



Bridgewater State University

Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Honors Program Theses and Projects

Undergraduate Honors Program

8-18-2022

But Everyone is Playing This! A Closer Look at Video Gaming and Moral Panics From 1996 Through 2006

James Damon
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj



Part of the [Social History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Damon, James. (2022). But Everyone is Playing This! A Closer Look at Video Gaming and Moral Panics From 1996 Through 2006. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 523. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/523
Copyright © 2022 James Damon

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

But Everyone is Playing This! A Closer Look at Video Gaming and Moral Panics From 1996
Through 2006

James William Damon

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in History

Bridgewater State University

May 5, 2022

Dr. Paul Rubinson, Thesis Advisor

Date: 5/9/2022

Dr. Ann M. Brunjes, Committee Member

Date: 5/5/2022

Dr. Leonid Heretz, Committee Member

Date: 5/6/2022

But Everyone Is Playing This!

A CLOSER LOOK AT VIDEO GAMING AND MORAL PANICS FROM
1996 THROUGH 2006

JAMES DAMON

Preface

Every couple of decades, a new form of entertainment sweeps the world. During the twentieth century, people were able to enjoy emerging technologies like the radio, movies with and without audio, and television. Each evolution of pastimes grew more popular than the last, and as the 1900s drew into its final two decades, the fastest growing entertainment medium of the time began to emerge: Video Gaming. As someone who has grown up video gaming, it has been an integral part of my life. I am grateful that I have parents that were supportive of video gaming as a fun activity in moderation, as well as the opportunities that video gaming has given me to connect with my friends and peers as I have grown older. The support that I had for gaming made me think about my relationship with video games and the impact they have had on my life. I have spent hundreds of hours over the past fifteen or so years gaming by myself, with my older brother, and with friends in-person and over the internet. This has me wonder how other people's relationships stand versus society at large. With kids and teens in more recent years being consumed with online multiplayer games such as Fortnite, Call of Duty, and others, along with concern that some parents have for how much time their kids spend in these virtual worlds, it has made me curious to see if parents have always been concerned about their children being absorbed by video games and unable to tell reality from fiction.

Introduction

“One kid who was probably 8 or 9 says he likes playing these games, but he also gets nightmares from them...Mom and I watched a 3-year-old girl splatter blood on one of the machines at a pizza parlor while the babysitter helped her balance on the footstool. She was holding a mounted gun, and when she missed the mother hollered from the table, ‘Aim higher

next time’.”¹ This was a story told by 12-year-old Danielle Shimotakahara at a Senate hearing for violent video games called “The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children” in March 2000. At the end of her story, Shimotakahara exclaimed that she told her mom that “I think the parent should be fired.”² The violence in games that kids had easy access to shocked Shimotakahara, along with other parents during this time. This kind of exposure to violent and immoral content at an early age is something that parents and journalists fought back against in the 1990s. Such a moral panic had roots in other video games.

Two important media that will be compared with video games will be comic books and heavy metal music. Comic books caused problems for parents, who thought that these books were leading their children down a path of violence and deviancy. Heavy Metal music drew the ire of religious authorities through the accusation that the music, lyrics, and symbolism had close ties to Satan. A comparison of these media with video games begs the question: has gaming as a medium been treated by parents, religious figures, legislators, and others in the same way as comic books and heavy metal in the past? This deep dive into the digital world aims to answer this question.

This research focuses on three popular franchises in the gaming world from the 1990s through to the early 2000s, with each franchise sparking a different controversy and discussion. The first is *Pokémon*, a franchise aimed at children with the objective of catching each of the 151 different monster species roaming the world, as signified by the catchphrase, “Gotta catch ‘em all!” The first analysis will be of the sudden rise of the trading card game and video game, as well as the reaction of both parents and religious figures alike. The second franchise that will be

¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, *The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 106th Congress., 2d sess., 2000, S. Hrg. 106-1096, 18, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg78656/pdf/CHRG-106shrg78656.pdf>.

² U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 18.

covered is Id Software's incredibly popular game, *Doom*, and its ties to the horrific events at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, along with the consequences and changes that the country and video game companies experienced in subsequent years. The final games that will be discussed are *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for their violent and sexual content. I will also briefly explain what the ESRB is, how it works as a resource for people purchasing video games, and how parents and the government reacted to it.

Most sources that will be examined will come from print and television news sources. Transcripts from senate hearings will also be included, as they provide direct insight into the views of parents, doctors and other professionals, and legislators who debated video gaming in a post-Columbine world. Also, news clips collected from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive provide an interesting perspective for this line of research through the information provided by news anchors, as well as the interviews and video footage they use, not to mention the rhetorical questions they asked their audience. These sources provided critical information on how video games were framed by the media, as well as what information was provided to its audience and why. Analyzing the rhetoric used by anchors and newscasters was worthwhile for gaining a better perspective on how the gaming scene changed over nearly a decade.

This variety of sources grants a clearer view into how adults viewed different games and how general opinion could swing quickly and drastically. For instance, parents have different opinions, thoughts, and feelings about the Pokémon franchise compared to the Grand Theft Auto franchise. Using clips from the Vanderbilt archive allows for a unique perspective through the break-down of what news stations said about video games, as well as how news anchors and reporters dispensed information on games. This enables us to view how parents expressed their opinions on video games based on thoughts shared with the news. Based on these factors, I am

looking at parents to see if video games caused a moral panic as comic books and heavy metal had in the past. A driving force in this buildup is due to video games being a more interactive form of entertainment compared to reading comic books or listening to heavy metal. There are many who believe that the participatory factor in gaming is a critical part of what generates real life violence from pixels and data moving around a screen. This interactivity is what makes gaming so unique, especially as graphical quality became better in a short period of time, going from two-dimensional sprites that required an active imagination to fill in the details, to the high-definition three-dimensional models that inhabit the world of games during the first few years of 2000. This leap in graphics and direct input from the player both contribute to what made adults take a stand against for the sake of their children. It is also important to understand that this research is not about whether the moral panic experienced by the public is legitimate or justified, rather, it is about what reaction the public had and how they interpreted video games and their content.

