing by one partner in a romantic relationship may result in an increase in interpersonal aggression between the partners, which may ultimately undermine the quality of the relationship.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND THE MODEL IN THIS STUDY

Video games can have multiple independent effects along different dimensions, including the amount of time spent playing and the content of the games (Gentile, 2011). Amount and content of game play likely operate through different theoretical mechanisms. With regard to the amount of play, time spent playing video games may displace other activities relevant to the relationship or general family life, often called the displacement hypothesis (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998). For example, an individual might feel neglected if his or her partner spends a large amount of time playing video games as opposed to investing that time with him or her. Additionally, time spent playing video games may displace necessary work related to family life, such as housework, yard work, or taking care of children. This may lead to resentment in the non-game-playing partner, which may spark arguments over the media and potentially lead to heightened aggression in the relationship.

The content of the games may also be related to increased relationship problems, particularly if it includes violent content. According to the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), exposure to violent video games may increase subsequent aggression in relationships, especially if the content is frustrating or includes violence. In the short term, exposure to such games may increase physiological arousal, angry feelings, and aggressive thoughts, all which might contribute to problems in the relationship, including aggressive behavior. Arguments may also escalate if one partner does not approve of the content of the video game, for example, if it includes graphic portrayals of violence or sex. Furthermore, it is possible that content may also have an effect not through either of these priming mechanisms or disapproval of specific game content. It may have harmful effects on relationships if the game allows for interpersonal relationships that may be seen as threatening. For example, if men flirt or form emotionally intimate bonds with women met in the game, this can be damaging to the relationship. This represents a different type of content effect, one not specifically programmed in, but programmed to be allowed.

According to the above theories, both the amount and content of gaming may have independent effects on players (e.g., Coyne, Nelson, et al., 2011; Gentile, 2011; Gentile, Lynch,

Linder, & Walsh, 2004). It was this sequence of behavior that we sought to address in the present research. To our knowledge, research has not examined whether playing video games can influence conflict or aggression in romantic relationships. Using a large sample of heterosexual couples, we examined whether video game play was linked to conflict in relationships, including aggressive behavior. Based on previous research and theory, we predicted that higher amounts of time spent playing video games would be associated with increased conflict regarding the media (about both time and content), which in turn would be related to increased aggression in the relationship.

METHOD

Participants

The sample from this study was drawn from the entire population of participants who completed the Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE; Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001) between 2009 and 2011. Participants completed the questionnaire individually. Thirty-nine percent of the sample were referred to the online site by their instructor in a class, 19% were directed to the site by a relationship educator or therapist, 5% were sent to the site by clergy, 16% were referred to the site by a friend or family member, 3% were referred by an ad they saw online or in print, and the remaining 18% found the instrument by searching for it on the Web.

The RELATE sample included many couples in a variety of relationship types, from early acquaintances who were just starting to date to seasoned marriages. Because of the relationship variables that were analyzed in this study, the only individuals retained in the sample were participants who were in a serious dating relationship, engaged, or married. This resulted in a sample of 1,333 couples or 2,666 individuals.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 79 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.5$ years, $SD = 10.1$). Eighty-three percent of the sample was Caucasian, 4% African American, 4% Latino, 5% Asian, and 4% "Other." In terms of education, 5% completed a high school diploma or less as their highest degree of education, 37% completed some college, 25% completed a bachelor's degree, 7% completed some graduate schooling, and 26% completed a graduate degree. Twenty-eight percent of the couples were in an exclusive serious dating relationship, 43% were engaged, and 29%

were married. The amount of time the couples had been dating, or dated prior to marriage for the married couples, was less than 1 year for 40% of the couples, was 1–2 years for 30% of the couples, 3–5 years for 23% of the couples, and 6–10 years for 7% of the couples. For those who were married, the length of their marriage was less than 1 year for 28% of the couples, 1–2 years for 16% of the couples, 3–5 years for 13% of the couples, 6–10 years for 13% of the couples, 11–20 years for 15% of the couples, and more than 20 years for 15% of the couples.

Measures

The RELATE is an approximately 300-item online questionnaire designed to evaluate the relationship of individuals in a dating, engaged, or married relationship. The questions examine several different contexts—individual, cultural, family (of origin), and couple—in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of challenges and strengths in their relationships. After completing the questionnaire, participants receive personalized feedback that may help them evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship. Previous research has documented RELATE's reliability and validity (see Busby et al., 2001, for psychometric properties of the instrument).

