

Video Games: Trigger or Rumor?
Discussing the History of Video Game Violence

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In the present day, controversies circle around the idea of video games portraying a violent message towards children and, potentially, embedding a stimulant to repeat exactly what they saw within the game. Tie in the recent rise of gun violence to create a plausible reason to fight against violent video games, especially in the hands of youth. Though, this issue has not recently appeared in the country in light of the major shootings; in fact, the first rise of controversy came in 1976¹. Interestingly enough, violence in video games had appeared in the beginning—particularly the use of guns. That being said, video games do not encourage, promote, create, or establish violence within the mind of a child or adult, regardless of the realistic aspects in modern design. Does a history of graphic media show the same story?

Released by Magnavox, the Odyssey became available to homes in 1972 and began a booming era of video gaming from the comfort of the home. It was developed from a prototype known as the “Brown Box,” which was the first multiprogram and multiplayer video game system to be created; created by Ralph Baer and Sanders Associates, Inc., it held a range of games including a putting game, four different sports games, ping-pong, checkers, and, notably, target shooting². Both the former and latter entries to the list had specific attachments that allowed the player to appropriately use the console; as expected, the skeet shooting game had a brown light gun to point at the screen and fire at targets. During the time period, the public uproar about violent games had not existed. In fact, the Odyssey had met the alleged expectations and, therefore, succeeded quite well.

¹ Kent, Steve L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond: The Story behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.

² "Magnavox Odyssey Video Game Unit, 1972." National Museum of American History. Accessed April 03, 2018. http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1302004.

Up until 1976, little concerns arose for the path of video games and the moral or psychological questions were out of mind. However, Exidy Games released *Death Race*, a game where players drive over stick figures³. The public got upset over, as described by video game historian Steve L. Kent, “was that you heard this little ‘ahhkh’ when the person got hit, and a little gravestone came up”⁴. Even if the figures that the player ran over were referred to as “gremlins”, it had no effect on the outcry against it and, inevitably, got pulled from the shelves by its manufacturer. Yet again, in 1983, *Custer’s Revenge*, produced by Mystique for the Atari 2600, was protested on release for its sexist agenda. As for its content, the player runs towards a Native American woman strapped to a pole and, while dodging arrows, engages in intercourse with her for points. These protesters considered it rape, while the game portrays it as consensual and, ironically, pleasurable. However, the graphics of this era were crude and difficult to make out yet had just as much of an impact on the public. Fortunately, video games neared a new peak with the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the same year.

Originally known as the Famicom, or Family Computer, the device saw its initial release in Japan and later released in the United States in 1985 with titles such as *Super Mario Brothers* and *The Legend of Zelda*⁵. While both had cartoon violence expressed through a gamepad, another infamous title released in the American market was *Duck Hunt*, a game where the player shoots ducks from the sky into the hands of a dog. More importantly, they did not use a controller, but a light gun, packaged with the game in every brand-new system. Yet, Nintendo is regarded as a legend among the gaming industry and so is *Duck Hunt*. Instead of being protested

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dooley, Patricia L. *Freedom of Speech: Reflections in Art and Popular Culture*. ABC-CLIO.

⁵ "Nintendo." | Nintendo - Corporate Information | Company History. Accessed April 03, 2018. <https://www.nintendo.com/corp/history.jsp>.

and boycotted, the game received praise and sold exceptionally well in the United States. Why would some games that involve crude graphics, such as *Death Race* and *Custer's Revenge*, be protested and pulled from the shelves when others that allow the player to use a gun on a screen, like *Duck Hunt*, thrive? In short, it comes down to a theme that will be visited again and again throughout history: graphics and context.

From the mid to late eighties, players could start to discern objects from real life, such as people, animals, or objects, much easier than before. Naturally, it caused concern in the minds of some of what consequences existed. This truly took off when the nineties came around, particularly 1993, when *Night Trap* and *Mortal Kombat* stocked the shelves of toy stores around the country. The former title took realism to a whole new level by using real footage inside of its game, sparking a spree of debates against it. Being as developed as it was, the game portrayed a woman being attacked and drained of her blood in a scandalous manner; for the time, this was absurd. Toys “R” Us and F.A.O. Schwarz banned the Sega title almost immediately, while the Senate Judiciary and Government Affairs Committee came together in a joint hearing on video game violence. They declared the game was “shameful,” “sick,” “ultraviolent,” and “disgusting,” causing Sega to pull *Night Trap* from sale in 1994; however, it made a quick return with new box art and publishing to other systems⁶. Another title that features a “helpless female as the central character” is *Phantasmagoria*, a point and click adventure game released for Windows⁷. It, too, felt the wrath of protest in 1995 and faced bans in several stores around the world, including

⁶ Plunkett, Luke. "Sega's Most 'Shameful', 'Sick' And 'Disgusting' Video Game." Kotaku. March 24, 2011. Accessed April 03, 2018. <https://kotaku.com/5785158/segas-most-shameful-sick-and-disgusting-video-game>.

