

Moral Panics and Video Games

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Moral Panic and Academic Discourse

As Joe Kincheloe (1997) recently wrote, students of the emerging “postmodern childhood cannot escape the influence of the postmodern condition with its electronic media saturation”. In our academic circles, we are familiar with the long debate about the consequences of growing ‘media saturation’. Those of us who write about the children’s media do tend to fall into one of two camps—the moralizers and the liberators. Both camps speak about and on behalf of children’s culture: but do so from very different points of view. The moralizers see the media saturation as a problem because it is associated with the declining educational and moral standards. Children need to be protected from exploitation in the new media environments in the same way that 19th Century advocates protected children from abuses in factories and the family they argue. Alarmist voices proclaim a ‘crisis’ of postmodern childhood pointing to a moral decline, the rise of violence and degradation of cultural quality issuing consequential calls to curb the growing freedom that children’s TV producers enjoy. Perhaps Postman’s (1982) lament for the dissolution of ‘literate childhood’ is the best example of this alarmist position. Postman (1993) reiterated this argument about computer technology, which is according to him: “breaking a four-hundred year old truce between gregariousness and openness fostered by orality and the introspection and isolation fostered by the printed word”. He goes on to say: “Stated in the most dramatic terms, the accusation can be made that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity. It creates a culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living.... When institutions are threatened, a culture finds itself in crisis” (1993: xiii).

Liberators have argued that media critics feed this moral panic about new media and children and impose their own postdated values onto a cultural change, which is itself, progressive. The liberators advocate a more hands off approach to children’s culture and

media industries. They want adults to lighten up a bit, preferring to grant to children's cultural industries more autonomy in serving their child audiences free from the invasive interference of the moralizers. Liberators adopt a laissez faire attitude sometimes championing postwar American attitudes to socialization as they encourage children be freer to explore their world from their own position. However ribald and aggressive is at least more in keeping with their own values and needs. Liberators thus dismiss the moralizers 'alarmism' as just a recurring "moral panic" grounded in either zealous rectitude or bourgeois guilt. They scoff at the prior generations of moralizers who have sought to protect children from the evil influences of idleness, comics, or video nasties and write articles urging parents to accept the values and aesthetics of an expanding domain of postmodern media (Cumberback, 1993). It is the paternalism of traditional cultural values, they argue, which perpetuates a limp and sanitized children's media, and which doesn't respect children's genuine quest for more varied and less conventional forms of re-creation and amusement.

If nothing else as Drotner (1992) says, these recurring panics about media and the culture remind us that our ideas about children's culture remain a contentious and politicized zone - media are a contested means of "social regulation". This is because as Drotner observes: "Children and young people are prime objects of media panics not merely because they are often media pioneers; not merely because they challenge social and cultural power relations, nor because they symbolise ideological rifts. They are panic targets just as much because they inevitably represent experiences and emotions that are irrevocably lost to adults." (1992: 59). Enter the kids' media zone warily and self reflexively she notes. With Drotner I believe that both the attitudes towards our children's media that underwrites moral panic and the cultural dynamic itself is a serious topic that requires dissection. Indeed it is impossible to study of cultural industries without recognizing the contested politics of children's culture, which animates these debates in the postmodern era.

Moral Panic and Media Markets

In my work on children's TV I noted that the politics of children's television changed when the regulatory structures for US children's television advertising were discarded and the

world of children's television was dramatically changed. Because children (under 12 years) at least were regarded as 'vulnerable' consumers, and incapable of formulating rational choice, most countries had protected them from the persuasive force of television marketing. In Canada for example, there was a self-regulatory system in place, and in Quebec an outright ban on advertising to children. In America, the TV industry was engaged in a long fight between policy makers protecting kids (FTC and FCC) and the children's goods marketers who agitated to be allowed to market their goods (mostly snacks, soft drinks, toys and cereals) directly to children in the most effective way possible.

Out of the Garden (1993) focuses on toy marketers who in the wake of deregulation, became the most and dynamic children's advertisers of the 1980's and pioneers of synergistic marketing strategies. In that book I detailed the new thinking that underwrites the targeting of children by the toy companies as they gradually shifted over to cross marketing strategies in which the ads become the front end of saturation campaigns, which flood multiple media channels to optimize exposure to their superhero, fashion and plush toy characters. And as direct to children's toy advertising expenditures grew, so too marketing focused on children has matured and expanded into a very complex synergistic communication practice focusing on 'character toys' and cross marketing opportunism. Children's media became a more hotly contested zone of postmodern culture, as parents resisted the growing influence of children's marketers on their children's lives. Successive generations of young boys were inducted into the joys of fantasy play by *He-Man*, *G.I. Joe*, *Ninja Turtles* and *Power Rangers*. And children's animated TV veered in the direction of war and aggression.

It was the emergence of the action hero warrior character that most agitated parents and renewed critics concerns about media saturation—although perhaps for different reasons than the earlier taste panics of the "vast wasteland" debates. In 1986-87 Hasbro launched a series called the In-Humanoids with an accompanying set of action figures. The series had combined the horror and action hero genres to provide a slightly different and more daring back-story to that season's new show. This new programme was reasonably popular with young boys; yet those that watched it began waking up with nightmares, and when their parents went to their rooms they found the boys dreams were populated with

characters and scenes from the *Inhumanoids*. A number of mothers actually called up their local stations, in sufficient enough numbers that the message got through to syndicates that there was a problem with this programme. It was withdrawn. I point out that this minor revolt against a disturbing programme although a byproduct of the organized action by activist campaigners (ACT) was not directly mobilized by it. The withdrawing of *Inhumanoids* was a grass root uprising comprised mainly of concerned moms mostly that experienced the effects of TV within their lives. My own entrée into these debates began as *Star Wars*, *GI Joe* and *Inhumanoids* invaded my own living room and disturbed the sleep of my own son.

