The Rise (and Refinement) of Moral Panic

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Concerns over media's corrosive influence on the minds, emotions and behaviors of humans can be traced back as far as mediation itself. In these debates, the often anti-normative content of many messages – from scientific (re: heretical) papers to science fiction novels – has introduced dissonance and discomfort among broad swaths of society regarding the relative merit of such content. As an interactive technology, video games have stoked this debate by allowing consumers an unprecedented level of agency over on-screen actions, allowing gamers to at once perpetrate and witness gratuitous on-screen content. Yet, contemporary sciences calls to question the veracity of these fears.

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The following chapter provides an overview of the dominant approaches to understanding the impact of mediation on media consumers. Before approaching the topic regarding video games however, it is important to plot the trajectory of how we have historically understood moral panics from the media. To this end, the chapter will cover six main areas of thought: a definition of moral panic, early accounts of media fears, the rise of moral panics as a result of mass communication, the refinement of media effects as individual processing, interactivity as a key igniter of the moral panic debate, and a contemporary view of media effects as the interaction of messages and the idiosyncratic ways they are processed.

Moral Panic, Defined

As a social science, the study of media psychology aims to untangle the "complex relationship between humans and the evolving digital environment" (Rutledge, 2013, p. 44). If we were to remove the term "digital" from this definition, we can broadly explain that the goal of media psychology is to better understand how individuals use and are effected by mediated messages. By effects, we are referring to how media might impact people at the cognitive (thoughts), affective (feelings), and behavioral (actions) levels.

While not by definition, most scholarly and public interest tends to focus on the potential for negative media effects – that is, as a whole we are driven to understand how media usage (often considered as a voluntary pursuit) might have a corrosive impact on how we think, feel and behave towards each other (cf., Dill, 2013). Wilson (2002) suggests that some of this focus might be the result of an evolutionary tendency – at both the individual and societal level – to identify and minimize risk.

Focusing on risk mitigation is not an inherently faulty practice, but in practice such an approach brings with it a need for researchers to adopt a more normative approach to science. Researchers are required to assume that the effects they are looking for are (a) present and (b) dangerous, which often results in the adoption of a moral stance. Writing for *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, Elson and Ferguson (2013) explain potential pitfalls with this approach:

> "In a moral panic, a part of society considers certain behaviors or lifestyle choices of another part to be a significant threat to society as a whole. *In this environment, moral beliefs can substantially influence scientific research, and its results are readily used as confirmation for what has been suspected*." (p. 32, emphasis added).

Early Moral Panics

> "Appraisal: All have said the stated proposition to be foolish and absurd in Philosophy; and formally heretical since it expressly contradicts the sense of sacred scripture in many places…" ~ trans. by Graney (2014), p. 8-9.

In 1616, the Roman Inquisition of Pope Paul V issued the above ruling in a heresy case against famed Italian scientist Galileo Galilei for his public writings about the heliocentric structure of the solar system – a view that directly contrasts several passages in the Catholic Bible suggesting the Earth, as created by God, to be the "height of the stars" (Job 22:12). Galileo was later committed to a lifetime of house arrest after mocking Pope Urban VIII as the Simpilcio (simpleton) in further writing on the topic in 1633 (trans. by Finocchiaro, 1632/1989). While certainly not the only scientist to be persecuted by church authorities – indeed a portion of the *Pontifacale Romanum* (the oath taken by Roman Catholic bishops at their consecration) requires any ordained bishop "to the utmost of [their] power, persecute and attack

heretics, schismatics, and rebels against the same our Lord or his aforesaid successors" – Galileo's case is compelling in that his scientific views were accurate. Later work by scientists empirically confirmed his theories by demonstrating the Earth's orbital patterns around the Sun, and Vatican leaders later apologies for their treatment of Galileo, with Pope John Paul II issues an official apology on behalf of the Catholic Church nearly 360 years after the original ruling (*New Scientist*, 1992).

