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Violent video games can dull pain

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Computer games can reduce pain, researchers say, and a high speed virtual death-match is more effective at dulling discomfort than an arcade classic like space invaders.

The discovery raises the prospect that trips to the dentist or painful injections could be made easier by providing patients with the right kind of computer game to distract them.

Bryan Raudenbush and colleagues at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia, US, tested the effects of playing different genres of videogame on subjects receiving painful stimulus. They compared six genres of game - action, puzzle, arcade, fighting, sport, and boxing.

Half of the participants in the study were a total of 15 minutes to practice and play each game under normal conditions. Then one of their feet was placed in ice cold water and they were instructed to play for up to five minutes more. The control group underwent the same treatment but without having any computer games to play.

On average, those subjects playing games were able to withstand the painful icy water for longer than the control group. Furthermore, those given sports or fighting games were able to withstand more pain than those playing any other genre.

Information overload

"There are implications here for children, adolescents, and young adults, all of whom are the primary users of such video games," Raudenbush says. "Physicians could possibly implement this in their office to aid in distraction during a painful procedure such as injection or dental work."

Nilli Lavie, a psychologist at University College London, UK, agrees. "This makes sense in light of what we know about how loading up people's attention can make them unable to detect other stimuli," she says. "My own work has shown occupying someone's attention with a task makes them effectively blind to what is normally a very strong visual stimulus, like an object moving toward them. The visual cortex actually shuts down."

Lavie adds that fighting and sports games probably dull pain most because they occupied more of a player's attention. "Research has shown that action-filled games take up your attention more than other games, like puzzles," she says. "They present more of an information overload by giving you a lot to process and do very quickly."

Lavie is currently planning her own research into using attention-grabbing tasks such as games to distract patients from painful procedures.

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