Other Panic-Inducing Media

To understand how video gaming drastically changed the entertainment scene in the 1990s, other media that came before it must be understood as well. During the 1940s, comic books became the popular pastime for kids to buy, read, and exchange with their friends. At first, few adults had a problem with comics. This would change in the mid-1950s when comic book writers shifted their target demographic to more mature audiences.³ Comics became a sudden problem when children started getting their hands on comics that were not considered appropriate. To prove that children being exposed to comic books was harming their

³ Carol L. Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics," *Information and Culture* 47, no.4 (2012): 384, accessed April 25, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737440>.

development, psychologist Fredric Wertham stepped onto the scene in 1954 with his research on comics, called *Seduction of the Innocent*. According to the research of Carol L. Tilley, a scholar who examined the work left behind by Wertham, Wertham's issues with comic books stemmed from, "clinical evidence of the format's detrimental links to juvenile delinquency and general children's welfare," with delinquency in this context being defined by Wertham as, "a catchall diagnosis that included truancy, shoplifting, and daydreaming."⁴ For Wertham, these issues caused by comic books were unacceptable and required immediate action.

Although Tilley proved that Wertham meddled with his data and responses from the children he worked with in various hospitals and clinics, *Seduction* was still able to draw the attention and support of parents and adults. This support and outcry led to the creation of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), which enacted strong guidelines of what was allowed to be shown in comic books of any kind. Some rules included, "Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals...Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited...Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged."⁵ This exhibits just a few of the many rules that comic book producers had to abide by to get product onto the shelf. Between the research of Wertham and the resulting CMAA guidelines, comic books were enough of a problem to parents and adults that changes were required to keep children safe. Seeing comic book publishers become a form of media with that much regulation gives good insight into how something popular can go under the radar of adults for a period, and then suddenly parents learn about what their kids are consuming and do

⁴ Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent," 384-86.

⁵ "Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc., 1954," U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/artifact/code-comics-magazine-association-america-inc-1954>.

everything they can to protect their minds from such mature matters with sudden measures. It provides a foundation for how parents were later thrust suddenly into the world of video gaming as the medium became more realistic by magnitudes and how parents and legislators tried to interpret, digest, and work through these new developments in the digital world.

The printed word was not the only problematic media throughout the late twentieth century. By the mid-1980s, heavy metal music had become popular with younger people, and with this rise of popularity came a backlash against the music genre. John Brackett, a music instructor and scholar from Vance-Granville Community College, provides a window into the line of thinking shared by anti-rock preachers and activists, primarily driven by groups such as the New Christian Right, as they strove to counter the “lyrical descriptions and visual depictions that glorified and promoted violence, sex, drug and alcohol abuse, and Satanism...symptomatic...of many forms of popular entertainment...[leading to]...the overall moral decay of America.”⁶ Like comic books, adults concluded that the media kids were consuming was poisonous for developing what was considered “proper” morals and could lead to a decline in them.

To fight back against the immorality contained in heavy metal, the New Christian Right and others highlighted the idea of backward masking, or backmasking, as a piece of evidence that showed the need to rid the world of heavy metal. An assemblyman from California named Phil Wyman was shocked by the messages hidden on records, and in a bill drafted and introduced by him, Wyman defined backmasking as “...a process by which an audible verbal statement may be heard when the record is played backwards...these messages can also be

⁶ John Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide: The Formation and Development of an Antirock Discourse in the United States during the 1980s,” *American Music* 36, no. 3 (2018): 272, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.36.3.0271>.

perceived, unknowingly and subconsciously, by the listener when the record is played forward in the normal manner.”⁷ Along with this definition, the Wyman’s bill aimed to add a warning label to records that contained hidden messages.⁸ Although this bill did not get past the house of Representatives, it helped pave the way for the creation of the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC), an organization for those concerned with the rise of rock music and its immoral lyrical content.⁹ This group took their argument all the way to the U.S. Congressional Committee on Commerce, where they found success in convincing the Committee to add an advisory label to music containing explicit lyrical content.¹⁰ Over the following years, the PMRC attempted to prove backmasking existed in tracks by musicians like Ozzy Osbourne and others, but were unable to prove such connections exist in a track when played in reverse. While the PMRC could not prove that backmasking truly existed in popular music, the fear of backmasking gives deep insight into the lengths to which parents and politicians were willing to go in their pursuit of keeping children’s morals wholesome and pure.

In terms of how comic books and heavy metal were acknowledged and treated as popular media, a working definition of moral panics can be created. To experience a moral panic means for a specific medium to become popular and introduce mature themes that adults do not find suitable for children and young teens to consume. Moral panics tend to erupt over a brief period of time upon discovery of the immoral content that kids are consuming, thus causing an uproar that is visible to society at large. Experts from a variety of sources add their input to the situation, and some legislators may throw their hat in the ring as well. Eventually some kind of change is made to the industry. It is important to note once again that this research is not about whether

⁷ Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide,” 276-77.

⁸ Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide,” 277.

⁹ Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide,” 285.