Importantly for our discussion, scientists were not the only ones persecuted by the Church. Thomsett (2011) writes that nearly 75 years prior to Galileo's trials, the 1564 Council of Trent formalized their guidelines for adding published books to the *Librorum Prohibitorum* – a list that eventually grew to include over 4300 works on science, philosophy and popular culture (the list was not abolished until 1966, by decree of Pope Paul VI). While not all of the authors were punished, their works were severely restricted for containing views against Church doctrine. Works such as Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* are only a small sampling of volumes on the Index that while shunned in their time, are celebrated today. Indeed in the late 1700s, German theologian and historian Johann Gottfried Hoche wrote extensively on the societal dangers of reading adventure novels, claiming that they lead to compulsions that were a foolish and harmful waste of time – particularly for children, but also for housewives who might be distracted from their other domestic duties (cf. Hoche, 1794; in German).

Our focus on the Catholic Church above is done to illustrate an important point raised by Elson and Ferguson (2013): when part of a society (the Church) considers another part (the scientist) to be a threat or risk to the greater social good, perspectives are severely limited. As written by Thomsett (2011): "It would not have been possible for science to progress as long as the Church held the power to silence anyone it chose" (p. 204). From a moral panic standpoint, and certainly from the standpoint of Hugo and Dumas, the same could be said about literature: when one aspect of society deems another to be heretical, expression becomes impossible.

The persecution of Galileo, Hugo, and Dumas for their "immoral" teachings (or at least, teachings incompatible with Church doctrine) share a unique common factor that makes each a key for the study of media psychology: each published books, for the general public, written in a common language (Italian in the case of Galileo, French in the case of Hugo and Dumas). That is, the Church was not so much concerned about the individual authors as they were about the impact of their works on the thoughts, feelings and actions of the larger social structure. The printing of a book allowed for the authors' thoughts to be spread in an unadulterated form, and writing these thoughts in a common language allowed them to be understood and discussed by a mass audience.

As far back as the ancient Greeks, fears of written language – one of the first forms of mass media – were expressed. In his *Phaedru*s, the famed philosopher Plato emulates the thoughts of his mentor Socrates, who denounced written words as antithetical to learning, suggesting that as writing spreads, people will begin "sowing words which can neither speak for themselves not teach the truth adequately to others" (trans. by Jowett, 1999). Those early philosophers feared that written words would ruin education because they would present singular answers to complex problems, and such a perspective again fits Elson and Ferguson (2013): the dominant perspective on education during the time of Socrates and Plato (argumentation and rhetoric) was challenged by an emerging perspective that privileged the written word. Indeed in the modern education system, both speech and writing are equally treasured.

Fast-forwarding nearly 1800 years from these debate (and skipping over the previously discussed controversies with the *Librorum Prohibitorum*), we can find a number of examples of media products that faced early moral scrutiny. Connor (2011) gives an account of the "enslaving" (para. 4) allure of the newspaper crossword puzzles in 1920s North America (the USA and Canada, namely). Citing a variety of accounts in which editorials written in English newspapers espoused the corrosive impact of crosswords on laborers and housewives (distracting them from their economic or domestic duties, similar to Hoche's fears about reading in 1794) and encouraging a marked decline in reading and intelligent conversation. One editorial, entitled 'Cross-Word Puzzles. An Enslaved America', claims that crosswords "have dealt the final blow to the art of conversation, and have been known to break up homes" (*Tamworth Herald*, 1924, as cited by Connor). To some extent, the roots of this moral panic can be traced back to a Puritan approach to media entertainment (cf. Zillmann, 2000) in which "idle hands are the Devil's playthings".

