

The Games of our Lives: A Look at Mature Themes in Video Games


The traffic light flashes red. Cruising around in your stolen Lincoln Continental, you hardly give running it a second thought. A policeman three cars back sees your little stunt, and as if on cue flashing red and blue lights appear in your rearview mirror. Calmly, you turn your car over on to the side of the road, as if there wasn't a care in the world. Instead of reaching for your license and registration, your hand comes to rest on the handle of a gun resting in the passenger seat. Your face is eerily emotionless as you empty the clip into the cop's chest before he even has a chance to ask you for your license. Before the man has a chance to hit the ground, you've acquired his police cruiser and have taken extra care in running the front tire over his bloody chest. This scene, however gruesome, has been played out in video games around the world. There are no victims and there are punishments other than those that reside in the virtual realm. The video game industry, like other forms of entertainment, has expanded by introducing fresh and daring concepts such as this to keep patrons entertained.

Many people have become outspoken about the negative affects this violent material may have on developing minds, as these games find their greatest popularity among adolescents. Parents especially are concerned, and some have become biased towards video games in general. This prejudice could lead to the assumption that the entire genre is detrimental to pre-adult development at all levels. This is not the case. If responsible video games are played by

intended age groups established by the ESRB, parents would have less reason to worry about their children adopting violent behavior.

The first mature theme to be utilized by the video game industry was violence. In its infancy, most games featured cartoon-like characters and little to no representation of blood. The first video game to grab the attention of parents and Congress alike was *Mortal Combat*, released in 1993 for the Super Nintendo and the Sega Genesis. The console game featured tournament-style fighting mechanics and what now would be considered moderate depictions of blood, featured mostly in the notorious finishing moves. The video game sold extremely well in both arcade and console form. The content of the game prompted Senators Herbert Kohl from Wisconsin and Joseph Lieberman from Connecticut to start a Senate investigation of violence in video games. Their objective was to enforce a ban on such content, but they settled for the creation of a universal rating system which could classify the violent content in each game. Thus the Entertainment Software Rating Board or ESRB was formed (Herman 8).

Today, the ESRB assigns more than 1,000 ratings per year. These ratings range from EC or Early Childhood (ages 3 and older) to AO or Adult Only (18+), with a spectrum of ratings in between that can also be accompanied with content descriptors such as fantasy violence or blood and gore. Each of these ratings is visible on the front and back of every video game box. According to a study performed by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, a research organization commissioned by the ESRB, parents find themselves in agreement with 83% of the ratings that are assigned. Regarding the study, Patricia E. Vance, the president of the ESRB, said: "The results are especially noteworthy and credible because unlike academic studies that rely on the personal opinions of the researchers, this one gets to the heart of the matter by gathering information directly from those people for whom ratings matter the most — parents"



(Wagner 1). The 401 randomly selected parents were shown a compilation of video footage from 80 different video games released over the course of last year. They were asked to assign a rating which they felt was appropriate for each game, and then were told what rating was given by the ESRB. They were then asked whether or not they felt the ESRB rating was too strict, too lenient, or just right. Of the seventeen percent who did not agree with the ratings, five percent thought the ratings were too strict (Amaloo 1).


From the 1,036 video games that were rated in 2004, fifty-four percent of them received the E, or Everyone rating, and thirty-three percent received T for Teen (13+), which denotes the possibility of mild violence, crude humor and some strong language. Twelve percent fell into the M for Mature (17+) rating, which denotes the use of intense violence, sexual content, and strong language. The last one percent is made up of EC and AO. From these figures, one may be inclined to deduce that the majority of video games released today are free of negative material (About ESRB 1). The number of each game sold, though, may vary depending on the popularity. Some of the most popular games are those that carry the extreme amounts of violence that push them into the mature range. While most distributors require a proof of age to sell games of that nature to children, parents without complete knowledge of the ESRB rating system often buy M-rated games at the behest of their underage children.

Other organizations have done their own tests on the content system developed by the ESRB. In a study conducted by the Journal of American Medical Association in February of 2004, the "Teen" rating was put to the test. Of the 396 T-rated video games released prior to April 2001, eighty-one were selected and play-tested for content. Each game was given an hour of attention. After playing a game, the tester would assess the content independently, and then compare his or her findings with that given by the ESRB. They found fifty-one cases in thirty

nine games of adult-oriented content that did not have an ESRB content descriptor where such should have been found. While these results are undoubtedly debatable, they still present a strong argument towards closer examination of content in video games (Haninger, Thompson 1).