¹⁰ Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide,” 289.

adults were justified in their moral panic or not with video games, but rather whether they had a reaction to this content and the kind of reaction they had.

Between comic books and heavy metal, parents and adults had a great weight on their shoulders to ensure that children were learning the correct morals and staying on the straight and narrow. Heavy metal also opened a window into how media were evolving to become more interactive. Comics rely on the written word to convey meaning and tone, which can be left to interpretation by its audience. Heavy metal includes lyrics along with the instrumentation, which is arranged to push a specific message or theme and stick in the mind of its listeners. Both these media rely on a different sense, the former being sight and the latter being sound; each provides a different physical avenue of consumption. Video games rely on sight, sound, and direct input from a player on the other side of the screen. Since parents have struggled against a certain medium in each generation, it makes sense that video gaming would become the hot topic as the final decade of the 1990s came and went; if kids were learning bad morals from simply reading certain material or listening to specific songs, what consequences could this kind of interactive gaming have on their children?

To Be the Very Best Requires Deep Pockets: Problems with Pokémon Trading Cards

A Brief History of the Pokémon Franchise:

Pokémon is a game series developed by Game Freak and released in 1996 in Japan and localized in 1998 in the United States. The idea of *Pokémon* stemmed from the mind of Satoshi Tajiri, who reached out to Nintendo to turn his game about capturing creatures into a reality. Since the release of *Pokémon* Red, Blue, and Green versions for the Nintendo Gameboy, the

franchise has exploded in popularity, and Tajiri along with his game development company Game Freak have grown the franchise beyond video games, and into a world of merchandise spanning clothing to plush toys, as well as manga and anime to accompany the games, not to mention numerous major motion pictures, and, finally, an extremely popular trading card game.

Controversies by the Pack: Parents and their Problems with the Trading Cards:

Once *Pokémon* was localized and released in the United States, it swept through the playgrounds of America like wildfire. As kids were consumed by their desire to “Catch em’ all!,” some adults began to voice their concerns about the cards that were taking over the lives of children nationwide. One demographic with such concerns were school principals. When kids brought their cards and binders to school to trade during lunch and recess, principals put their foot down on the children’s version of stock exchanging. In an article from *The New York Times*, the principal of St. James Episcopal school in Los Angeles described the situation on the woodchips: “We tried to let the kids do it [Trade cards], tried to be open-minded... but kids were actually stealing the cards from each other. They would get so caught up in the trading, after recess, it would continue in the classroom where teachers were having to referee, with the haves flaunting their purchase power over the have-nots.”¹¹ These cardboard rectangles left parents struggling to comprehend that their own children were committing acts of theft, just so they could get some sought after cards. Thievery of *Pokémon* cards in the first degree was not the only problem that school faculty had to face. *Pokémon* card trading got more complicated for schools when one student attacked another over the cards. In another article from *The New York*

¹¹ “Is Pokemon Evil? Well, probably not. But educators and parents still worry it’s gone too far,” *Newsweek*, November 15, 1999, https://go-gale-com.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/ps/i.do?p=MSIC&u=mli_n_s_bridcoll&id=GALE|A57437740&v=2.1&it=r&sid=ebsco.

Times, the accident is mentioned in a discussion on the release of the first *Pokémon* movie: “the police say a 9-year-old boy on Long Island stabbed a 13-year-old, causing a minor injury, during an argument over a Pokémon card.”¹² Thankfully this stabbing did not lead to serious injury, but it did further justify adult concern about the consequences these cards were having on kids.

Although parents had every reason to dislike the *Pokémon* franchise, given that children were spending tons of money on the cards and it was all kids would talk about, it was difficult for some parents to not support this interest. One parent named Pamela Abrams stated, “Cards are not new... They provide kids with a way to read and sort and trade... I think the cards promote reading. If they want to read cereal boxes or magazines or comic books or cards, that’s great.”¹³ Abrams was not the only parent to support her children’s Poké-habits. In an ABC news article from 1999, Christina Levy was interviewed on why she bought so many *Pokémon* cards for her children and she replied that it was a game that provided social contact with other kids, so she preferred this trading card hobby to the alternative of her kids sitting in front of the television with no social contact at all.¹⁴ Although these parents agreed with school faculty in keeping the card game out of the classroom and playground, parents could be rather supportive of the Pokémon card game.

This sampling of parents’ thoughts reveals ambivalence about *Pokémon*. Although some authority figures like principals were annoyed with how quickly and totally these pocket monsters had invaded children’s lives, other parents saw the invasion of these Poké-pals as a new way for kids to relate to each other and learn various reading comprehension and organization

¹² Katherine E. Finkelstein, “Pokemon Movie vs. School? For Young Fans, That’s a No-Brainer,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), November 11, 1999.

¹³ “Is Pokemon Evil? Well, probably not.”

¹⁴ ABC News, “The Fickleness of fads, and full on Pokemania.” Vanderbilt TV News Archive, September 1, 1999, video 2:41-2:49, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

skills. For American parents, *Pokémon* was absolutely an obsession with their kids, but it was one they were willing to tolerate if they kept themselves in the loop on what their kids were doing. It was when parents or other adults were not around that Pokémon card trading could get way out of hand, one example being the stabbing incident; although an adult did intervene, leaving the kids to their own devices with the cards may have led to the sudden violence. Keeping parents in this information loop kept the Poke-mania from spiraling out of control and causing a stronger reaction from adults other than banning the trading cards at school, as well as allowing parents to keep kids' morals in check.

What to Make of this Crisis?