Mass Audiences Give Rise to Mass Panic

As media technology progressed into the 20th century, so did pubic fears about its impact. Parker (1995) explains that the early adoption of the electronic telephone systems in the late 1800s was met with fears that the technology was invasive (allowing for others to spy on private conversations by intercepting telephone signals) and potentially dangerous (its electronic signals might permanently deafen the user). Eber (1982) suggests that others were concerned that telephones would prove to be incessant distractions – so much so that Alexander Graham Bell himself (the inventor of the device) refused to have a phone in his own workshop. Many would claim later that the source of some of these fears may have been telegraph companies, who were encouraged to incite moral panics about a (not-so) dangerous technology in order to slow its growth (Parker, 1995).

Perhaps the first scientific study into moral panics can be traced to the Payne Fund studies of the 1930s. Funded by noted Ohio philanthropist Frances Payne Bolton, these studies looked to establish a learned opinion to address societal concerns about the influence of motion pictures on their largely adolescent audiences – concerns fueled by newspaper editorials and magazine articles similar to those denouncing the evils of the crossword puzzle (cf. Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). As written by Charters (1933):

> "No one in this country up to the present time has known in any general and impersonal manner just what effect motion pictures have upon children. Meanwhile children clamor to attend the movies as often as they are allowed to go." (p. v)

For Charters and his colleagues, the best way to address the moral panics associated with motion pictures was not through argumentation and rhetoric, but instead through an impartial scientific lens (cf. Lowery & DeFleur, 1995) in which effects could be observed and understood without the biased perspective of any one investigator. Broadly, the Payne Fund studies were broken into (1) an analysis of film content and (2) investigations into the impact of that content. In analyzing over 1500 films in the time period of 1925 to 1935, Payne Fund scholars reported that nearly three-fourths of films featured crime, sex and love as central plotlines, with the use of tobacco and alcohol being openly portrayed (as Lowery and DeFleur note, during a time of Prohibition). Moreover, a variety of experimental and interview techniques showed that not only did children react physiologically to films (such as increased arousal when watching action and horror sequences) but they also expressed attitudes and opinions that aligned with on-screen content (such as more liberal views on crime, sex and love). Such findings led Charters to later conclude that "the commercial movies are an unsavory mess." (as cited by Sproule, 1997). The fact that his conclusions were seemingly based on (at the time) state-of-the art science

seemed to justify the larger public's concern that motion pictures were a root cause of juvenile corruption.

So, if the Payne Fund studies were done using the objective lens of science, then do their conclusions support 1920s moral panic over motion pictures? Hardly. For example, Sproule (1997) discussed that many of the studies themselves – such as the content analysis study – was designed from a moralist perspective; at one point, the authors of that study concluded that (then) contemporary film contained themes "at variance with the views that we are trying to develop in the schools, homes and churches" (Dale, as cited by Sproule, 1997). Noted social scientist Samuel Stouffer similarly critiqued the methods of using anecdotes as proof of causal and generalizable phenomenon (Sproule, 1997). Finally, Lowery and DeFleur (1995) suggest that while the Payne Fund studies did provide evidence of motion pictures' corrosive impact on children, they also provided evidence about pro-social impacts – for example, studies on children's perspectives towards minorities (such as ethnic Chinese) were found to improve in the short- and long-term following exposure to a film that showed those minorities in a positive (vs. a negative) light. That is, the best conclusion of the Payne Fund studies – although not a popular conclusion among media critics and others caught in the moral panic – was simply that:

> "films were an influence on attitudes; they provided models for behavior; they shaped interpretations of life. They probably had as many prosocial influences (or at least harmless influences) as those that disturbed adults of the time." (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 42).