A good example of a video game that required a closer look is *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for the Xbox, Playstation 2, and PC. This particular video game belongs to a long-standing franchise that is well-known for both its outstanding sales record and its gratuitous use of nearly every type of adult theme conceivable. The general premise is simple: the character is presented with a series of tasks to perform, and the player is to complete them by any means necessary. The game provides a large virtual city for the player to inhabit; one based off a current city in the US. This city is also inhabited by a large number of computer-controlled civilians, policemen, and cars. Criminal activities such as stealing cars and murdering civilians are required to advance through the game. The game was rated M for mature, and could not be sold to children under the age of 17. As of March 2005, 12 million copies of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* have sold in the United States and Great Britain (Adams 1). Despite the enormous amount of violent material included in the game, most of the controversy spawned by it revolves around a small sexually-oriented mini-game that can be unlocked using a third-party modification. The resulting political and public outcry resulted in the changing of the game's rating from M to AO. The ESRB also adopted a new policy which will force designers to submit all mature material present in the game's coding, regardless of whether it is meant to be seen by the player.


Due to these recent events, lawmakers have become particularly strict with regards to violent and sexual material in video games. In Illinois, a bill has recently surfaced that seeks to reach outside the range of the ESRB. It states that any and all retailers who sell mature-themed



games to minors will incur a one-thousand dollar penalty. The definition of violence and sexual situations within the bill differs from those put in place by the ESRB. This would effectively undermine the validity of the ESRB. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), along with several others, is fighting this new bill on the grounds of impeding the First Amendment. The ESA president Douglas Lowenstein said: "This law will have a chilling effect on free speech. It will limit First Amendment rights not only for Illinois residents, but for game developers and publishers, and for retailers who won't know what games can and cannot be sold or rented under this vague new statute" (Adams3 - 1). Parents need to know that the label placed on every game sold is valid, and the passing of this law will make those labels insignificant.


If parents are not responsible enough to protect their children from violent material or other mature themes, there is indeed a risk of children becoming adversely influenced. Repeated exposure to violence can lead underdeveloped adolescents to become desensitized to the idea of violence, especially if the child already shows bad behavioral tendencies. According to a study done at the Indiana University School of Medicine, children who suffer from disruptive behavior disorders (DBD) show different brain activity than normal children when viewing violent video games. The children with DBD show noticeably less activity in the frontal lobes of the brain, the portion responsible for decision-making, while viewing violent material from video games. This denotes that the child was less concerned about the morality of the material in question than those children who did not suffer from DBD. The study also suggested that the amount of violent material experienced prior to the study may have an influence on the result. This not only includes video games, but media such as television and movies as well. (Hardin 1)

Content in many forms of media are separated by age. It is common knowledge that most adolescents do not have the same grasp on reality that is present in an adult mind.



According to an online questionnaire presented by the Journal of Adolescence in 2004, the differences in the adult and child mind do not stop there. The questionnaire surveyed players of the popular online game *Everquest* with the intention of determining the main drawing point of the game for each age group. The survey determined that seventeen percent of players below the age of nineteen, felt that violence was the most important aspect of the game, as opposed to 4.3% of adults. Significantly more adult players felt that the social side of the game was the most important aspect (Griffiths, Davies 93-95). This could be considered a strange result, as the game requires fighting in order to build a character's strength. It is logical then, to think that the majority of players would feel combat is the most important aspect. A possible explanation for the adult interest in social interaction could be the inclusion guilds, or player-created clubs made in-game. These guilds require large investments of time, which may have more appeal to adults than impatient adolescents.


Video game violence will be a source of controversy until the connection between games and children is broken. Parents are prone to obsess over their child's well-being, and any threat to their child, psychological or otherwise, will naturally be met with fierce resistance. This is not only true for humans, but in many other members of the animal kingdom. A mother bear may protect her cubs, but she knows they must engage in playful combative behavior to enhance chances for survival. Violence appeals to the baser instincts in the human mind, especially in developing males. For many people the virtual reality that a video game presents is the ultimate form of escapism. This separate reality allows a person to act out his or her deepest desires without consequence. We as a people do not wish to think that violence and sex are themes that should amuse us, but the entertainment industry is saturated with them both for a reason. The best way to protect children from the adult situations presented in video games is through



parental regulation. Parents need to know what their children is playing. Once a child reaches maturity, violent content and other mature themes in video games are less likely to be detrimental and more likely to be become an outlet for relieving stress. The most important thing to remember is that a video game is just that: a game. As long as a person is mature enough to recognize that, the mature content present within a game is only entertainment.

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