⁷ "A Timeline of Video Game Controversies." National Coalition Against Censorship. Accessed April 08, 2018. <http://ncac.org/resource/a-timeline-of-video-game-controversies>.

Australia and Germany⁸. The new-age side-screen fighter from Midway and Acclaim Entertainment, *Mortal Kombat*, met immense amounts of protest from Congress due to its use of humanoid figures in brutal, graphic, and gory kills. In reality, this marked the first time that someone could picture other humans in these extreme combat situations, thus sparking the first controversy around it.

However, unlike *Night Trap* and *Phantasmagoria*, the fighter remained in stores and thrived for how entertaining it was. Their solution to the new-age violence was the establishment of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) in 1994, adapting a method from movies to video games in order to warn potential buyers of the content. With the new system in mind, parents could filter games from their children due to the ratings placed on each and every box. So, why is the violence an issue? At the time, crimes claiming to be related to video games were unheard of, despite the extremely brutal titles around. In retrospect, a common theme between each game that faced bans is the idea of a helpless female victim character, particularly involved with extreme sexual deviance. In the successful title of the era, no sexual scenes are displayed, and each woman is more than capable of being powerful and defending herself. Unfortunately, the prospects of peace and video games starts to die out with the first school shooting tied to media violence in 1997: The Heath High School Shooting.

In early December, fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal “opened fire on a morning prayer group killing three students, injuring five, and traumatized many more”⁹. An anti-video games

⁸ "Roberta Williams' Phantasmagoria for DOS (1995)." MobyGames. Accessed April 03, 2018.
<http://www.mobygames.com/game/roberta-williams-phantasmagoria>.

⁹ Philpott. "Remembering a Deadly Kentucky High School Shooting 20 Years Later." Lexington KY News | WKYT. Accessed April 03, 2018.
<http://www.wkyt.com/content/news/Remembering-a-deadly-Kentucky-high-school-shooting-20-years-later-461092173.html>.

activist and attorney, Jack Thompson, files the first of many lawsuits claiming that video games are the source of violence resonating in teenagers. On behalf of the parents of those killed, the lawsuit's supporters investigated that the perpetrator regularly played several computer games. These titles include Doom, Castle Wolfenstein, Nightmare Creatures, MechWarrior, Quake, Redneck Rampage, and Resident Evil¹⁰. Alongside the developers of these games, several pornographic sites and a movie, "The Basketball Diaries," were also targeted by the lawsuit's claim of irresponsibility on who their content reached. However, the lawsuit received no traction and the prosecutor was later disbarred permanently by the Florida Supreme Court for inappropriate conduct¹¹. Evidently, these issues seemed negligible at the time since only one incident occurred and those pursuing it seemed far-fetched to reach out as far as they did.

Alas, the next three years meant chaos for the gaming industry. *Grand Theft Auto* saw its debut in 1998 with an immediate reaction from the public. With missions allowing the player to drive prostitutes around town, run from and murder police, smuggle drugs, create pornography, and slaughter civilians, it gained the reputation it has today. Ironically, there were no lawsuits related to it within coming years, though developers did delay the release of *Grand Theft Auto III* after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and had to alter content involving New York City¹². Where court came back to the situation was in 1999 after the Columbine Massacre, a brutal shooting by two students that regularly played video games in their free time. Families of the victims filed lawsuits against the entertainment companies allegedly responsible for causing the deaths, which were mainly dismissed two years later; alongside this, lawsuits against the gunmen's parents and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Terdman, Daniel. "Report: Jack Thompson, Game Industry Scourge, Disbarred." CNET. September 25, 2008. Accessed April 03, 2018. <https://www.cnet.com/news/report-jack-thompson-game-industry-scourge-disbarred/>.

¹² Ibid.

friend who helped them obtain the weapons were settled before court¹³. With that in mind, if video games were to blame, why did their lawsuits dissipate while the one's against the parents of the shooters follow through? This failure did not mark the end of the attempts against video games; instead, the state of Indianapolis targeted the sale of violent games to minors.

