

# "CATHARSIS"

"The most common question I am asked about this phenomenon is whether playing such "kill bin Laden" video games is likely to be helpful or harmful in some way. Some have suggested that playing such games is therapeutic. More specifically, a common belief among many people in our society is that a person can relieve aggressive inclinations or urges by symbolically aggressing in some way. The ancient Greeks held this belief as well (see Aristotle's "Poetics"). Freudian scholars revived this belief in modern Western societies. This belief, known among behavioral research scholars as the "catharsis hypothesis," states that aggressive urges can be safely reduced by observing (e.g., in plays, TV shows, movies) or by behaving aggressively in socially approved ways (e.g., playing football, or violent video games). So, we can boil all this down to one key question:

## Does catharsis work in the domain of aggressive behaviour ?

Research psychologists have extensively studied this issue for many years. A clear answer emerged over thirty years ago, and has been confirmed many times since then. **The answer is NO.** Observing violence (e.g., violent television shows) or behaving aggressively in symbolic ways (e.g., playing violent video games) generally increases later aggressive behavior. It does not reduce it. Obviously, there are many complicating factors at work, factors that increase or decrease the negative impact of entertainment violence on future aggressive behavior. So, my simple "no" answer might seem to require an extensive discussion, one that is certainly too extensive for the time constraints of most TV and radio reports or the space constraints of most newspaper and magazine reports. Similarly, such a discussion is too extensive for me to detail in this e-mail message. Nonetheless, it is important to note that research has failed to find any set of circumstances in which exposure to entertainment violence reliably leads to a decrease in future aggressive behavior. In response to the few people who have sent me "hate" mail after reading some news report that quotes me on this topic, there are a few points to consider.

1. News reports sometimes do not report interviewees' statements correctly, or put them in a very different context and thereby change the meaning. So far, I have not seen any major misquotes of my expert opinion statements on the issue of bin Laden video games, but I am apparently being quoted in hundreds of locations, and I have neither the time nor the inclination to check them.

2. I have never discussed with any reporter my personal views concerning the proper response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, or my views concerning the conduct of the war on terrorism. This is a personal policy of mine. So if I am quoted in a way that appears to give an indication of my personal views about the war on terrorism or about the Bush administration policies, then the quote is either incorrect or out of context.

3. My scientifically derived conclusion that "kill bin Laden" games are not cathartic does not mean that I do not support the war on terrorism or that I have a negative view of the Bush administration's approach to the problem. It simply means that the scientific evidence does not support the view that such games are cathartic.

I hope this form letter clears up a few questions for you. I apologize for being unable to personally answer all of the inquiries that I receive. There simply aren't enough hours in the day for me to do my job as a teacher, researcher, and administrator, to answer the volume of requests that I receive, and to still have time for my family.

For more information about recent research on catharsis, go to Professor Brad Bushman's web page and scroll down to the section on "Does Venting Make You Less Angry?"

<http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/faculty/bbushman/homepage.htm>

For recent research articles about violent video games and aggression, go to my "Recent Publications" page (URL below), scroll down to the "2001 & in press" section, and click on the title you want. <http://psych-server.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/recpub.html>

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