It seems that even in a free enterprise age, parents remained concerned about the changes taking place in television programming and its effects on their children's fantasy life and play. Indeed in Canada, a grass roots movement against violence started 1989 by the mass murder of university women by a man fascinated by *Rambo* gained force through the 1990's as incidents in the playground with children kicking and hurting each other with *Ninja Turtle* sticks and *Power Ranger* kicks. Surveys revealed that 90% of Canadian parents expressed strong concerns about reducing violence in children's media and limiting the commercialization and advertising, a clear sign even to the Conservative governments of the 1990's that there was a need to do something.

Deregulation of TV was a political act whose implications for children's culture became the rallying point of those who struggled against commercial exploitation of children—and the growing role that marketing to children plays in shaping the world's media systems. The new critics and advocates (CMA/CME) re-focused their arguments away from the question of quality towards the biases of commercialization of media. A particular point of contention involved the imitative modeling of violent behaviour by very young children of the action warrior cartoons, which were most popular with the under 7's — because they were deemed to be most vulnerable. The advocates have been remarkably successful in achieving the mandatory v-chip and the revisions to the *Children's Television Act* (USA) because of this growing weight of public opinion (Stanger and Grindina, 1999). Some liberators point out how well organized the anti-TV advocates have become noting that these restrictive policies go against the grain of evidence that children in reality are no more violent today than twenty years ago. But

even if they are right, this doesn't mean we can dismiss the mobilization of public concern around media issues. The phenomenon of moral panic is itself of interest precisely because it is not just about differences in academic positions but because the issues still have enough resonance with the public to mobilize action.

Media Panic, Gender Dynamics and the Violence Debates

In my own work I have slyly tried to evade the debates about media violence, because they seemed to miss the point about commercialization, and the reasons the media industries produced violent programming in the first place. I recently interviewed a sample of mothers raising young boys between the ages of 3 and 6 years of concerning their views and family practices in relation to superhero media. I was interested in how mothers dealt with their sons' interest in action toys. Although I don't want to detail this piece of work here, I do want to note that mothers of 3 year old boys seemed especially concerned about the effects of TV on their kids. Except for the small percentage that did not allow TV or war toys into their households, all referred to incidents in which they saw their lads "act out" in some way the aggressive behaviour they witnessed on TV. What I found especially interesting in these interviews was how many of these moms claimed to have become very worried and alarmed about what they saw as 'male aggressiveness' and how they often talked of a struggle with the child's father about this. In their minds, the interest in the action hero cartoons, the banging of toys, and the wildly energetic mock battles or actual attacks was associated with their son's coming out 'as males'. Their concerns focused on the linking of gender and aggressiveness. It was as if these moms were horror struck by the fact that their darling children were indeed of a different sex.¹ Many reported adopting a restrictive approach to violent TV programmes and play as a result of these observations. But gradually over time, many came to accept male aggression as simply typical boy behaviour. They seemed to get over their initial panic.

Parents are in fact interesting observers of their young children's behaviour. By dismissing their concerns as bourgeois moralizing, and excluding them from our

¹ This is an observation that I had never made about my son, but did when my daughter refused to wear anything but dresses.

examination of children's media issues we fail to reflect on what they can tell us about how TV influences children. I believe they were observing something very important about the effects of contemporary media—from age 3 up males are targeted exclusively with action hero adventures because that is what sells action toys. In other words, their concerns about violent play culture was not just an act of moralizing as grounded in real observations. Maybe taking a leaf out of the “mass observation” methodology we might be a little more interested in parents concerns about how media impacts on and are used by their children.

New Media Panics

Clearly our debates about postmodern childhood are adjusting to the changing media environments and the rise of interactive media like video games. Digitalization has extended the capacities of the global media industries by adding interactivity to television. To today's youths, *Commander Keen* and *Crash Bandicoot* are as familiar as *Mickey Mouse* and *Ninja Turtles* were in previous generations reflecting the current corporate repositioning around the digital channels of communication distribution. The \$100 million launch of the *SEGA Dreamcast* in North America in 1999 reminds us that the video game industry is fast becoming the most active and dynamic merchandisers of entertainment products to the young with promotional budgets exceeding those of the toy or movie industries. Digital entertainment has already won 30% of the US playthings market, earning 18\$ billion globally in 1999. By 1995 this increasing share of entertainment spending larger than the Hollywood box-office gross (\$5.2 billion) and ten times the amount spent on the production of children's television (Haynes and Dinsey, 1995). And with the increasing push of global marketing campaigns video game culture has been developing a similar loyal following around the world. Mostly young and male—who prefer interacting with avatars in cyberspace to ‘vegging-out’ in front of the television, hanging around with friends or playing street sports. Recent studies of children's media use have documented that a global gamer culture focused on digital adventure is taking shape around interactive entertainment technologies. (Livingstone, 1999).

Negroponte (1995) assures us that new media have set our children's culture on a positive

trajectory:

We are not waiting on any invention. It is here. It is now. It is almost genetic in its nature, in that each generation will become more digital than the proceeding one. The control bits of that digital future are more than ever before in the hands of the young. Nothing could make me happier (231).

Douglas Rushkoff in *Media Virus* (1994) similarly writes optimistically about the effects of this new wave of interactive entertainment on youth: “While their parents may condemn Nintendo as mindless and masterbatory, kids who have mastered video gaming early on stand a better chance of exploiting the real but mediated inter-activity that will make itself available to them by the time they hit techno-puberty in their teens”. (1996: 31). He quotes Timothy Leary to support his optimism about interactivity: “The importance of the Nintendo phenomenon is about equal to that of the Gutenberg Printing press. Here you had a new generation of kids who grew up knowing that they could change what’s on the screen.” (30) This enthusiasm for technology has been forged into a promotional strategy for technologizing children’s socialization, as digital megacorps promise a pedagogical revolution of ‘interactive multimedia’ⁱ:

multimedia has the potential to revolutionize certain aspects of how educators manage education... TV in its time was going to do the same thing. They didn’t because they couldn’t. Unlike these earlier technologies, multimedia is interactive. It has the ability therefore to replicate some teacher/learner interaction. It also has the ability to link the student with tutors, his or her peers in other places, and with remote sources of information.” (Telstra, 1994: 1)

A House Ablaze?