Although the questionnaire contained over 300 items, we focus here on items measuring video game usage, relational aggression, and physical aggression. First, participants indicated whether they played video games (1 = *yes* or 0 = *no*). If they said yes, they indicated how often they played each of six types of video games (First Person Shooters, MMORPGs, Role-Playing Games, Music, Exercise, Sports) using a 7-point scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *more than once a day*).

Couples indicated how often the amount of time spent using media such as video games had been a problem for them and how often the content of media used, such as violent or sexual content, had been a problem in their relationship (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). These two items were analyzed separately in all analyses. This *problem areas scale* has been shown to correlate strongly with relationship outcomes such as satisfaction and stability in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research (Busby, Holman, & Neihuis, 2009; Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007; Busby et al., 2001).

Relational aggression was measured using a 14-item scale (Carroll et al., 2010), which contained 7 items measuring aggression against the partner (e.g., “I have threatened to end my relationship with my partner in order to get him/her to do what I wanted”) and the same 7 items measuring aggression against the participant. Items were scored using a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*; Cronbach's α s ranged from .76 to .84).

Physical aggression was measured using the six-item version of the Revised Conflict Tactics scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), which contained three items measuring physical aggression against the partner (i.e., “how often they threw something at their partner that could hurt, how often they pushed or shoved their partner, and how often they punched or hit their partner with something that could hurt”) and the same three items measuring aggression against the participant. Items were scored using an 8-point scale (1 = *this has never happened* to 8 = *11–20 times in the past year*; Cronbach's α s ranged from .62 to .80). Because there were two reports of the same person's physical and relational aggression (e.g., the female rated how aggressive the male was to her and the male rated how aggressive he was toward her), these reports were averaged together in the model we analyzed.

Before describing the results, it should be noted that some variables (most notably physical aggression) were positively skewed because these destructive behaviors were relatively rare. Although we tried several transformations, using Tukey's ladder of powers as a guide, these transformations did not result in any meaningful improvements in the data or change the results. Thus, we elected to use the variables in their original form.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

Overall, about 60% of men and 34% of women reported playing video games (see Table 1). Men were most likely to play first person shooter and music games, whereas women were most likely to play music and exercise games. Both men and women were least likely to play MMPORGs compared to other types of games. As we wanted to assess the overall impact of playing video

Table 1. *Video Game Play by Men and Women Gamers (in Percentages)*

| Type of Game | Men | Women |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|
| First Person Shooter* | 65% | 18% |
| MMPORGs* | 17% | 6% |
| Role-Playing Games* | 42% | 21% |
| Music* | 60% | 69% |
| Exercise | 37% | 58% |
| Sports* | 51% | 19% |

Note: Multiple games could be endorsed. MMPORGs = Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.

* $p < .001$, showing a gender difference in the amount of game play by men and women.

games, these different types of games were combined in subsequent analyses.

Bivariate Correlations

For men, time spent playing video games was positively correlated with problems over the amount of time spent consuming media and the content of media (see Table 2). For women, time spent playing video games was positively associated with problems with time spent consuming media (especially as reported by men). Female video games use, however, was not significantly correlated with problems over media content. Men's and women's time spent playing video games were positively correlated with each other, and physical and relational aggression were positively correlated as well. Finally, both types of media problems (time and content) were positively correlated with both types of aggression for both men and women. Although we initially modeled a direct relation between video game use and aggression, the correlations clearly showed that these direct relations were not significant, so we removed these paths from the model.

Primary Analyses

A structural model using the maximum likelihood method was estimated using Analysis of Moments Structure (AMOS) software (version 19) modeling engagement in different types of video games as a predictor of problems with media (both time and content). Problems with the media were then modeled as a predictor of relational and physical aggression for both men and women (see Figure 1). We decided to

examine both men and women in the same model, given the correlations between media use, reported media problems, and aggression in the relationship. Additionally, all variables were correlated for men and women. This model fit the data very well, $\chi^2(8) = 11.24$, $p = .19$; comparative fit index = .99, Tucker-Lewis index = .99, root mean square error of approximation = .02.

Results revealed that time spent playing video games was related to problems reported with the media (both time and content) for men only. Media problems were also related to both physical and relational aggression for both men and women. Accordingly, it appears that problems with the media is an intervening variable between the amount of time that men spend playing video games and aggressive behavior in relationships.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, the amount of time spent playing video games led to conflicts about the media. This was only the case for men, however. Specifically, the more time men spent playing video games, the more often they argued with their romantic partner about the amount of time spent consuming media and its content. Conflict about time spent consuming media, and its content, in turn, was related to physical and relational aggression for both men and women. Thus, it appears that playing video games can be a source of conflict in romantic relationships, potentially leading to aggressive behavior between partners.