Almost directly mirroring the motion picture debate, the 1950s saw a similar debate involving the negative impact of popular entertainment media on young minds – this time, pulling comic books into the bulls-eye of a moral panic. An article in Collier's magazine entitled "Horror in the Nursery" (Christ, 1948) offered a six-page feature on the work of US psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who claimed to have clinical evidence of the impact of comic book illustrations and narratives on juvenile delinquency rates across the nation. To Wertham, comics "are demoralizing the morals of youth" and he saw role in this research "not as a psychiatrist, but as a voice for the thousands of troubled parents who, like myself, and concerned primarily with their children's welfare" (p. 23). Wertham and his team content analyzed selected comic books of the time and found them to contain themes of crime, sex, horror, misogyny and violence (many of the same themes found by Payne Fund scholars in the 1920s), and his follow-up interviews with children in juvenile detention found many of them to be avid comic book readers. From this, Wertham confirmed comic books to be a form of dangerous entertainment media in need of regulation – eventually leading to an industry self-regulation (the Comics Code Authority) that held from 1954 (the publication of Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* volume) until January 2011 (Rogers, 2011). In reflection, much of Wertham's research was discredited for not adhering to basic standards of the scientific method – for example, neither his sampling of comic books for analysis nor his interviews with children were random – but for industry, the damage was done. In offering a comprehensive and critical analysis of Wertham, Tilley (2012) best summaries his research as:

> "filled with examples like the preceding ones in which Wertham shifted responsibility for young people's behavioral disorders and other pathologies from the broader social, cultural, and organic physical contexts of these children's lives to the recreational pastime of reading comics" (p. 402).

Looking back, contemporary media psychologists refer to studies such as the Payne Fund and the Seduction of the Innocent as examples of a magic bullet effect: a model of media effects that assumes

media content to have a direct, powerful, and universal impact on the individual audience member. In truth, it is unlikely that any of these researchers honestly claimed that effects were so simple; at the same time, their studies placed a heavy focus on media as the causal agent in corroding individual thoughts, actions, and behaviors. However, as best stated by Joseph Klapper:

> "mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences" (Klapper, 1960, p. 19)."

Klapper's perspective, often called the limited effects paradigm, perhaps aligns most closely with the modern definition of media psychology offered earlier in this chapter (Rutledge, 2013): in both definitions, the impact of a media message cannot be understood unless we better understand the person consuming it, requiring a deep understanding of both individuals and their evolving media environment. Conversely, this deep understanding does not require (and is not assisted by) a moral panic perspective that diminishes the role of the individual as an active creator of meaning. Unfortunately for Plato (and Socrates), research and common practice has long disproven the notion that mediated messages are closed for interpretation, such as Taylor's (1953) cloze tests for readability and Barthes (1967) discussions of the dual agency of author and reader.

Yet, while we might denounce a strict adherence to the magic bullet effect was ever present in the social sciences, many suggest that these early studies – even after they were reinterpreted as being less damning that initially drafted – established a legacy of fear for mass media effects that continues to dominate the scientific examination of media effects into the digital age.

Interactivity and the "Murder Simulator"

By most accounts, the first video game subjected to moral panic was the 1976 driving simulator *Death Race*, an arcade machine in which players, sitting at the controls of a physical steering wheel and gas pedal, earn points for using their on-screen car as a weapon to run over "gremlins" (Walker, 2014). The game sparked controversy for essentially encouraging players to use their cars in an aggressive manner, awarding them points for committing vehicular homicide reminiscent of the 1975 film *Death Race 2000* (of which, the game was loosely inspired by). In an interview with The New York Times (Blumenthal, 1976), a psychiatrist from the US National Security Council by the name of Gerald Driessen offered a simple-yet-powerful statement on the matter in stating his group's concern over the interactive nature of video games, suggesting that while television violence is passive, "in [Death Race], a player takes the first step to creating violence. The player is no longer just a spectator. He's an actor in the process."