Allequire Stone (1995) argues that we have very little understanding of the unique features of interactivity that make video gaming a unique cultural experience comparing our ignorance about this medium “to holding a cocktail party in a house that is already ablaze”. Stone attributes this oversight to the feeling on the part of many academics that computer games are inherently educational, or on the other hand, as an entertainment medium beneath serious contemplation. Stone is right. Yet despite its ascent as the fastest growing and most profitable entertainment industry, there is remarkably little commentary on the development and acceptance of this new medium -- on the range of games and their ratings, let alone studies of their impact on children’s socialization and growth—especially when it comes to the question of violence. Compared with television,

academic research on the impact of video games on young people amounts to little more than cocktail party chitchat. Reviewing this literature one finds that there are almost as many reviews as there are original studies on this question of video games and aggression in youth.

We also note that in spite of the digerati's assurances this new media is becoming increasingly discussed in terms those long standing panics surrounding children's media culture. Unfortunately it has taken a series of school shootings in Puducuh, Jonesboro and Littleton, in the USA, and in Tabart, Alberta to return the malaise in North America's entertainment industries into the public limelight. Bathed in a maniacal aggressiveness, filled with a postmodern cynicism and urging a new tribalism of virtual comradery, the contemporary multimedia entertainment industries have once again caught the eye of the popular press when some avid video gamers on the fringe of their school's social life set out to exact vengeance on their peers. Anyone who looks at the content of some of the entertainment experiences that this industry is promoting may understand the sense of anxiety that underscored Provenzo's (1991) assessment of this growing force in children's lives:

If the video game industry is going to provide the foundation for the development of interactive television, then concerned parents and educators have cause for considerable alarm. During the past decade, the video game industry has developed games whose social content has been overwhelmingly violent, sexist, and even racist. (1991: 105). Perhaps this recent ad for a PC graphics accelerator that enables arcade quality video game play on the domestic PC says it all:

We have in our possession a chip. A chip that could revolutionize medicine as we know it. By performing a hundred billion operations a second this chip could help us heal across continents. We could touch more lives help people live longer than ever. And give us all more time to cherish the journeys truest rewards. But then we thought Lets use it for games ... three D effects PC accelerators ... its so powerful its kind a ridiculous! (you know that game's a little violent for my taste) (3DFX ad, 1999)

The renewed moral panic about the culture of violence has involved many academics in the public debates about the postmodern media environment. As Henry Jenkins (1999) recently stated: "when the Littleton shootings occurred calls from the media "increased dramatically". Many of us found ourselves in front of the television cameras trying to make sense of the video game industry and its impact on youth cultures. Henry Jenkins

account of his appearance in a Senate committee hearing where he finds himself lined up against a set of seasoned anti-violence advocates is a sign of things to come: “Suddenly, we are finding ourselves in a national witch hunt to determine which form of popular culture is to blame for the mass murders and video games seemed like a better candidate than most” he says. Jenkins rebuffs this growing hysteria about video game violence as a witch hunt arguing: “We are afraid of our children. We are afraid of their reactions to digital media. And we suddenly can’t avoid either”.

Like Henry Jenkins, many media analysts will find themselves sucked into the vortex of these debates about violence. But unlike Drotner (1992), I suspect there is more at stake than just our own nostalgia for our waning conception of childhood innocence. Jenkins is right in noting that media industries themselves are part of this ‘witch hunt’ mentality that envelopes the political struggle over family and social values — in part because the battle concerns the state’s regulation of these cultural industries. And as Jenkins observes, the emotional underpinning of moral panic is shifting from nostalgia and anxiety to fear and loathing—a panic, which may make thoughtful debate harder to come by.

Video Games and Male Aggression

Indeed the recent outbreaks in America and Canada of youth rage against school mates has once again raised the alarms about a new moral panic related to youth and media: But rather than violence in television and war toys, the moral panic gathering force is focusing on violent video games. The comparisons of video games with television are obvious, to both researchers and parents. The video game represents the point of convergence of the twentieth century’s two most important communication technologies—the computer’s interactivity with television’s powerful story telling. Eugene Provenzo (1991) argued that this new “interactive medium as different from traditional televisions as television is from radio.” He goes on to predict that “The remaining years of this decade will see the emergence and definition of this new media form in much the same way the late 1940’s and early 1950’s saw television emerge as a powerful social and cultural force. (1991: 105) Yet we are far from clear about this fusion of TV’s spectatorship with cybernetic play control.

Hybridity — the key characteristic of this new medium is confusing. Interactivity is the

hoped for magic bullet for educators seeking to break down the traditions of rote learning. Yet although the interactivity makes this medium even more ‘dynamic’ and ‘engaging’, the contents and themes of these games and entertainments appear to be extensions of escapist TV fare at its worst. A quick look at *Messiah*, *Resident Evil II* or *Splatterhouse*, will leave anyone wondering whether we really have transcended the age of television in this new digital playground when so much of the contents promote testosterone fantasy and grotesquely cartooned violence. And here lies the confusion for the promise of the media is based on abstract notions of interactivity will the concern be based on the obvious similarity of its content with aggressive television and films. Media researchers are once again facing heated debates about the consequences of this interactive play medium without understanding very much about the unique “entertainment experience” it produces—an experience which for many kids has already changed how they allocate and spend their leisure time. Stone argues “it is entirely possible that computer-based games will turn out to be the major unacknowledged source of socialization and education in industrialized countries before the 1990s have run their course” (1995:6-27). Moreover, much of the research has been undertaken in the context of schools use of educational video games (Greenfield, 1996) with little regard for the growth of an arcade and domestic videogame culture mostly among young males (Funk and Lowe, 1993). Yet as Mark Griffiths (1999) notes it is because they are effective in training recruits to the armed forces that many critics are becoming concerned about this medium.