Pokémon was not truly a crisis, but more of a mixed bag. On one hand, the franchise caused a massive headache with the sheer obsession that kids had with the video games, the anime, the movie, and the cards. The obsession was leading towards behaviors that parents and adults did not want permanently instilled within a child's growing mind, including serious violence between kids that could not be ignored. The way that the news media spoke about *Pokémon* as it rose in popularity is also important to understand. News sources like CBS and ABC focused on the worth of the cards, as well as the gambling aspect that was put in play through the potential of finding a rare foil version of a card. For the parents, they found more positive aspects to the game, like getting their kids socially engaged with other kids on a regular basis. Stacking these two views with the problems that Pokémon faced in the classroom environment paints an interesting picture for the pocket monster craze at the end of the century. This framework created a contrast between the news media, which made a concentrated effort to

paint the card game as somewhat dangerous or malicious, and parents who tended not to focus on the monetary value of the cards and support the social aspect that the cards provide.

In comparison to comic books and heavy metal, these cardboard pocket monsters were tame compared to the backlash these other media experienced during their heyday. However, it is important to note that part of this crisis aversion comes from parents staying on top of the game when the obsession started. Parents were drawn into the loop one way or the other whether it was through the cards or the movie or both. Parents who understood what the trading card game was really all about and had at minimum a foundational understanding of what the kids are doing, as well as keeping tabs on them and the habit, created a space where parents were not as concerned with the game as they could have been; a space where they allowed kids to partake in Poke mania in a controlled manner. Had parents not stayed on top of *Pokémon*, the whole situation may have become a more serious problem requiring a larger intervention. The issues present in the *Pokémon* franchise would grow and compound do as children became wrapped up in more violent media. While *Pokémon* did not cause a moral panic, it cemented video games and their place in the media, which led other games after it to inspire growing moral panics.

Doom and Columbine: The Horrible Incident and the Ties they Share

What is Doom?

Doom is a video game that was released in December 1993. It was described by developer Id Software as taking control of “a space marine armed with a mere pistol. Your mission is to locate more substantial firepower, blow your way through an onslaught of undead

marines and mutant demons from hell, and navigate yourself off a radioactive moon base.”¹⁵

Since its release, *Doom* has seen critical success in its sequels throughout the 90s and early 2000s, as well as in its modern reboot from 2016. Like *Pokémon*, *Doom* was popular enough to make its way to the silver screen in 2005, a year after *Doom III* was released to players worldwide. Its popularity stemmed not only from the intense gameplay, but also from the ability for players at home to modify and create levels of their own. These factors gave *Doom* a lot of staying power in the consciousness of players, who could come back again and again and find a new level to play, or simply make one themselves and share it with others across the globe.

A Moment with the Developers: How the Developers of Doom Dealt With the Littleton Fallout?

Shortly after the terrible shooting at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, adults turned their attention toward the content that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold interacted with prior to the shooting. The discovery that the two had played *Doom* brought attention to the co-creators of the game, John Romero and John Carmack. As the discussion of violent media grew in the months following the Columbine shooting, a writer from *The New York Times*, Paul Keegan, decided to interview Romero and Carmack to gather their thoughts on how the parents and general public were viewing their violent video games. When Keegan asked Romero about the Littleton shooting, Romero was quoted as saying “I’m the one who made this stuff—why would I care about that?... If people don’t like it, they don’t need to play the game.”¹⁶ Upon asking Carmack whether parents were simply using the games he made as a scapegoat, Carmack

¹⁵ “Ultimate Doom,” Id Software, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/19970615015445/http://www.idsoftware.com/>.

¹⁶ Paul Keegan, “A Game Boy in the Cross Hairs,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), May 23, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/23/magazine/a-game-boy-in-the-cross-hairs.html>.

responded with “Yeah, push your responsibilities on somebody else.”¹⁷ The responses given by Carmack and Romero exhibit little sadness for those who lost their lives in the Columbine shooting, and no remorse that their video games were played by those who brought digital violence to the real world. Romero’s statement was cold, exact, and heartless. Carmack was not decisive on violent video games either. This attitude against responsibility was one that would get the two and their game in hot water soon.

The way that Keegan described the games made the reader feel as though they were there as well, saying that “Physical reality suggests that you are sitting in a chair operating a mouse and keyboard. But with the computer screen replacing your field of vision, you believe you’re actually creeping around a corner, causing your breath to shorten...When the monster jumps out, real adrenaline roars through your body.”¹⁸ These feelings are extremely important to note, as video games became gradually more realistic from this point forward. Compared to the simplistic 8-Bit graphics of *Pokémon* for the Nintendo Gameboy, *Doom* stood in a league of its own when considering not only the graphics, but how violence was portrayed with that new graphical power. This new sense of realism along with the cold responses from Romero and Carmack as game developers became important points of discussion between adults and legislators alike. Carmack and Romero’s statement contrasted with Congress and parents, leaving *Doom* to remain a target of parents and politicians.

The Aftermath of Columbine on the Video Game Industry and the Senate’s Response

The discovery that the Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were avid players of the video game *Doom* opened the door to public discussion of violent video games and

¹⁷ Paul Keegan, “A Game Boy in the Cross Hairs.”