As a video game, *Death Race* was not particularly innovative – it presented simple black-and-white pixel graphics, rudimentary even for their time. However, Kocurek (2012) suggests the controversy surrounding the game set a course for video game fears that persisted far beyond the 500 Death Race arcade cabinets that were eventually manufactured (far beyond developer Exidy's original sales projections). For Kocurek (2012), The Death Race controversy inextricably linked video games and violence in the public mind, as well as drew specific attention the potentially dangerous role of interactivity in video games. Walker (2014) discussed similar concerns over the 1982 pornographic game *Custer's Revenge*, in which players navigated an arrow field in order to force himself upon a Native American woman tied to a cactus – the pornographic elements (given technological limitations of the time) were incredibly rudimentary, but the game required players to digitally enact an on-screen rape in order to win. In replicating Driessen's panics, Dworkin (1987) claimed that the game had "generated

many gang rapes of Native American women" (p. 4) although this claim was supported with a lone anecdote.

Perhaps the most prominent illustration of the limits of what the public would be willing to accept in a violent video game can be found in the 1992 release of the arcade fighter *Mortal Kombat*. Perhaps best stated by Narcisse (2012), *Mortal Kombat* "broke an implicit taboo about what was okay to put in video games." (para. 4) – such as the game's use of motion-capture technology to display realistic human body movement, the intense focus on blood and gore during in-game fights, and the (not so) secret "Fatality" special moves where players could brutally kill each other through a series of beatings, beheadings and disembowelments (based on the talents of the gamer as well as their in-game character). Although the game's reputation in arcades had drawn some criticism from activist groups, it was the game's home release on September 20, 1993 (or "Mortal Monday" as labeled in a $10 million advertising campaign by producer Acclaim – at the time the largest advertising campaign ever for a video game; Gruson, 1993) that was most concerning for a critical public. As described by Time Magazine:

> "Johnny Cage kills his victims with a bloody, decapitating uppercut. Rayden favors electrocution. Kano will punch through his opponent's chest and rip out a still-beating heart. Sub-Zero likes to tear his foe's head off and hold it up in victory, spinal cord twitching as it dangles from the neck…these are characters from Mortal Kombat, America's top-grossing arcade game last year and the focus of a growing debate about whether violence in video games has finally gone too far." (Elmer-Dewitt & Dickerson, 1993, paras. 1-2).

To some extent, video game manufacturers had already anticipated criticism of the home versions of *Mortal Kombat*. Prior to release, Nintendo censored out the blood and violence and altering the Fatality moves to make them less graphic in their Super Nintendo version of the game. While not editing the original game code (except to make it compatible with their system), SEGA chose instead to label the game packaging with a "MA-13" as not appropriate for children under the age of 13 (Andrews, 1993). However, in the face of intensifying Congressional scrutiny to answer questions about whether or not games were training killers and encouraging graphic violence, the two companies instead chose to debate each other's relative moral stance: SEGA claiming moral superiority because their games were labeled for concerned parents, and Nintendo claiming moral superiority because their products were never allowed to contain such violence as a matter of internal corporate policy (Kohler, 2009). Further complicating these debates was a complete lack of any scientific data on the potential impact of video games on aggression, leaving all sides of the argument with little more than empty rhetoric for which to base their claims. In the face of mounting public, governmental and industry pressure to address the moral panic caused by *Mortal Kombat*, 1994 saw the creation of the Entertainment Software Rating Boards – an independent organization funded by the gaming industry and designed "to empower consumers, especially parents, with guidance that allows them to make informed decisions about the age-appropriateness and suitability of video games" (ESRB, n.d.). Looking back on the controversy caused by his creation, *Mortal Kombat* creator Ed Boon expressed in an interview that he somewhat sympathized with critics of his game, saying that "[back in 1992] there was no ratings system when the first one came out, and to me it makes sense - I wouldn't want my ten-year-old kid playing a game like that" (as cited by Robinson, 2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mortal Kombat was the first game ever assigned ESRB's "M" rating (for "mature audiences only"). As stated by Korucek (2012), games such as *Death Race* and *Mortal Kombat* served to stoke public fears about the presence of interactive video game violence, and the response *du jour* seemed to be a heightened awareness of the adult-nature of

video game content; that is, the implementation of a ratings system so that consumers could be better informed as to the content of their desired media products. Ratings were not new to entertainment media, as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) had been rating US films since 1968. However, it was clear (as mentioned by Nacisse, 2012) that audience expectations and perceptions of violence in films and video games differed substantially; a claim empirically supported in later literature (cf. Tamborini, Weber, Bowman, Eden, & Skalski, 2013).