Conversely, time spent playing video games for women was not associated with increased conflict regarding the media. As with other research, we found that women play substantially lower amounts of video games than men (e.g., Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Accordingly, it is likely that video game play did not reach problematic levels for the vast majority of female gamers. Indeed, it is possible that men value video game play in women, as this may represent a joint recreation activity that they can share. It is also possible that women may be playing video games in response to their partner's game play. For example, some women may play video games in order to spend time engaging in an activity valued by their partner.

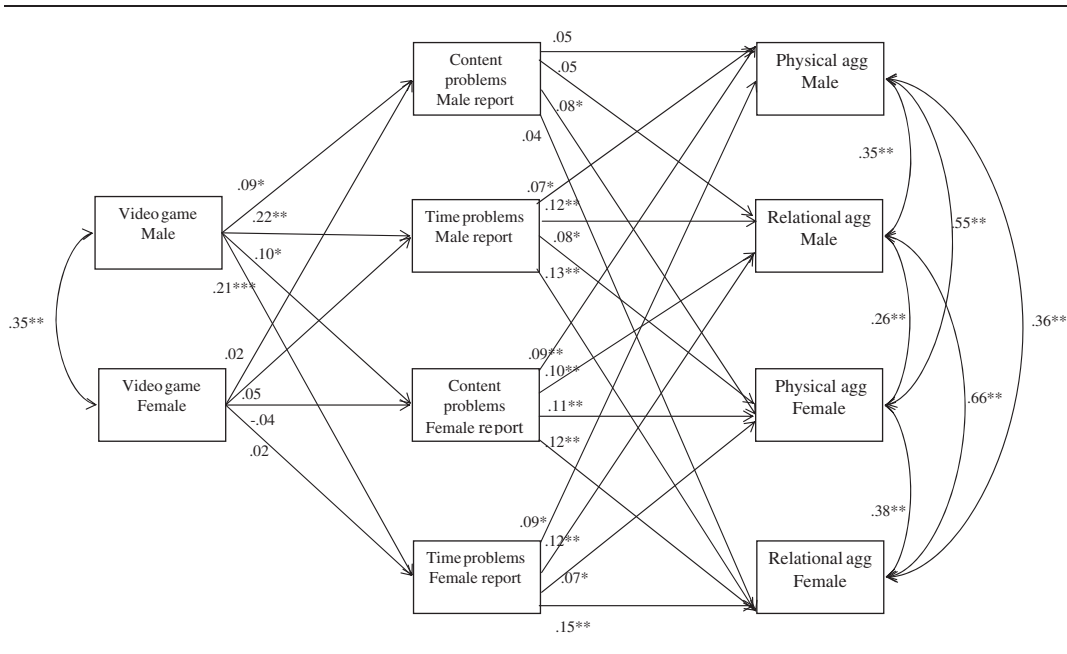
Although this study used a large sample of couples of varying ages, it is probably best

Table 2. Correlations Between Study Variables

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Video game play (M) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Video game play (F) | .35** | | | | | | | | | |
| Time problems (MR) | .20** | .11** | | | | | | | | |
| Time problems (FR) | .18** | .08* | .56** | | | | | | | |
| Content problems (MR) | .08* | .04 | .32** | .30** | | | | | | |
| Content problems (FR) | .07* | .01 | .18** | .41** | .40** | | | | | |
| Relational aggression (M) | .01 | .02 | .28** | .31** | .21** | .22** | | | | |
| Relational aggression (F) | .04 | .01 | .31** | .35** | .22** | .25** | .72** | | | |
| Physical aggression (M) | .03 | .07* | .18** | .21** | .15** | .17** | .41** | .42** | | |
| Physical aggression (F) | .07* | .05* | .19** | .21** | .19** | .19** | .34** | .44** | .59** | |
| Mean | 1.64 | 1.21 | 2.06 | 2.11 | 1.41 | 1.42 | 1.40 | 1.55 | .12 | .23 |
| SD | .78 | 1.20 | 1.11 | 1.14 | .68 | .82 | .41 | .48 | .40 | .63 |

Note: M = male; F = female; MR = male report on the relationship; FR = female report on the relationship.
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

FIGURE 1. VIDEO GAME USE, PROBLEMS WITH MEDIA, AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR.



Note: Only standardized values are shown. Correlations between media problems are not shown. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

interpreted as exploratory. Although conflict over media was an intervening variable between video game use and aggressive behavior within the relationship, it is not clear from this study alone what specifically about the games or gaming behaviors was most related to conflict. It may be that the conflict is induced not by anything specific to game types but instead to

the use of playing video games instead of other leisure activities, including activities that the partner might value more. One study found that excessive video game use was related to lower relational maintenance behaviors, including lower openness, positivity, conflict management, assurances of commitment, and shared tasks (Chory & Banfield, 2009).