¹⁸ Paul Keegan, “A Game Boy in the Cross Hairs.”

their effects on children and teenagers. Nearly a year after the tragedy, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce held a hearing regarding the impact of interactive violence on children. In the introduction, Kansas Republican Senator Sam Brownback called out the video game industry for claiming that the games were fantasy, asking his fellow congressman and audience: “What does playing all of these violent, interactive games do to a child? What does it do to a child if they’re playing a game where they commit mass murder, carnage on the road, and are rewarded points for shooting scantily clad prostitutes? What does it do to a child?”¹⁹ It should also be noted that Brownback himself had stakes in this Senate hearing. He explained that he has “five children, and two them are avid video game players. And I was this weekend in a video arcade with my children. And you do get very concerned about what you see. It is the romanticized violence. It is the excessive violence. It is everywhere. It is every clip. It is all surrounding you.”²⁰ Brownback tried to qualify his statement by saying “the majority of video and PC games produced are non-violent.”²¹ This weak effort to qualify that all games were not violent did nothing to change how games were being discussed by the Senate at all. Whether all violent video games were violent or not misses the point, rather, the fact that the Senate was speaking on the matter at all demonstrates the negative framing that video games had at the time, as well as the lengths that were needed to get the gaming moral panic under control. His previous statement about what games were doing to kids framed his own argument, as well as the arguments to follow from those invited to speak in front of the Senators. This outcry against digital violence and gore and fears framed violent video games as an issue that needed quick and resolute attention, even though Brownback said that he was not condemning all video games.

¹⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 3.

²⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 57.

²¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 2.

The first witness was Dr. David Walsh, the President of the Institute on Media and the Family, which was an organization that desired deeper controls over media that they deemed as harmful for children.²² Using similar rhetoric to Senator Brownback, Dr. Walsh said that not all games were violent, but also that “I do not believe that it [Doom] was their [Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold] favorite game, Doom, that led them to load up their guns. I do believe, however, that media shape the norms, and the norms shape the extremes.”²³ Through Walsh’s argument, he maintained a level response, taking both the good and bad in video games and concluding that it was a medium that required more attention from parents and adults as children played in their virtual playgrounds. He condemned the violence caused by the Columbine shooters, yet Walsh did not call for an end to video gaming, rather, he reminded the Senate that “We all, media leaders, game producers, and parents, have to do a lot better job of caring.”²⁴ Walsh showed the Senate that he was deeply concerned about the behavior of children and their interactions with violent video games, but also held parents, political leaders, and game producers accountable for keeping their children safe. Walsh made it clear that there were things to fear, yet if accountability was held by all parties involved, the moral risk and crisis could be avoided.

The second witness was Sabrina Steger, a nurse who lost her daughter, Kayce, in a school shooting at Heath High School in December 1997. While Dr. Walsh qualified that video games were becoming violent, and adults and industry leaders needed to keep a closer eye on what kids were consuming, Steger starkly contrasted. In the beginning of her statement, Steger staked her claim and said that “the Heath shooter was influenced by the movies he watched, the video games he played, and the Internet sites he accessed...Despite what some parents think, these are

²² “Who Are We,” National Institute on Media and the Family, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20061228181421/http://www.mediafamily.org/about/index.shtml>.

²³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 7.

²⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 8.

not the games that we played...They are so real, the military uses them to train soldiers...I am in the business of recognizing signs of illness and promoting healing, and I see an America addicted to violence and in denial of that addiction. It permeates our homes, playgrounds, and schools.”²⁵

In response to the death of her daughter, Steger claimed that violent media not only killed her daughter, but it was also leading American families down a path of consuming more violent media over time; a path that Steger saw as dangerous for all Americans big and small. She went a step further to declare that she was “suing the makers of the violent video games that so profoundly influenced Kayce, Nicole, and Jessica’s killer. Our lawsuit is not about free speech. It is about product liability, plain and simple. Any person or company that makes a product is responsible for the harm that comes from its use.”²⁶ Revealing this pursuit of a lawsuit to the Senate allows insight into how video games had real world consequences, and developers should face those consequences.

The anger and sadness that Steger felt from the loss of her daughter Kayce was amplified by the absence of video game companies and their representatives at the hearing. It made those companies appear as if they shared the same sentiment as Romero and Carmack in their interview with Keegan when they each declared that other people were being ridiculous in their claims about *Doom*, and that if it is not their cup of tea, they can just not play. Steger’s opinion also marked a departure in the parental attitude toward gaming that was seen with *Pokémon*. With parents being ambivalent toward *Pokémon* and authority figures like principals being the ones against *Pokémon*, Steger’s intense attitude worked toward condemning violent games and their content against Dr. Walsh’s qualifying approach that parents and companies alike had a responsibility to keep their kids safe. It showed that Steger not only wanted to hold game

²⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 11-12.

²⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 13.

companies responsible for the games they produced, but also raise awareness of this violent content for the parents' paying attention to that hearing. Steger had no control over the content that the shooter consumed and reenacted and had to face what she saw as the consequences of heavy consumption of violent media. For Steger, seeing American culture continue to consume violent media only to copy it in real life led her to the conclusion that there was no cure for the disease known as violent content without intervention from legislation, companies, or the people themselves.

When the Senate called forward their third speaker, it was not another adult who was prepared to say their piece. Instead, twelve-year-old Danielle Shimotakahara made her claim to the Senate that little kids should not be allowed to play violent games, and that they should be outright removed from places where they are easily accessible to them. In her testimony, Shimotakahara explained that kids' "eyes look crazy when they play them [violent games], and they get excited when the blood splatters and parts of bodies fly... These machines are almost everywhere that kids go... I think it teaches some kids to be violent, and I think a few of those kids will think about acting it out on innocent people... I think it is the same as selling alcohol, drugs, pornography, or tobacco to kids."²⁷ The way that Shimotakahara talked about video games was similar to how Steger wanted game developers to be held accountable for the game content they made and sold, as Shimotakahara did not want kids to have access to these games in the first place. Her statement was also striking because of her age. Up to this point, only the opinions of adults had been considered in both the Senate hearing and in the issues with *Pokémon*. To hear the same words and see the same stance from a 12-year-old, someone in the age bracket of people that the Senate and adults were trying to protect, put into perspective how

²⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 17.

widespread the issue of video game violence was. Additionally, Shimotakahara provided a perspective that was typically ignored or underrepresented, specifically the opinion of the demographic being affected by violent or immoral content. In the heat of the discussion between parents, adults, legislators, and game companies with their developers, the voice of kids living with these games seemed to fly under the radar. Thus, Shimotakahara being asked to speak at this panel gave her statement more weight. Similar to what Dr. Walsh said in his testimony, Shimotakahara also wanted “people to learn and think about these machines [arcade games]. I know that a lot of parents did not even know that these types of games were being played by their kids.”²⁸ Here, Shimotakahara walked the line between what Dr. Walsh said and the proclamation made by Steger; Shimotakahara wanted the games removed, but also needed parents to be educated on what exactly was getting banned in the first place.

Dr. Walsh made his call against violent media, yet Shimotakahara, Steger, and the Senate all framed the video game violence situation more negatively than Dr. Walsh. This difference in framing created an interesting dynamic to consider, where Dr. Walsh, a professional who should have agreed that something needed to be done about violence, qualified that some games are good, and others are bad. In comparison, Steger and Shimotakahara, who represented the general public in this hearing, were more direct in their thoughts about video gaming and demanded that violent games be unavailable for children to obtain in any form public or private. This demonstrates that even though some professionals did not see a need for drastic action, violent games were still causing a moral panic with the demographics that mattered, namely families and politicians.

²⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 18.

How are games and morals evolving from here?

After *Doom*, moral stakes were much higher for adults. The trading card “epidemic” looked quaint now that actual lives had been lost due to the violence wrought by school shooters. With parents and government officials searching for a cause of the violence, video games got caught with the heat once it was discovered that the shooters played in these digital landscapes. The Senate’s involvement in this discussion on violent video games also shows how dire the situation was for some people. Take for example the Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America. The code was described in its introductory pamphlet as being “Originally adopted in 1954 and revised in 1971 to meet contemporary standards of conduct and morality, the enforcement of this code is the basis for the comic magazine industry’s program of self-regulation.”²⁹ In order to maintain morals, comic book companies self-regulated to ensure that readership levels would not fall. Video gaming followed a similar path as comic book companies through the creation of the ESRB, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, to inform consumers of what players could expect to see in the games they played. Founded in 1994 by the Interactive Digital Software Association, the ESRB cemented five different categories for rating video games by 1999: Early Childhood, Everyone, Teen, Mature 17+, and Adult Only 18+.³⁰ Most kids were able to get their hands on E-rated games, but unable to purchase T or M-rated games from retailers on their own before becoming old enough. The ESRB strove to provide customers with this labeling so that they knew exactly what themes or content would be in the games on the shelf. However, because the ESRB was only a tool for the customer, it was a key difference between it and the comic book code. The comic code included strict guidelines

²⁹ “Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc., 1954.” U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/artifact/code-comics-magazine-association-america-inc-1954>.

³⁰ “Our History,” *ESRB*. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.esrb.org/history/>.

regarding what moral content could or could not be included within the comic book stories, thus creating a morally acceptable comic book that parents and adults could tolerate their children purchasing and reading. The ESRB had no hard restriction like that, as it was only a guidance system. Because of this, game developers could still make whatever kind of game they desired, including violent or immoral ones without any direct input or censorship from the ESRB.

News media followed this trend when asking if kids and teens should have exposure to the kind of violence found in games. In a clip from CBS on April 25, 1999, the reporter covering the segment, Jeffery Kaufman, utilized language and phrases like “In a typical day, 15-year-old Elijah and his pal Sid might kill one-hundred, maybe two-hundred people, just for fun” or “Fantasy it may be, but it is also seductive.”³¹ The language used to describe violent games is reminiscent of Wertham’s own attitude toward comic books being a source of delinquency, even going so far as to call it *Seduction of the Innocent*. Kaufman may be trying to elicit a certain reaction of fear from parents viewing this news segment. In this segment he framed video games as being something that will seduce a child, insinuating that something as picking up violent tendencies from the games they play. Although the teens interviewed in the article believed that video games should be considered in moderation with other causes of violence, Kaufman’s and the media outlet’s words framed video games as a medium that will seduce children to consume more violent media if parents do nothing to stop it.

Seeing video games scrutinized by the U.S. Senate is reminiscent of how heavy metal and other music genres had to defend themselves from the law when it was accused of connections between people’s deaths and suicides and backmasked lyrics. One example of this lies in the trial

³¹ CBS News, “Talking with Teens Committing Virtual Mayhem,” Vanderbilt TV News Archive, April 25, 1999, 0:23-1:06, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

of musician Ozzy Osbourne and the suicide of John McCollum. Osbourne was blamed for the death of McCollum because “McCollum’s parents claimed that Osbourne’s song [Suicide Solution] encouraged suicide as an ‘solution’ to life’s problems. In his defense statement, Osbourne explained that the song was about the dangers of alcohol abuse...In July 1988 an appellate court upheld the dismissal, ruling that the lyrics were protected under the First Amendment and that no matter how the word ‘solution’ was interpreted, there was no proof that suicide was a foreseeable consequence.”³² This method of trial is similar to how Steger told the Senate that she was pushing for a lawsuit against the developers of the video games the school shooter played. Even though she stated that her suit was not about free speech, it has parallels with McCollum’s reasoning. Steger believed that “the Heath shooter was influenced by the movies he watched, the video games he played, and the Internet sites he accessed.”³³ Both McCollum and Steger stepped up to talk about what happened to their children to enact justice by holding the creators of said media responsible for their content.