However, an established ratings system did little to quell moral panics related to video game violence, and a series of high-profile school shootings in the US re-ignited concerns that video games served as interactive murder simulations. Investigations into the causes of tragic incidents in Paducah, Kentucky (December 1, 1997) and Columbine, Colorado (April 20, 1999) – at least in the public sphere – were many – such as then-US Attorney General John Ashcroft (Associated Press, 2001) – implicated video games as a root cause of the shootings. On the surface, linking violent video games to school shootings was a simple matter of observational deduction, given the increased popularity of the first-person shooting game in the 1990s. Games such as *Wolfenstein* (released by id Software in 1992) and *DOOM* (1993) ushered in a genre of video games in which the player was effectively placed in the shoes of the main protagonist (a Nazi prisoner in the former, and a space Marine in the latter), armed with high-powered weapons and challenged with navigating a series of mazes and puzzles while being attacked on all sides by enemy soldiers and demons. Ashcroft mirrored many other public opinion when we suggested that shooting games have the ability to train players not only to think about violence as an acceptable form of reprisal for pent-up aggression (a process empirically supported by Anderson and Bushman, 2001; albeit challenged by Ferguson et al., 2008), but that games also have the capacity to teach someone how to use a weapon effectively – such as how to load, aim and fire a military-grade weapon. While the debate still rages about the relative contribution of video game violence on human aggression, the latter behavioral effects seem dubious given the non-familiarity between game controls and actual weapons. As written by the 6th US Court of Appeals (in reference to the Paducah shooting):

> "We find that it is simply too far a leap from shooting characters on a video screen (an activity undertaken by millions) to shooting people in a classroom (an activity undertaken by a handful, at most)…" (*James vs. Meow Media, Inc*., 2002)

As games gained in popularity, the content of games became increasingly scandalous – likely in an effort for games to stand out among an increasingly-crowded marketplace, UK-based Rockstar Studios released one of the most commercially and critically successful games in the medium's history with *Grand Theft Auto*. While early iterations of the game enjoyed moderate popularity, the 2001 release of *Grand Theft Auto III* popularized the sandbox genre of video games: games in which the player has the ability to navigate the environment as if it were real (in this case a sprawling city "Liberty City" modeled loosely after New York City). In this game, and its subsequent iterations, players adopt the role of a criminal involved in any number of organized crime activities from (as the title implies) car theft to drug-running, prostitution and murder. While these games were meant to satire popular gangster films – such as Francis Ford Coppola's acclaimed *Godfather* trilogy (cf. Bowman, 2014) – their content is decidedly dark, "from the theft of vehicles to get from one mission to the next to the murder of rival crime bosses, police officers and innocent bystanders who might interfere with the player's objectives" (p. 189).

While games such as *Wolfenstein* and the *Doom* and *Grand Theft Auto* series have incurred little recourse beyond public ire and scrutiny, there have been video games that have been banned for their overtly violent content, such as the prison violence game *Manhunt* was banned in New Zealand and

Germany, and refused a rating by Australia's Classification Review Board (effectively banning he game) for containing elements "beyond those set out in the classification guidelines" (as cited by Smith, 2004). In an interview, former Rockstar programmer Jeff Williams explained his feelings about the game, suggesting that unlike the satirical nature of the *Grand Theft Auto* games:

> "*Manhunt*, though, just made us all feel icky. It was all about the violence, and it was realistic violence. We all knew there was no way we could explain away that game. There was no way to rationalize it. We were crossing a line." (as cited by Cundy, 2007, para. 3).