Perhaps not coincidentally Jonesboro was also the place where Dave Grossman author of *On Killing* (1995) and a leading critic of violent video games had retired. Grossman was a lieutenant colonel who had devoted his career to figuring out how to train soldiers to kill. Recently he has become a leading US critic of the interactive entertainment industry arguing that “the main concern is that these violent video games are providing military quality training to children.” Like the training of these soldiers, Grossman believes that violent video games may have a similar effect on young people who play them a lot, not because they create models or templates for children’s behaviour, but because they help break down the psychological barriers that prevent killing: “children don’t naturally kill; they learn it from violence in the home and...from violence as entertainment in

television, movies and interactive video games.”. Like in the army, the repeated shooting at targets in the video games may not only enhance weapons skills, but also desensitize some young people to the horror of killing by turning enemies into targets. Like the soldiers, with constant practice, players of violent video games will eventually have extremely low or even no empathy towards victims of violence. The engagement process from video games will decrease the players’ empathy and negative reaction towards violent acts. The disturbing blend of participation, engagement, rewards and practice that video games encourage, is a perfect instructional environment. One of the central thrusts of Grossman’s argument is that we see the rise of violent video gaming as more of a concern than violence in movies and on television. In other words, aggression training is more effective to the degree it is experienced as not really violent – even pleasurable and enjoyable as playful entertainment—which is the case for most gamers.

And this moral panic has recently spread to Canada. In a recent case where five teens were accused of brutally murdering an 81 year old woman in her home, the press reported statements by the town mayor who claimed “Young people play Nintendo with scenes of violence and flowing blood”. The article also cites “A group of local teenaged boys who hung around with one of those charged said the boy in recent months became increasingly withdrawn, spending hours playing video games or surfing the net on his home computer. “He used to get into crazy Web sites – murder, pedophilia, there were no exceptions,” said one boy in a baseball cap and cargo pants. “It’s like there were fantasies at work” (Globe & Mail, 1999: A3). Grossman’s arguments are obviously contributing to the escalating political struggle over video games worldwide. But they may also help to galvanize some much-needed research into how video games influence kids. As a retired US army officer, Grossman is well positioned to comment on the similarity between the tactics used in the army to train soldiers and they use of violent video games among children today. The US military has long used simulation training for its soldiers because the “repetition and desensitization” of simulated killing effects kill rates (the actual percentage of soldiers that will pull the trigger in real life combat).

Grossman has trained elite fighting soldiers and police officers how to kill by adapting fighting simulations for training purposes. What they found was that by eliminating the blood, gore and emotions of the ‘victims’ on the computer screen, the soldiers begin to

treat their training as more of a game. According to Grossman, the soldier's training is designed to be both practical and psychological. Simulation training enhances familiarity and physical skills with weapons while decreasing the soldiers' empathy towards their enemies. By firing at the computer simulated images of enemies who die without blood and gore, the fighting simulation can sharpen the marksmanship of these soldiers at the same time it trains them to see enemies as targets rather than humans. In desensitizing the soldier to the act of killing the trainee becomes more capable of actually pulling the trigger effectively (Discovery Channel). It also shifts researchers attention to the cognitive and emotional mechanisms by which shooting is rehearsed by video game players and dis-inhibited by emotional numbing through fantasized killing acts. But Grossman's research is not based on examining how extensive video game play influences children.

There does exist a small and slowly growing body of evidence concerning the potential negative effects of aggressive video games. Subsuming Bandura's (1986) social learning paradigm most is focused on whether video games are likely to intensify the modeling of violent behaviors:

Furthermore, the interactive nature of video games may increase the learning of game playing behaviors, including aggression, especially considering the move towards real-life action and actors in the newer generation of video games. This increasing realism might encourage greater identification with characters and more imitation of the behaviors of video game models.

Pursuing this idea, Durkin's (1995) review of these early studies for the Australian Broadcasting Authority acknowledges that like television, violence in interactive entertainment is parents prime concern—but he concludes that there is no scientific basis to substantiate this. There are a few studies which demonstrate the possibility of social learning from video games he acknowledges, but this constitutes very limited evidence concerning the causation of aggressiveness: “evidence does not lend strong support to the suggestion that computer game play promotes aggression in children”. Overall he concludes, “although the research is not exhaustive and by no means conclusive, it indicates that the stronger negative claims are not supported. Computer games have not led to the development of a generation of isolated, antisocial, compulsive computer users

with strong propensities for aggression” (1995: 71). To the contrary, some evidence indicates that there may be cognitive and perceptual-motor skill gains as a result of computer game practice...reviving patterns of family togetherness in leisure”.

Durkin notes two reasons why video game play may not result in violent behavior in kids: Firstly, by age 8 most kids understand the ‘virtual’ nature of video games and therefore the aggressive behaviors enacted in video games are playful and cognitively distinct from real aggressive behaviors in daily conflicts or interactions. One of the key problems in attempts to compare the effects of television violence and that of video game play is the difference between playing and watching: “Identification is a complex process that has been scarcely studied in relationship to computer game play, especially in respect of aggressive content”. Secondly, many heavy players report that they enjoy the experience of conflict and competition—because playing makes them happy and relaxed rather than angry and hostile it is not likely to result in aggression.

In a more recent review, Durkin and Lowe (1998) notes that problems in research methods makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on video games contribution to violent behavior: “there were only a small number of studies and these had yielded weak or inconsistent findings” (1998: 111). In this overview of recent Australian research he notes that the limitations in design and measurement of effects are serious. Even more recent studies in Australia he reports reveal “aggressive responses not inevitable from playing video games” (112) studies often confuse conflict with aggression, and hostile feelings with aggressive behavior. Durkin notes that laboratory studies of effects are especially inconsistent in their results. Moreover, as in television research generally the correlation between judged aggressiveness and time spent playing video games is confounded by interpretations of causal direction. Durkin also notes that most of the original research into the effects which utilized earlier gaming technologies whose graphic capacity and game control bear little resemblance to the current and coming generations of young gamers.

