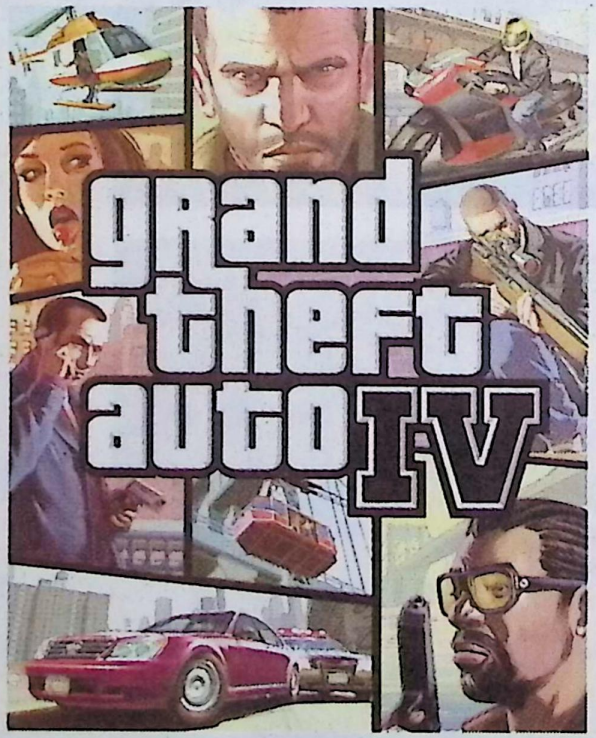
Gaming and Violence?

In Singapore three gamers were in the news last week for the wrong reasons. Two are dead and a third is in jail after they hurt themselves or others.

Is there a link between gaming and their aggressive or violent behaviour?

Studies by Iowa State University's distinguished Professor Craig Anderson, one of the world's foremost scholars on media violence, show that playing violent video games causes people to think and act more aggressively, but he does not believe playing video games will turn "normal 12-year-olds into school shooters".



Social psychologist Angeline Khoo, said that the link between violent computer games and aggressive behaviour is co-relational rather than direct. Khoo, who is the National Institute of Education's associate professor of the psychological studies academic group, explained: "When people read sensational news like this, they tend to think, it must be the evil game. But there are many people who play violent games and are perfectly normal."

What most people fail to understand is that physical violence, like stabbing, is only an extreme form of aggression. It rarely happens, she said.

More common manifestations of aggression are verbal, like raising voices or spurting vulgarities, she said. "The aggressive tendencies tend to be short-term. They can dissipate. For example, if you listen to soothing music after playing a violent game, you will calm down."

Experts agree that in extremely violent cases, there will usually be a convergence of multiple risk factors. These include gang involvement, anti-social parents and peers, substance abuse, poverty and media violence. Males are more at risk.

On the ground, psychiatrists and social workers are reporting more gaming-related problems among youths. At Touch Cyber Wellness and Sports, counsellors have seen more than 140 cyber- related cases in the past three years.

Dr Brian Yeo, a consultant psychiatrist at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, said he sees at least one patient daily who has gaming or Internet related issues.

"Some of them have avatars, and when their avatar dies or gets killed, they can become very angry, and in extreme cases, they may throw things or scream at their parents, or threaten to commit suicide."

Gamers are, however, upset that violent games have been fingered for the recent incidents.

Referring to the stabbing incident at Nanyang Technological University last week, Nicolas Khoo, 31, co-founder of the Cybersports and Online Gaming Association, said: "Such incidents happen to a minority of gamers...In this incident, there could have been other reasons that led him to do it, so why was gaming blamed?"

Those interviewed also said they have not experienced any violent behaviour, although they said their relationships may have suffered.

Sabrina Ong, 25, a blogger and avid gamer, said: "I don't become violent, but I tend to be more engrossed when I'm killing a character in shooting games like Left 4 Dead. I will shoo people away when they come and talk to me."

Technician Eddy Zhang, 28, said: "I became a bit reclusive. My girlfriend also broke up with me as she felt that I was spending more time playing games than with her."

Khoo said studies have shown that parental involvement is vital in managing the violent effects of gaming.

"For instance, if someone utters a profanity in the game, the parent can tell the kid, we are not going to imitate this person's behaviour. There will at least be some guidance."

AsiaSoft, publisher of games like Maple Story, has created pop-up messages to remind gamers to take breaks. By the fourth hour, the gamers are asked to quit the game. Its spokesman said: "It's all about moderation."

This article was first published in The Straits Times.