For Williams, the question of violent video games might not be so much a question of media effects as it is a question of storytelling; that is, not a question of whether or not that media content might cause moral corruption in players, but rather whether or not he was comfortable telling such a dark tale.

Moral panics surrounding gaming are not restricted to violence. Walker (2014) talks about widespread fears that gamers would be "a generation of fatties who never left the house" (p. 2, para. 1) – speaking to assumptions about the social unattractiveness and social awkwardness of gamers. In an infamous – albeit analog – example of the latter point, Fine (1983) recounts the story of James Dallas Egbert III, a Michigan State University student who went missing in August 1979. Early fears about Egbert disappearance centered around his fascination with the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, and many early media reports suggested that he had taken refuge in steam tunnels below the school to re-enact scenarios from the game (it was later discovered that Egbert suffered from severe depression, and had entered the steam tunnels in attempt to commit suicide in seclusion). Following the Egbert story, scores of panics regarding *D&D* players as malcontents incapable of discerning fantasy and reality lead to similar allegations in the US and UK. In writing for the BBC, Allison (2014) summarizes the fears:

> "Looking back now, it's possible to see the tendrils of a classic moral panic, and some elements of the slightly esoteric world of roleplaying did stir the imaginations of panicked outsiders." (para. 17).

Concerns over gamers being physically fit and social isolated have been challenged with more recent data. In a survey of 7000 *EverQuest II* players, Willilams, Yee and Caplan (2008) found players to have lower body mass index scores than the general population, and that a major motivator for their continued play was for social interaction – although the authors also noted that gamers had higher levels of depression than would be expected. Similar work by Kowert and Oldmeadow (2013) suggests that not only are gamers social when playing, but that these social skills can be learned in-game and used out-of-game, and work by Banks and Bowman (in press) suggests that gamers can even form authentic social relations with their own avatars.

The Myopia of Moral Panics

> "The moral panic over violent video games is doubly harmful. It has led adult authorities to be more suspicious and hostile to many kids who already feel cut off from the system. It also misdirects energy away from eliminating the actual causes of youth violence and allows problems to continue to fester." (para. 4).

The above quote was drawn from an essay by noted technology scholar and sociologist Henry Jenkins, and speaks to the dangers of allowing normative assumptions about psychological principles permeate

our research. In speaking specifically about the violent video game debate, Ivory and Elson (2013) warn that scholars choosing either side of the debate – powerful effects or null effects – seem to be engaging in an "[increasingly] aggressive academic game" (para. 11) that likely does more to advance individual careers than our societal-level understanding of video games.

Where are the roots of these moral panics? In a 2013 public opinion poll conducted in collaboration with YouGov – a research firm based in the UK – Oxford research fellow Andrew Przybylski found that opinions about the public danger of violent video games differed as a result of a number of different demographic and experience variables; such research suggesting that those less experienced with video games are more likely to fear them. In their study, older non-gamers were significantly more likely to feel that games were "a contributing cause in mass shootings" than younger gamers; interestingly, younger gamers were also more likely to agree that "new legislation is needed to restrict the availability of games," which might indicate that gamers are comfortable with labeling and rating the age-appropriateness of games (similar to *Mortal Kombat* creator Ed Boon's comments on his game, earlier in this chapter).