Funk et al. (1996) reviewing the same body of literature note the positive health, educational and therapeutic implications of video games stating that “edutainment is one of the most positive applications of electronic games, but one whose impact has yet to be demonstrated through longitudinal research” (1996: 117). They go on to say that many

are more concerned about violent video games than films because “on a theoretical basis playing violent electronic games may influence behavior through observational learning, practice and reinforcement... the critical dimension of active participation may increase the impact of electronic games relative to time spent” (1996: 120-121). “Surveys have identified various negative correlations between playing electronic games and various target measures such as aggression and self-concept” yet these results are correlational “and do not at this point establish causality. As a whole however laboratory and survey results suggest that game-playing particularly playing violent games, may not be entirely benign for all players” (124). But Funk and Buchman have also noted there is consistent evidence of gender differences in use and response to video games, as well as in aggressive predisposition which create problems for generalizing the effects of playing violent video games.

Griffiths (1999) in his recent review concludes similarly, but is scathing about the design and measurement issues arguing that “all the published studies on video game violence have methodological problems and that they only include possible short-term measures of aggressive consequences”. Differentiating between the modeling and catharsis explanations is especially difficult in correlational studies using self-report measures of hostility he notes, and because subjects vary in their predisposition to aggressiveness. He argues that not all video games are violent or aggressive. There is confusion in the literature between cartoon like violence and more realistic games (as in TV shows) and also between competitive hostility (sports or racing) and aggressive contest (fighting, shooting). There is therefore “a need for a general taxonomy of video games as it could be the case that particular games have very positive effects while other types are not so positive”. (1999: 210) Griffiths also comments that “the one consistent finding is that the majority of the studies on very young children – as opposed to those in their teens upwards-tend to show that children do become more aggressive after either playing or watching a violent video game”. based on a method observing children’s ‘free play’. The demonstrated effects are not on aggressive social interaction but on play.

Dill and Dill (1998) in their review of the same literature weigh the evidence similarly: “overall the majority of investigations have supported the predicted relationship between violent video game or violent virtual reality play and increases in aggression or

aggression related outcomes... two studies show decreased pro-social behavior as a function of violent video game play". Dill and Dill (1998) have noted that only four studies have used "state of the art video games" and three did show effects on "aggressive behavior, hostility or aggressive thoughts ". So they conclude: "The preponderance of the evidence from the existing literature suggests that exposure to video game violence increases aggressive behavior and other aggression –related phenomenon. However, the paucity of empirical data coupled with a variety of methodological problems and inconsistencies in these data, clearly demonstrate the need for additional research." Dill and Dill go on to cite the same reservations about this research. Durkin and Lowe note: "Precious few true experiments have been done to assess the effects of playing violent video games on aggression-related outcomes; too much has focused on very young children and used 'aggressive free play"; the studies of "aggressive affect studies often uses undergraduates" (1998:420). Moreover there is a failure to deal with the gender differences cogently, to properly theorize the aggression effect or distinguish between hostile feelings, aggressive thoughts and fantasies and behavior. As they conclude "there are a number of methodological problems in this literature, the majority of which were in efforts that found no differences or that failed to support their own hypotheses." (Durkin and Lowe, 1998).

Dill and Dill also see the need for a more sophisticated theorization of the effects of media – one which might better accommodate the growing diversity and realism of contemporary video games, the sophistication of our understanding of social learning, the gender and other individual differences that lead to susceptibility, and other external factors that mediate the processes of aggressiveness. Dill and Dill note the growing complexity in the theorization of TV violence arguing "A similar relationship should exist because the same conceptual variables are involved. Specifically video game violence effects should operate through elaboration and priming of aggressive thought networks, weakening of inhibitions against antisocial behavior, modeling, reinforcement, decreased empathy for others and the creation of a more violent world view" as well as the possibility of catharsis and arousal effects (1998:409). They go on to note that following Huesman et. al. (1997) playing violent games may prime by either exposing children to aggression which "can trigger related feeling and can bring to mind

knowledge of aggression related skills, memories and beliefs “ or which “weakens inhibitions against engaging in aggressive behavior ... changing individual perception of what is normal or acceptable behavior” (Dill and Dill, 1998). Noting the video games generally reward violent responses they note this may lead children to “chose aggressive responses to conflict situations in their own lives”. Dill and Dill also note that the increasing realism in the games is of consequence because the similarity of aggressive clues “most particularly the weapons, and moves used in fighting can be translated into real life”. As they state :“the child playing an aggressive video game may learn that hitting or even shooting another person is the appropriate response in a conflict situation and that this type of aggression is likely to be reinforced” (1998: 410).

Dill and Dill also note that the active participation of video game play where players choose and then manipulate characters from first person point of view may accentuate the identification with he aggressor: “Identification with the video game character may be stronger than identification with television or movie characters, in part because players choose a character and play the characters role in the video game scenario” (1998: 413). For this reason desensitization effects may be accentuated: “Empathy has been found to be low among known aggressors than non-aggressive and the degree that plots justify the aggression “if violent video games depicts victims as deserving attacks and if these video games tend to portray other humans as targets then reduced empathy is likely to be a consequence of violent video game play”. Dill and Dill observe that many of the problems in these studies arise from limited theorization of the differences between video game play and television watching. Three general issues arise from this literature: the difference between watching TV and playing video games; the need for new research that recognizes that video games have dramatically changed; and a need for an expanded theory of how playing aggressive games may have long term effects on children.