Throughout the years of 2000 and 2001, Indianapolis mayor Bart Peterson proposes and successfully passes a violent video game ordinance, making it the first city to pass such a law in the country¹⁴. It planned on forbidding any operator from allowing a minor, unaccompanied by a parent or guardian, from having access to a game that is harmful to minors. On top of this, Peterson banned all violent video games from city-run property. Though, before his ordinance went into effect, several representatives of the national video game industry filed a case against the City of Indianapolis in federal court¹⁵. When brought in front of a three-judge panel of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, they ruled that Indianapolis' ordinance is unconstitutional for the oppression of the First Amendment, though agreed that the government can aid parents by restricting minor's access to certain mature material¹⁶. In essence, the establishment of the ESRB and restricting sales to minors based on the rating marked as far as the government could interject. Yet, when a bill, proposed by California Representative Joe Baca in 2003, enacting a federal fine for selling or renting a game to a minor came to vote, it fell short of passing. During the same year, two families from Tennessee sue the maker of Grand Theft Auto and other games

¹³ Staff, CBSNews.com Staff CBSNews.com. "Most Columbine Lawsuits Dismissed." CBS News. November 27, 2001. Accessed April 03, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/most-columbine-lawsuits-dismissed/>.

¹⁴ "The Official Website of the City of Indianapolis and Marion County." Indianapolis. Accessed April 03, 2018. http://www.indy.gov/eGov/Mayor/Families/Media_Violence/About/Pages/timeline.aspx.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "FindLaw's United States Seventh Circuit Case and Opinions." Findlaw. Accessed April 03, 2018. <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-7th-circuit/1146977.html>.

when a shooter claimed he imitated Grand Theft Auto III; the case was soon dismissed with little to no repercussions to the company itself. Even with the public outcry against video games in select states, the general majority did not subscribe to similar beliefs; during this year, sales began an upward climb at this time, reaching roughly seven billion dollars' worth of sales in the United States¹⁷.

For years to come, several states have been making movements against video games. The state of Illinois again attempts to ban the distribution of any entries with certain violent content to minors in 2005, threatening enforcement against those who infringe this law. In both a local and federal court case, the state is encouraged to post information about the ESRB but cannot enforce sales to minors due to Constitutional infringement. Another set of court cases in 2006 finds laws set by Michigan and Louisiana unconstitutional for similar reasons as the formerly mentioned case. A year later, Oklahoma had their dissemination of graphic video games to minors struck down by the Western District Court of Oklahoma. On a federal level, New York Senator Hillary Clinton advocated for regulations on video game sales after a "sexually explicit" mod known as "Hot Coffee" became available for Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas¹⁸. As the previous bill, it gained no momentum in the Senate. With several other state movements against video games that receive no momentum, researchers start to come out more on both sides of the issue.

¹⁷ "U.S. Computer and Video Game Sales 2015 | Statistic." Statista. Accessed April 03, 2018.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/273258/us-computer-and-video-game-sales/>.

¹⁸ Peterson, Andrea. "Hillary Clinton's History with Video Games and the Rise of Political Geek Cred." The Washington Post. April 21, 2015. Accessed April 03, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/04/21/hillary-clintons-history-with-video-games-and-the-rise-of-political-geek-cred/?utm_term=.fccf9169b968.

Overall, numerous figures fought for the argument that video games spark violence in youth; many of these claims went without substantial research, citing instances such as Professor Kevin Saunders and Guy Cumberbatch. One notable research piece, however, came from psychology professor Craig Anderson and his peers, Douglas A. Gentile and Katherine E. Buckley, where they claim exposure to violent video games and other sources of graphic media constitutes a substantial risk factor for later aggressive behavior. While they target more than video games, these forms of media have existed for decades at a time now and show no correlation between the rates of violent crimes and the increase of sales of violent media¹⁹. As the other side of the issue argues, the world would fall into chaos if media influenced the mind that substantially.

According to Professor Henry Jenkins, the first of recent and major claims discrediting video game violence, the “rate of juvenile violent crime in the United States is at a 30-year low. Researchers find that people serving time for violent crimes typically consume less media before committing their crimes than the average person in the general population”²⁰. Alongside this years later, Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olson of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media claim that the research regarding the link between violent video games and aggressive behavior in the real world is simplistic and unsupported by modern claims²¹. If

¹⁹ Kain, Erik. "As Video Game Sales Climb Year Over Year, Violent Crime Continues To Fall." *Forbes*. April 24, 2012. Accessed April 03, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/04/19/as-video-game-sales-climb-year-over-year-violent-crime-continues-to-fall/#1d4b1ed74507>.