Comments expressed by non-gamers, such as infamous (and now disbarred) US attorney and anti-video game zealot Jack Thompson's dismissal of video games as a form of "mental masturbation" for "knuckleheads" (as cited by Benedetti, 2007, para. 10) reinforces the point that normative perspectives on gaming tend to come from non-gamers. Assuming his masturbation reference is a suggestion that gaming is a self-gratifying leisure activity, one is reminded of perhaps one of the earliest models of mass communication, formulated by sociologist Harold Lasswell in 1948. In his model, Lasswell (1948) suggested a three-part function of modern mass media to (a) offer surveillance of societal events, (b) explain the correlation of those events and general public opinion, and (c) to serve as a method for the transmission of cultural heritage. Missing from this definition, of course, is the role of entertainment, which was later added by Wright (1960), along with the notion of political mobilization. Why the differences in perspectives? Lasswell's model was prescriptive (the perspective of a sociologist explaining the ideal role of mass media in society) whereas Wright's model was descriptive (an explanation of his own observations of mass media as it was being used by society). Indeed, nearly 20 years after his original crusade against the morally corrosive content of comic books, Wertram (1973) himself wrote a volume "The World of Fanzines" that celebrated the creativity that comics books and science fiction novels can foster in children; Gonzalez (2012) tells the story of NASA director Charles Bolden waxing nostalgic over listening to, reading about and watching Flash Gordon as a child.

At the same time, video game scholars (as well as developers and players) are similarly warned about the risk of taking a normative stance in assuming that video games have no capability for negative effects. Huesmann, Debow and Yang (2013) argue that many of the reasons why "intelligent people still doubt the effects [of violent video games on aggression]" (p. 159)) are related to the fact that many of the researchers and policy-makers are unwilling to accept that an activity that they personally engage in (gaming) could have negative effects. The same article also suggests that a general desensitization to violence as well as a strong third-person effect (subconscious psychological assumptions that others are more effected by content than ourselves) are causing many media psychologists to adopt a normative stance that video games cannot be harmful.

At the 2013 Game Developers Conference meeting, designer Walt Williams was abundantly clear that developers should not claim that games are not violent or that they don't have any influence on gamers – indeed, the point of his presentation was do describe his team's latest game *Spec Ops: The Line*, which

makes liberal use of contextualized realistic violence in order force gamers to question their own acceptance of the atrocities of war (in a more poignant scene from the game, players are confronted with the horrific results of a white phosphorous mortal attack on a group of civilians – an attack which the player perpetrates). Bogost (2012) talks about this in terms of the potential for disgust and disinterest reactions to video games, suggesting that when gamers are abhorred by interactive on-screen content (such as the active sadism in *The Torture Game*), it is as likely that they will be less rather than more motivated to engage those activities. A pair of recent studies have demonstrated this claim empirically, finding that when a video game presents gamers with moral transgressions, they will actively avoid the anti-normative behavior (such as committing an act of violence; Joeckel, Bowman, & Dogruel, 2012) or they will feel a deep sense of guilt if they do (Grizzard, Tamborini, Lewis, Wang, & Prabhu, 2014).

Conclusion

> "And I verily do suppose that in the braines and hertes of children, which be membres spirituall, whiles they be tender, and the little slippes of reason begynne in them to bud, ther may happe by evil custome some pestiferous dewe of vice to perse the sayde membres, and infecte and corrupt the soft and tender buddes."

The above is quoted from Sir Thomas Eliot as the introductory text for *Seduction of the Innoce*nt. One interpretation for his choice of words is to frame the poem as a call to action for his work, providing moral justification for a crusade against corrosive comic book content. Likewise, many have taken similar edits from centuries of moral in adopting a defensive and normative stance to understanding the negative impact of mediated communication on the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of us all – from children through adulthood. Moreover, as newer interactive technologies, the popularity of video games (especially among children) has reignited debates as to the role that mediated fantasies of death and destruction play in the shaping of future generations. As noble as the inspirations of this research are, it is equally important to recognize that moral panics are just that: irrational approaches to observable and quantifiable phenomenon that can be understood separate from subjective evaluation. The current empirical record is by no means invalid but rather, in need of further refinement of research designed to better describe, explain, predict and eventually control the results of the interaction between mediated content and human interactions with that content. Doing so requires us to better understand our research heritage to seek areas of replication and extension, and this chapter is aimed at providing such an understanding. The legacy of fear of media effects is just that: a fear rooted not in science, but all-too-often in the moral panics of well-meaning researchers less committed to understanding a phenomenon and more committed to stopping it before it is fully understood.

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