Kline (1998) has noted researchers must understand the tremendous growth and sophistication of the video game industry. Early studies of video game “effects” involving *Pac Man*, *Space Invaders* and even racing games are so primitive that few researchers now consider them relevant to today’s much more realistic, more dynamic and much more ‘violent’ games. As Herz (1997) also notes “Games like *Streetfighter* and *Mortal Kombat* are generations away” from those designed in the 1980’s. “They’ve

catapulted from total abstraction to full frontal gore and realism”. Kline (1997) argued a new ‘action adventure’ meta-genre of video games has emerged as game designers learned to target their primary audience of male aficionado’s with more intensely engaging games. The newer games often combine elements of fighting with other forms of competition for example racing and sports games that involve fighting – and the new action conflict fighting games have become the leading the sellers for both home PC and console games in north America. From interviews with game designers he notices how they focused on producing games with good graphics, lots of action, and play control that increased immersion and intensity of the play experience. Games like *Golden Eye* in which depending where you shoot the approaching enemy soldier (knee or shoulder) the avatar dies differently. And it is the specter of the evolving game systems and emerging game genres that use first person point of view to situate an imaginary player within a simulated brutal environment that has drawn the attention of US senators and regulators. Games like *Syphon Filter* (a recent top 10 selling game for the PlayStation captures the:

The action unfolds with heated non-stop gunfire...a conspiracy that deepens as the bodycount rises. Plunge into this suspenseful thriller where enemies are taken on in a hail of bullets or taken out with a stealthy click of the silencer’s trigger.

Noting the historical shift of popular arcade games to the home systems taking place in the early 1990’s with the successful promotion of Nintendo (NES) and Sega 16bit systems de Waal (1995) states that “within the technological cycle of obsolescence and new technology there remains a continuous stream of development. The primary male audience and the violent games they enjoy are continually developed, moving from one video game platform to another.” De Waal predicts that games will continue to become more violent.

The violent characteristic of video games is likely to remain due to structural industry constraints. New game platforms are in development to create even more realistic three-dimensional fighting games patterned on the concept of the *Mortal Kombat* type game. The industry has found a solid money-generating machine in the fighting game. As my study demonstrated, these violent games provide a dramatic focus of excitement for the player.

He therefore undertook a study of the physiological responses of 28 players while playing a violent (*Mortal Kombat*) and an adventure (*Bubsy*) game using the *ICARUS* system to

simultaneously monitor blood flow, heart rate EMG and galvanic skin responses (GSR) of two youths alternating between playing and watching each game in sessions of up to 10 minutes.

Through a video record of the sessions de Waal was able to monitor social interaction between them, as well as construct a time based record of game events (kills, mistakes etc.). He also pre-interviewed his subjects asking them about their play histories, and play preferences as well questioning them about their play experiences after the sessions. The factorial design allowed de Waal to compare violent and non-violent play experiences, as well as different subjects playing and watching the same game. This study demonstrates potentially different physiological response to video games between male and female subjects whose heart rate readings were consistently and significantly higher than those of their male counterparts do – but differed between playing and watching only for the violent game. Heart rate and blood flow provided clear evidence that playing was more exciting than watching for all male subjects across games and that playing and watching violent games is more arousing than playing and watching adventure games. Moreover males were relatively less excited by the violent games than females. The GSR readings only reflected a gender difference when playing *Mortal Kombat*.

		Playing Video Games	Watching Video Games
Boys	Mortal Kombat	121	87.5
	Bubsy	102	90
	Boys Total		
Girls	Mortal Kombat	157	135
	Bubsy	120	118
Totals	Mortal Kombat	126	93
	Bubsy	105	94

De Waal states: “This study clearly shows that video game players are experiencing significantly different levels of excitement and arousal between playing and watching conditions.... This would suggest that the content of the video game is secondary to the interactivity” (1995). Yet “players’ reactions to the two different games were almost

identical when watching, yet quite different when playing”, so one is forced to “re-examine the role of content in interactive media.” Noting his subjects expressed a general excitement and desire to play with friends whenever possible De Waal suggests the next research step would be to compare the physiological reaction of solitary play to multi-player play.” De Waal goes on to note that kills were rarely mentioned as motivational: Score was not a motivating factor to play. Players expressed advancing in levels, solving problems and life left as the primary forms of gauging their progress through a game. These factors, not score provided motivation and desire to continue playing. Once a player passes all the levels of a game, their interest and motivation to play disappears or is sharply reduced” unless a game that can produce the same emotional intensity is discovered. The de Waal study indicates that the structure of conflict and challenge of violent games is the key to their appeal. But the same intensity that makes the gamer want more violent games can also be experienced as frustrating and overwhelming by female players or those less skilled or habituated to such intense experiences. The implication of this finding are consonant with an emotional desensitization effect and also suggests that there is greater need to understand why heavy gamers play them and how they experience the various representations of conflict.

Kline (1998) also notes that interactivity has also enabled game designers to ‘narrativize’ the conflict situation and context with more complex and vivid lifelike graphics, more complete character backstory’s, and by adding elements of voice and character construction from role play games. The implications of this new narrativity makes game play less like solving puzzles and more like a participatory experience in a conflict situation. Video games are not just about representation of conflict as much as about experiencing it. Immersion defines the paradoxical quality of gaming experience in which realism is heightened by disbelief – a perception which Herz argues arises from a kind of social contract in which as a player “you have accepted the designers values and assumptions, at least for the duration of the game... .. Once you’re in the game, you’ve agreed to let someone else define the parameters” (1997: 223) Kline (1998) notes that the latest generation of games have seen new qualities of immersion which arise from designs which allow players the illusion of reality through navigation, choice of characters, settings and point of view all of which strengthen role taking and

identification.

Ask the Gamers

The inadequacies of this Bandura modeling hypothesis and previous research designs for understanding the implications of contemporary video gaming and its relationship to violence is apparent to all. As Griffith concludes: “the question of whether video games promote aggressiveness cannot be answered at the present because the available literature is relatively sparse and conflicting, and there are many different types of video games which probably have different effects”. He notes

it is evident that video games can have both positive and negative aspects. If care is taken in the design, and if games are put in the right context, they have the potential to be used as training aids in classrooms and therapeutic settings, and to provide skills in psychomotor coordination in simulations of real life events, for example, training recruits for the armed forces. (1999)

In fact the way we should interpret survey studies of kids play and violence is a hotly contested issue because correlations cannot reveal the causal relations between gender, amount of violent play and aggressiveness or hostility that researchers measure. As in the TV violence issue the confounding of aggressive predisposition with preferences for aggressive entertainment make it hard to explain either correlations or their absence. As Dill and Dill (1998) note the correlation between aggressiveness and video game play might have 1) a social learning explanation – video games cause aggression (or its absence indicates catharsis); 2) a disposition explanation – aggressive disposition leads to preference for more violent video game play; or 3) relate to an underlying factor (low self esteem, social isolation) which leads to both aggressiveness and video game play. But one thing becomes clear from just about all these studies: Experiencing intense and virtual conflict seems to be an attractive play experience for many males—an experience that heavy gamers seek and that most young females avoid (Kubey, 1996; Goldstein, 1998).