Where does *Doom* stand as a crisis?

Doom should be considered a moral panic. Although the game itself did not kill anyone directly, it was played by people like the Columbine shooter and the shooter who killed Sabrina Steger’s daughter. This made *Doom* a part of the bigger problem of children consuming violent media and that media leading to real world violence. This relates back to both comic books and heavy metal. For comics, part of the problem was the ease children had of acquiring comics with mature themes that were not appropriate for their age group. This relates closely to what Shimotakahara noted about the pizza parlors where the eight-year-old played the shooting game,

³² Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide,” 290.

³³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 11-12.

yet gave himself nightmares from it.³⁴ This ease of access to comics is similar to how *Doom* was extremely easy to access for anyone who knew how to use a computer. Keegan explained how Romero and Carmack got people hooked on *Doom* by allowing people to “download the first stages...of *Doom* free. But once addicted, you couldn’t get the whole game unless you forked over a credit card number.”³⁵ Because the first few levels were free, it would not have stopped people from sharing the demo version of *Doom*, although Keegan does not say as much in his article. This mirrors the same process of kids exchanging comics between each other and increasing the overall readership per one comic.

Doom’s moral panic also had ties to the moral panics of heavy metal in terms of U.S. legal troubles, namely both getting caught up in the deaths of people. Heavy metal artists became caught in the middle of legal battles regarding the lyrical content of their songs. Although every case listed by Brackett in his research ended in the artist being covered by free speech, it shows that connecting the death of an individual to the media they consumed was a large enough issue that it required the intervention of the U.S. legal system to determine a solution. For *Doom*, its violent content was enough to contribute to the growing moral crisis surrounding the content that children were playing with and reenacting in the real world; it became a smaller part of the greater whole of violent games that Steger, Shimotakahara, and Dr. Walsh all spoke about to the Senate.

With this information in mind, *Doom* was a contributor to the moral crisis surrounding video games. It was acknowledged as a factor in the history of the Columbine shooter and the shooter mentioned by Sabrina Steger among other media. The game also acted as a gateway to other violent media that emerged as the year 2000 approached. It gave parents and adults a taste

³⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*, 18.

³⁵ Paul Keegan, “A Game Boy in the Cross Hairs.”

of what video games were turning into, how realistic they were, and just how high that ceiling of realness and immersion could and would go. *Doom* was also a warning to adults that video games were something that they needed to keep an eye on. *Pokémon* did this to a degree, but not as much as *Doom* had. While parents had their eyes on *Doom*, it also prepared them for a game that released a couple of years later, and while it did not tie into a real-life shooting, it left parents shocked that the realism presented and sexual content could even be allowed in video games, leading to the peak of the moral crisis of video games in the mid-2000s.

Grand Theft Auto and Hot Coffee:

What Happens When Virtual Violence and Sex Come Together

What is Grand Theft Auto?

Grand Theft Auto is an action-adventure game developed by Rockstar Games and first released in 1997. Rockstar Games' own website advertised *Grand Theft Auto III* using this language: "You've been betrayed and left for dead. Now you're taking revenge, unless the city gets you first... You'll have to rob, steal, and kill just to stay out of serious trouble... with... a huge array of street ready weapons and some of the seediest characters in video game history, *Grand Theft Auto III* is a sprawling epic which will show you that sometimes, crime can pay and sometimes it can pay you back."³⁶ The latest game in the franchise, *Grand Theft Auto V*, released in 2013, and received critical acclaim, as well as a wide player base for its online multiplayer

³⁶ "Welcome to Liberty City where the only dirty word is hope," Rockstar games. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20030110231537/http://www.rockstargames.com/GRANDTHEFTAUTO3/html/info.html>.

mode where players from across the globe can play together and wreak mayhem across the digital sandbox.

Get em' while they're hot: Video Game Sales to those who shouldn't have them

A major cause of the *GTA* crisis originated with kids and teens obtaining copies of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and other M-rated games when they normally would not be able to without a parent or legal guardian there to authorize the purchase. One avenue that kids used was banking on video game retailers not bothering to verify a child or teen's age and selling the M-rated game regardless of whether the child was old enough. In one example provided by an ABC news segment, a fourteen-year-old was able to successfully obtain a copy of an M-rated video game with zero issues, with the cashier even telling the young customer that she was lucky to get the last copy they had.³⁷ The ability for kids to obtain such media so easily became the hot-button topic for familiar face Dr. Walsh from the Institute on Media and the Family. Throughout this news clip, Dr. Walsh called out the ESRB for allowing children to purchase and consume this media, while Doug Lowenstein from the ESRB shifted the responsibility back onto the parents for what their kids are playing in the home.³⁸ The issue of easy access to inappropriate games is similar to the start of the comic book moral crisis. In both situations, kids were able to purchase media that contained content unapproved by adults and parents, with retailers doing nothing to stop those sales. The blame that was shifted between by Dr. Walsh and Lowenstein in the news segment simultaneously showed discontent for kids having access to that kind of

³⁷ ABC News, "M-Rated Games are Too Easy to Purchase," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, November 29, 2005, video, 1:00-1:11, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

³⁸ABC News, "M-Rated Games are Too Easy to Purchase," 2:00-2:20.

violence, yet only pointing at a source other than themselves as the source of that blame. This discontent came to a head with the release of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

Who is enjoying this game? A brief look at what *Grand Theft Auto* did to stand out from the crowd