Indeed, when examining the model, although both time and content appear to be important when examining problems with the media, time appears to be particularly important, as it showed stronger effects than content. These effects are likely due, at least partially, to time use and the displacement of opportunities for other behaviors. According to the displacement hypothesis (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998), time spent playing video games may displace other meaningful relationship behaviors, including communication, affection, and shared activities. If time is excessive, this may lead to resentment in the nongamer and may lead to conflict in the relationship and eventually aggression. Several of the types of games measured in the current study may be particularly problematic regarding time. For example, several studies suggest that MMORPGs are often played for greater amounts of time than other types of games. Furthermore, a number of studies have shown that MMORPGs may be particularly problematic in terms of pathological video game use (e.g., Ng & Wiener-Hastings, 2005). These games may also encourage extrarelationship intimacy, as players are often required to work closely with other players, and may encourage friendships or relationships to form. Research should certainly examine such possibilities in the future.

It is also possible that the games themselves may induce conflict, either by disagreements about game type or content or by the game content itself increasing the risk of aggression. The General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) posits that video games can increase the risk of aggressive behavior if violent content primes aggressive thoughts or feelings, if the game is physiologically arousing, or if the player becomes frustrated. Additionally, situational provocations increase the risk of aggressive behavior, and one partner attempting to control the other's leisure activities could induce reactance and appear as a provocation. Furthermore, habitual use of violent media can influence how one perceives ambiguous situations (e.g., hostile attribution bias, hostile expectation bias), including both physical and relational hostile attributions, which can lead to increased risk of both physical and relational aggression (Gentile, Coyne, & Walsh, 2011; Hasan, Bégue, & Bushman, 2011). This study does not allow us to know which, if any, of these mechanisms is responsible for the link between game play and conflict. Nonetheless, the current

data suggest that something about content may be relevant, as playing video games was related to conflicts over content for men.

Although we did not assess the actual violent content in the games, several types of games included in the study (e.g., first person shooters) have particularly high levels of violence. Future studies are needed to test what specific aspects of games or gaming are most related to conflict within romantic relationships, with the understanding that it may be different for men and women. It will also be necessary to understand how couples use games to enhance their relationships; anecdotal evidence suggests that games can also be used in ways that maintain relationships, although we are unaware of any scientific studies addressing this issue.

This study has several strengths, including the use of a large heterogeneous sample of couples including data from both the male and female partners. It is limited, however, by its correlational nature. Causal interpretations should be viewed with extreme caution until future research can begin to discern the causal mechanisms at work. Future research should also continue to examine these relationships in a more diverse sample and in other cultures.

Despite these limitations, this study has several important implications for family therapists, educators, and romantically involved individuals. It may be important for family therapists to discuss the media, particularly video games, as a source of conflict for couples. It is possible that an individual in the relationship may not perceive his or her game playing as problematic; accordingly, therapists may wish to facilitate discussions regarding both the content and time spent playing video games. At the very least, couples may want to discuss the issue themselves to come to an understanding about what constitutes acceptable video game involvement. It may be that setting boundaries regarding both the content and the time spent playing video games may have a positive effect on the relationship. Future research should examine this possibility and should continue to examine the role that video games play in romantic relationships.

It should be noted that most of the coefficients in the study were small to moderate in strength. Future research is needed to assess what other variables may induce conflict regarding the media and aggressive behavior. Consequently, this study begins what will hopefully be a strong and steady stream of research exploring how

families successfully deal with how often and what types of video game media are used in the home in the hope of reducing serious problems with aggression.

It is likely that there are many sources of conflict in relationships beyond media use, but media use is easy to assess and probably not as threatening as other sources of conflict to address. As a result, it may be a good starting point for couples and families to begin to set better boundaries around their time and activities so that activities that reduce aggression may be expanded while those that increase aggression can be contracted.

Many questions remain unanswered about video game usage and the characteristics of those who are more likely to use different types of video games. Is video game usage simply a proxy for other variables that are associated with aggression? Are the characteristics of those who play video games associated with other stressors on couple relationships? Obviously more basic research is needed before substantial interventions are tested and used with couples who might be having conflict about video games.

In conclusion, playing video games is associated with conflict in close relationships and therefore could be one risk factor for aggression against one's partner in the "game of love." Yet video games and their place in family life are modifiable and hold promise as potential points of early intervention.

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