As Jukes and Goldstein (1993) have noted there is strong evidence that boys develop a preference for aggressive toys and games and that this is related to arousal levels and chronic aggressiveness. “Highly aggressive boys find war toys more appealing than other

toys - and prefer violent sports films and video games and television programs” (Goldstein, 1999). “Both war and war play may reflect the prevailing values of the cultures in which they flourish, values that stress aggression, assertion and dominance”.. Given the consistent evidence of gender differences in both aggressiveness and play preferences, correlations are theoretically problematic for media effects surveys Goldstein (1999) notes, because it confuses issues of male aggressiveness and male entertainment preferences with those of media effects. Commenting on the evidence of a relationship between aggressive play and war in children Goldstein notes: “The reasoning underlying this research is that exposure to violence activates aggressive associations and images. These in turn heighten the preference for further exposure to violence. “ (1999: 59). The implications are that we need to better understand the developmental processes through which aggressiveness is socialized.

Two things strike me about this literature generally. First that age and accumulated experience with highly aggressive game play must be considered a mediating factor in the assessment of consequences. And two, that the consequences whatever they are will not be noticed in real aggression but in fantasy life, emotionality and play preferences of heavy gamers—yet we have a very limited psychology of interactive play. Goldstein argues similarly that it is crucial to understand why and how young males develop their preferences for violent entertainment generally. Real violence is different from play violence he notes because there is the absence of intent to hurt another. Entertainment violence is consumed for distraction and mood management, to increase excitement and arousal, and to express emotions. Goldstein believes therefore that we must differentiate between violence experienced for its own sake and violence experienced as play and entertainment. “Individuals differ in their need for excitement and tolerance for stimulation. Those with a moderately high need for sensation find portrayals of violence more enjoyable than those with a lesser need”. He cites a number of studies that reveal that enjoyment is the male response to violent entertainment, not hostility: “in order to experience anything like pleasure from exposure to violent or threatening images, the audience must feel relatively safe and secure in their surroundings”. Further more there must be cues that the violent images are produced for purposes of entertainment and consumption”. In relation to video game violence he believes that interactivity may make

video games seem less violent than similar images in film: ‘because video gamers have more control over the images perhaps the effects of violent images are reduced’.

(Goldstein 1998: 60)

Kline (1997) argues that the promotional hype about computers and video games has led many parents to see interactive media as harmless. Kline concludes that in the light of promotional publicity surrounding computers it “is not surprising that many parents adopt an uncritical attitude towards video game play” which they see as emphasizing computer literacy. Less than 25% of the teens had experienced restrictions from their families with regard to video game whereas 43% had television restrictions. Most of those restrictions were concerned with homework, or the lateness and duration of the play rather than the content of the games and heavy players were no more likely to experience censorship than light players. Kline notes that like US and Australian parents (Sneed and Runco, 1992; Cupitt and Stockbridge, 1995) Canadians do not monitor their children’s video game play and generally think that computers are good for children.

Kline (1998) has recently documented the highly gendered role that action packed video games play in young peoples lives which he thinks constitutes an important new sub-culture of youth. Based on his survey of 650 students aged 11-18 found that although 93% of his sample had played video games, and 24% were heavy players. These heavy players were disproportionately male (32% of males 8% of females were “gamers” playing 1 hour per day or more). Light players (11 percent) and moderate players (24 percent) said that they had few friends who played video games while heavy players were split 49 said they played games with lots or most of their friends and 51 percent playing with few of their friends (Table 67). There were striking differences in the leisure preferences and activities of these gamers.

Table 59: Rank order of favorite solitary activities by gamer.

Light players n=322		Moderate players n=141		Heavy players n=131	
Activity	%	Activity	%	Activity	%
Listening to music	30	Watching TV	22	Video games	41
Outdoor activities	27	Video games	23	Watching TV	25
Watching TV	25	Listening to music	21	Listening to music	15

Video games	8	Outdoor activities	17	Outdoor activities	13
Reading	8	Reading	9	Reading	3

The male gamers were especially electronic in their entertainment preferences watching an average of 20 hours of television a week, almost double the amount that moderate and light players watched. Keeping in mind that heavy players were those that spent at least 7 hours a week playing games, the combined activities of television and video game play took up nearly 30 hours per week, if not more. For these individuals, viewership and gaming complemented each other and most likely occupied the majority of their leisure time. It was also the case the male heavy players preferred the cartoon genre on TV suggesting a graphic link that was important. Kline (1997) speculates that

What seems to differentiate the gamer is the absence of friends and alternative leisure opportunities; heavy gamers resort to solitary media for distraction and entertainment. Our evidence is rather limited on this point but, clearly, video games are an activity, which, like watching TV and videos, is something kids prefer to do when they have no other more social options. Family and sibling play is infrequent, mostly involves playing with brothers, and is more frequent in the occasional player groups.

Solitary video game play is especially attractive to the younger high school age males who are most interested in the great graphics, cool characters and exciting distractions this medium provides. Their favorite games are the ones that most create the combined experience of action, fantasy and simulation. A good game must have most of these attributes, although the heaviest players privileged action, fighting and cool themes. Older males often report a decrease in both their fascinations with video games and time spent in video game play as other social activities outside the home begin to attract them more.