²⁰ "Henry Jenkins, PhD Biography." *Do Violent Video Games Contribute to Youth Violence?* Accessed April 03, 2018. <https://videogames.procon.org/view.source.php?sourceID=009349>.

²¹ Kutner, Lawrence, and Cheryl K. Olson. *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.

these games truly created violent tendencies in the world, why is society still structured and has not reduced to chaos and destruction? Millions of consumers play these genres of video games, expanding the pool of those who are potentially affected; if the majority became violent, then there would be plenty of evidence to cite.

Therefore, arguing that video games promote violent tendencies in consumers, even children, is statistically improbable. Alongside the previously mentioned researchers, a personal survey of 16 individuals ranging from 18 to beyond 41 years of age. Out of those questioned, 15 have played a violent video game before, 14 say they are not more violent while they play, 13 believe that these games do not promote violent or aggressive behavior, and none of them consider themselves more violent after playing violent video games. Interestingly, the poll split in half on whether or not sexual violence and public mass violence are acceptable in video games.

On top of this, only two individuals questioned believe that video game violence is a real issue, being a woman over the age of 41 and another between the ages of 18 and 24; both of them indicate that they hardly or do not play video games. Another common trend between the 6 females who took the survey is their mutual agreement that sexual violence and public mass violence are unacceptable in video games. A potential reason for this is a previous involvement with sexual harassment or assault, though there is nothing confirmed.

For the rest of those surveyed, 9 of these indicated that they played video games daily, intriguingly all male and between the ages of 18 and 24. These same individuals find extreme gore, brutality, and torture acceptable in games, while all but two indicated that sexual violence and public mass violence are acceptable “as long as the displayed content has a reason to be

there”²². Speculations about this come from the idea that those who play games actively are less prone to being bothered by extreme content in the media so long as it thematically fits; another is the gender stereotype about men being raised to show little emotion about controversial or disturbing imagery.

At the end of the survey, four videos showed idols of video game controversy in history: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, *Custer’s Revenge*, *Phantasmagoria*, and *Sniper Elite V4*. Supporting the statistic about mass violence mentioned earlier, half of the respondents were disturbed by the video of the mission “No Russian,” while the other half agreed that it progressed the story effectively. Along with this, the scene of *Phantasmagoria* garnered split results on whether or not it is acceptable. All except 2 stated that *Custer’s Revenge* is too crude to be disturbing, known as “very strange” but “not over the top”²³. As for the detailed gore of *Sniper Elite V4*, 4 respondents considered it “too extreme” and potentially “educating some people of easy ways to kill someone,” while the rest considered it a generality in modern entertainment mediums or “it’s really cool”²⁴.

Ultimately, it is reasonable to claim that video games do not stimulate violent or aggressive behavior in adolescents and adults. Looking at the history of video games, there are no common trends between violence and the entertainment medium. Even with the rise of school shootings in past decades, general adolescent violent crime is still substantially lower across the board after its peak in 2006²⁵. If violent crimes by youth continue to plummet and video games

²² Rossi, Jeremy R. "Regarding Video Games and Violence." Google. Accessed April 08, 2018.
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1M8ITzmIBzPcFu1-b0xdAhCV7x3sfnX7RQlmypwitHiA/edit#responses>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Juvenile Arrest Rate Trends. Accessed April 03, 2018.
https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05201.

surge upwards in the market, how could they be linked to one another? President Donald Trump, along with other members of Congress, recently displayed a collage of videos that are violent with claims that these are the issue with children in the recent era of violence. However, there is no statistical evidence supporting his argument; popular media regard it as a “scapegoat in gun debate”²⁶. With these statistics backing its case, modern society starts to accept more and more that video games are not the problem. In a generation centered around games and other forms of media, being assured that video games will not cause any new tensions or issues in a child’s mind can provide a safeguard to parents and society alike.

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²⁶ "Trump Is Using Video Games as a Scapegoat in Gun Debate." The Nevada Sagebrush. Accessed April 03, 2018. <http://nevadasagebrush.com/blog/2018/03/13/trump-is-using-video-games-as-a-scapegoat-in-gun-debate/>.

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