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Tobacco Use Widespread in Video Games Played By Youth

New report finds parents unaware that video games contain smoking images with many targeting teens

Washington, D.C. – Smoking is prevalent and often glamorized in video games played by youth, but a new report, released today by Truth Initiative®, finds that most parents are unaware of the problem and the link that media can play in smoking initiation. Ninety-three percent of parents surveyed were unaware of the findings of the University of California San Francisco’s (UCSF) research that verified 42 percent of the video games studied contained tobacco images. The report, [“Played: Smoking and Video Games.”](#) comes at a time when parents are holiday shopping, and a new wave of video games topping this year’s wish lists have hit the shelves.

Research shows a correlation between exposure to smoking imagery and the likelihood to smoke among young people. In fact, 44 percent of adolescents who start smoking do so because of smoking images seen in the movies. Considering teens spend much more time playing video games than going to the movies—25 times more on average—or engaging in social media, the report raises cause for concern and the need for action.

“When it comes to smoking and video games, there are no winners,” said Robin Koval, CEO and President of Truth Initiative. “We need to shine a light on the gaming industry, much like with movies, and all smoking imagery should be removed from video games played by youth. Far too many games feature characters who smoke and are portrayed as strong and powerful, sending a very dangerous message to young people that couldn’t be further from the truth. Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death. This report should sound an alarm for parents and be a wakeup call to the industry that tobacco has no place in video games.”

Of the 2016 new releases, more than a dozen major video games contain tobacco use, including “Overwatch”, a popular “Teen”-rated game that is sure to top holiday wish lists. Since its release in May, “Overwatch” has attracted millions of young players, 15 million in the first three months alone, and features a main character regularly shown smoking a cigar. Other “Teen”-rated games featuring tobacco include “Batman: Return to Arkham” and “XCOM 2”. “Mature”- rated games (content generally suitable for ages 17 and up) containing tobacco that are widely played by teenagers and young adults include “Call of Duty,” “Grand Theft Auto,” and “Halo. Yet, video game content descriptors often fail to mention tobacco use, making it difficult for parents to monitor games for tobacco imagery.

In the 2015 University of California, San Francisco survey, researchers verified tobacco content in 42 percent of the video games that participants reported having played; however, only 8 percent of these games had received tobacco warnings from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), the gaming industry’s self-regulatory organization that rates video games and apps. The Truth Initiative 2016 survey also shows that 65 percent of parents would not purchase these video games once aware of the tobacco imagery.

Truth Initiative also commissioned video interviews with 44 teen and young adult “gamers.” All 44 recalled seeing smoking images in video games on a regular basis.

Tobacco use was viewed as making a character “tougher” or “grittier.” The report also reveals that while the majority of teens surveyed say they would play video games despite smoking images, more than 50 percent of these teens expressed concern about the impact smoking images would have on their younger siblings who often watch them play video games to learn themselves.

Actions needed to reduce the risk of smoking initiation among teens and young adults who could be influenced by video games to use tobacco:

- **Game developers and publishers** should stop including images of tobacco use in their games, particularly those marketed to or played by youth, regardless of their ESRB rating.
- **The Entertainment Software Rating Board** should consistently identify and disclose whether a game contains images of tobacco use or tobacco references and rate games containing those images with a “Mature” rating.
- **Parents and adults** should recognize that many video games contain images of tobacco use and be aware that ESRB content descriptors may fail to mention it. Adults should take this into consideration when purchasing games for tweens and teens.
- **Public health advocates** should build public awareness about the issue of tobacco use in video games and support research to learn more about its implications. The public health community should insist that game developers eliminate tobacco content in video games.
- **Public health researchers** should conduct more studies of the relationship between video games and tobacco use, including longitudinal studies that can shed light on the question of whether exposure to tobacco use in video games leads to increased use, or facilitates progression to regular use, of tobacco.
- **Policymakers** should recognize that the prevalence of tobacco use in video games may undermine public health gains in the reduction of youth tobacco use.

In addition, advertising is a key factor in youth tobacco use initiation. The depiction of tobacco use in games serves, in effect as both free advertising for tobacco companies and a way to recruit the “replacement smokers” they need to make up for the 1200 people who die each day from a tobacco related disease.

Facts about Teens and Tobacco:

Around 3,200 young people try a cigarette for the first time each day and nearly 2,100 youth and young adults become daily smokers. Nearly all smoking initiation occurs before the age of 18 and the younger that someone is when he or she starts using tobacco, the more likely he or she will become addicted. The U.S. Surgeon General estimates that 5.6 million young people alive today will die prematurely from tobacco use.

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About Truth Initiative

Truth Initiative is a national public health organization that is inspiring tobacco-free lives and building a culture where all youth and young adults reject tobacco. The truth about tobacco and the tobacco industry are at the heart of our proven-effective and nationally recognized **truth**[®] public education campaign, our rigorous and scientific research and policy studies, and our innovative community and youth engagement programs supporting populations at high risk of using tobacco. The Washington D.C.-based organization, formerly known as Legacy, was established and funded through the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry. To learn more about our work speaking, seeking and spreading the truth about tobacco, visit truthinitiative.org.