Although most children rate video games positively, gamers find this form of play extremely pleasurable and involving. They said that playing video games was exciting (98 percent of heavy players), interesting (96 percent), pleasant (92 percent) and involving (90 percent). 60 percent of the heavy players characterized gaming as *very* pleasurable (10 a) and *very* exciting (10 b) compared to 30 percent of light players and 40

percent of moderate players. Heavy players also found game play to be less frustrating than light players but also tended to rate their own ability as higher. This survey also revealed that certain aspects of video games were more important for heavy players than for light players. For instance, gamers were significantly more likely to say that a good game had to have good characters, lots of excitement, and good weapons, be challenging, responsive, and provide lots of action. These features were all less important to other teens. However, for females the importance of weapons was found to be dependant on how much they played (74 percent of female gamers said that good weapons were important for a game to be fun compared to 54 percent of female light players.) When gamers rated the eight genre categories it was clear that male gamers rated the fighting and or combat genre most enthusiastically (61% vs. 35%), followed by racing (60 vs. 42) and action (60% vs. 35%). On the other hand, female heavy players (71 percent) expressed a strong preference for action games compared to female light players (49 percent).

The intensity, repetitiveness and immersion in the game's play distinguish the heavy player's experience from the more moderate play of the majority. One participant said that he "could play video games for hours and not notice" the passage of time (Kline 1997). Flow experience is not only valued by gamers, but reflects a dependency behavior that the kids themselves call 'addictive' because it indicates a loss of subjective control and a distortion in the sense of time (Kubey, 1996). Indeed, over 80% of teens felt that video games can be described as compelling or like an addiction, and over 50% agreed that there could be harmful effects of playing them too much. This survey revealed that heavy players were more likely to report that they sometimes displaced homework and chores than light players did. In particular, heavy players were more likely to put off doing homework and chores (37 percent) and family activities (18 percent) than leisure activities (13 percent) or spending time with their friends (10 percent).

Table 1: Activities that gamers missed out on to play.

Activities displaced	Total n=611 %	Light Players N=310 %	Moderate players n=137 %	Heavy players n=128 %
Homework or household chores**	21	15	22	37
Family activities**	8	7	7	18
Leisure activities**	7	6	7	13
Friends**	5	3	5	10

The majority of heavy players (37 percent) agreed with the statement that ‘some kids played games too much’, a further 27 percent felt that ‘some kids played them obsessively’, and 19 percent believed that many were ‘totally dependent on their video game fix’. Only 10 percent of heavy players said that games were not addictive. Heavy players were more likely to say that games were not addictive when compared to light players.

Table 2.

Addictive potential of video games	
not addictive	5%
video games are quite compelling	7%
some kids play them too much	30%
some kids play them obsessively	34%
many totally dependant on their video game fix	24%

When asked to comment on the effects of violent games, only 15% of teens felt that video games had no bad influence. 24% felt that the negative influence was confined to vulnerable kids, 33% felt the influence was not that serious, and 25% though the negative influence was both significant and widespread. Most strikingly only 20 percent of heavy players felt that violent games had no bad influence at all, compared to only 12 percent of

light players.

With regard to what made video gaming violent only forty percent of teens felt the aggressive physical contact and characters being hurt made games ‘violent’, and the minority regarded verbal abuse military themes and kidnapping as violence in video gaming. If desensitization is revealed through the willingness to use the word violence to characterize aggressive acts, then this result might reflect changing meaning of the term violence as it applies to representational acts. Teens generally agreed on those aspects that did make games violent however, and regardless of how much they played they saw incidents of sexual assault 85%, gore (83%), as well as weapons and shooting (65%) and kicking and punching (57%) as making for violence.

Table 3: Characteristics that make a game violent by gamer.

Characteristic of violent game	Total n=611 %	Light players n=312 %	Moderate players n=134 %	Heavy players n=126 %
Sexual assault ^{***}	85	93	79	78
Gore (blood and guts)	83	85	81	79
Punching and kicking	57	59	54	58
Verbal abuse [*]	53	59	51	50
Military setting	46	49	45	40
Kidnapping ^{***}	33	42	30	25

Gender differences for sexual assault, kidnapping and verbal abuse accounted for much of the significant differences in the ratings of violence between heavy and light gamers. Female light players (91 percent) were more likely than female heavy players (79 percent) to say that the occurrence of sexual assault made a game violent.

CONCLUSION

Unlike television and films, where violence and cultural content have been categorized and regulated by the CRTC, video games and the internet have been treated as a different kind of medium, more like telecommunications. There are no restrictions on video games beyond the criminal code: Like the internet video gaming is emerging as a self-regulated global media industry largely because that is how the American's have viewed it. In the digital global marketplace American's make world policy. Although Canada has been a leading advocate in television regulation of 'gratuitous violence' on TV, this has not extended to video gaming industry. The classification standards most widely used are those of the ESRB's self-regulation categories created when the U.S. gaming industry was threatened by a Senate investigation. Indeed, in a 1994 decision the CRTC to allow cable companies to distribute Sega video games (many of them violent and thus violating the 9 o'clock water shed) over the protests of advocacy groups and recent CRTC decision not to regulate the internet are indications that the potentially harmful consequences of video games is not high on Canada's public policy agenda. (Kline, forthcoming)

Indeed, as this review of the literature revealed there was very little concern about video game violence until the recent moral panic: **most parents actually knew very little about their children's use of gamings experiencing their concern and regulating because of that addictive and displacement effects.** What I discovered as I set out to take stock of this evidence is that on a global basis there are almost as many reviews of the literature on violence and video games as there are actual studies. Yet the evidence is already available, that like television and films, this interactive entertainment industry may require guidelines for the sale and marketing of gratuitously violent entertainment to children and young people. Although the bleating call for more research is all too familiar, it is time someone sounded the fire alarms and noted the changing media environment.

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ⁱ Ulla Carlson and Cecilia von Feilitzen Introduction pg 45

The problem has increased with each new media.

The problem emanates from America and the emphasis on violence in Globalized US media products driven by global marketing (Gerbner 1997):

And are subject to concentrations of power in the media industries a kind of "private censorship" in the marketplace of cultural diversity"