Do gamers make better soldiers?

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Findings [1] by the Office of Naval Research indicate that video games improve overall perceptual and cognitive abilities. While nothing new—the claim is nearly as old as Pac-Man, the irregular warfare we face today makes it more relevant than ever.

Since Pong, video games have been castigated for everything from school truancy, to school shootings, to even global warming [2]. The sole bone, tossed at [3] every [4] opportunity [5], was that video games improve our cognitive and spatial abilities. This is well and good, but it represents a weak concession—*video games may be responsible for the fall of man, but at least they improve our hand-eye coordination*.

Ray Perez, a program officer at the ONR's warfighter performance department, noted that, “We have to train people to be quick on their feet - agile problem solvers, agile thinkers - to be able to counteract and develop counter tactics to terrorists on the battlefield.” Video games, according to Perez, affect our “fluid intelligence”—the ability to change, to meet new problems and to develop new tactics and counter-tactics. Fluid intelligence, he explained, allows us to solve problems without prior knowledge or experience.

ONR research concluded that gamers perform, “10 to 20 percent higher in terms of perceptual and cognitive ability than normal people that are non-game players.” Since problem-solving is vital for modern warfighters, the implication is that gamers make better soldiers.

Screenshot from "America's Army," the Army's internally-developed recruitment tool.

The benefits of video gaming, particularly as they relate to the military, are highly-controversial. While you'll occasionally see a study linking games with improved cognitive abilities, you'll usually find critics lambasting them for any number of perceived offenses.

An Air Force Colonel mentioned [6] that, "The video game generation is worse at distorting the reality of it [war] from the virtual nature. They don't have that sense of what [is] really going on. It [a video game] teaches you how to compartmentalize it." Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, U.S. Army, (Retired), author of "On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society," has labeled first-person shooters like Halo [7] "murder simulators."

In a statement before the New York State Legislature, LTC Grossman said [8], "The games that permit a child to hold and aim a gun, and fire it at humans, are particularly harmful, since these devices teach shooting skills. They are firearms training devices at best, and murder simulators at worst."

As evidence, LTC Grossman cites the Heath High School shooting [9], where the shooter, Michael Carneal displayed uncanny prowess with firearms. 14-year old Carneal fired 8 shots, scoring hits on all 8 (4 of them head shots, one neck, and 3 upper torso). Carneal was supposedly a fan of violent video games.

Sorry, but I'm not convinced. One could make the specious claim that such games desensitize the player. But to suggest a direct link between video games and proficiency with firearms betrays a lack of understanding of one or both of them.

Since LTC Grossman is, by his own admittance, "expert" qualified on all major U.S. small arms and many NATO weapons, I can only conclude that he doesn't sufficiently understand video games.

Basic marksmanship involves numerous factors—the weight of the weapon, the aiming mechanism (be it iron sights or optics of some sort), recoil, how to hold it, how to position yourself, and many more. But few video games take these factors into consideration. There's little to no chance that you can become proficient with firearms just by playing Halo.

Do gamers make better soldiers? In an indirect way, yes. I'm sure that improved cognitive abilities (acquired through years of playing Super Mario) give you a leg-up over the competition. But you won't see any direct benefits. Playing X-Box won't make you a more proficient shooter. Nor are video games a suitable replacement for real-world training. There's no substitute for actually holding a rifle, putting rounds downrange, and getting an actual feel for the weapon. Besides, "improved cognitive abilities" obscure the more obvious benefit of video gaming—entertainment.

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