As video game franchises transitioned away from the pixelated sprites of yesteryear, 3-Dimensional graphics became all the rage with gamers. Consoles like Sony's PlayStation 2 grew into this new era of gaming. With newer gaming consoles came better graphics, and with better graphics also came a higher level of game realism. This realism was seen in games like *Grand Theft Auto III* and its sequel, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. When *San Andreas* released, game reviewers like Jeremy Dunham had no trouble at all singing its praises. He stated in his review that "Those that are ethically opposed to the content of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, however, aren't going to find anything different this time around. The plot is still brutal, the characters are still ruthless, and the moral of the story is that there isn't really a moral."³⁹ Dunham also mentioned in passing that the game contained a sex appeal stat that the player could improve by doing things like modifying the character's car, working out, and wearing nicer clothing.⁴⁰ The game was new enough, but the fallout that would come from parents and legislators alike was something never before seen by the video game industry.

The Rain Before the Downpour: GTA III's effect on parents prior to GTA: San Andreas.

³⁹ Jeremy Dunham, "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas The best PlayStation 2 game ever?," last modified December 13, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2004/10/25/grand-theft-auto-san-andreas-6>.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Dunham, "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas The best PlayStation 2 game ever?."

Prior to the release of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, game developer Rockstar faced backlash from parents and media outlets for the content included in their game *Grand Theft Auto III*, which released in 2001. An important aspect of *GTA III* is how it was the first *Grand Theft Auto* game to be fully 3-Dimensional, with prior games in the franchise being 2-D. With a foray into the third dimension, *GTA III* provided a new way to experience the blood, carnage, and sexual content it was known for. This kind of violence did not go under the radar of parents or the news. *ABC* dedicated both a news segment and a thirty-minute program to the violence of *Grand Theft Auto III* and included the interview of teenagers who had obtained a copy of *GTA III* along with their thoughts. In the *ABC* News clip, Peter Jennings introduced the *GTA III* segment by describing it as “a celebration of violence and crime...developed with young men in mind, but it certainly hasn’t kept the children away.”⁴¹ In the first few seconds, the media framed *GTA III* in a negative context and supported that stance with interviews of young teens conducted by Michele Norris. The segment included teens describing the game as being “as close as you can get to killing someone without being arrested or actually killing someone” or saying that “When I get mad, I just play these and get all my angry thoughts out of my head.”⁴² These comments about getting anger out or killing without getting in trouble were concerning things to hear from younger teens that were still very impressionable, especially after the horrific shooting at Columbine High School. This discussion on the violent content and moral misconduct in *GTA III* was only touched upon in the brief news segment, but were talked about in greater detail on *ABC’s Nightline*.

⁴¹ABC News, “A Celebration of Violence and Crime: GTA III,” Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 1, 2002, video, 0:28-0:38, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

⁴² ABC News, “A Celebration of Violence and Crime: GTA III,” 0:59-2:31.

The news segment provided by *ABC* was brief, but the *Nightline* show hosted by Ted Koppel provided a more in-depth look at *GTA III*, and included an interview with high schooler Steve Crenshaw, Cornell University Professor of Psychology James Garbarino, and Sergeant Gerald Neil, Chairman of D.C. Fraternal Order of Police. After a rehash of the news segment with the teen kids letting their anger out in *GTA III*, Koppel introduced his three guests for the evening, and proceeded to put Crenshaw in the spotlight by showing a brief clip of a shootout and massacre in the *GTA III* free play mode. Over the course of the interview, Koppel asked questions like “What is, if anything, the redeeming social value of playing a video game like this?” and in the context of Crenshaw slamming into a police car asking “There’s no sense of whoops you just hit a police car?”⁴³ Koppel was trying to use this game demonstration as an opportunity to show a disconnect between how kids and teens behave when they play *GTA III* and the real world. Even though Crenshaw refuted multiple times by saying that *GTA III* had other activities that the player could complete, like car racing and flying planes, Koppel kept the primary focus on what the violent content was trying to impart on the younger gamers.

Koppel also revealed that he was quite unfamiliar with the core mechanics of *GTA III*, as he asked Crenshaw how he felt about players being encouraged to kill prostitutes to get their money back after picking them up. Crenshaw refuted by saying that you are not obligated to do so, nor does the game encourage you directly to commit such an act.⁴⁴ Though Koppel moved on from his own point, his description pulled a great deal of focus onto the shock factor of the game for parents by describing the entire act of finding a prostitute, getting them in the car for sex, and

⁴³ ABC News, “Just a Game: Playing Grand Theft Auto III,” Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 10, 2002, video, 14:40-14:45, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

⁴⁴ ABC News, “Just a Game: Playing Grand Theft Auto III,” 16:30-17:03.

then killing them. The way that Koppel phrased the moral questions that he directed to Crenshaw gives a window in just how hard Koppel was trying to get a specific response from Crenshaw, namely, to fully condemn the immoral acts that the player can commit within the digital world. It is important to note that because Crenshaw was in the seat as a player of the game both on and off the set of *Nightline*, Koppel was also condemning the players of *Grand Theft Auto III* for playing the game in the first place. The way that he kept saying that certain acts the player does within the game are done on purpose and encouraged by the game serve as proof of Koppel trying to alert parents to the dangers that immoral games like *Grand Theft Auto III* had within their code, as well as try and guilt players into feeling sorry for their actions in the digital world to rectify the bad behaviors being taught to them by *GTA*.

An additional way of interpreting Koppel's language and questions to Crenshaw is through his references to player choice within *GTA III*. Koppel appeared to accept Crenshaw's responses that the game does not obligate or encourage certain atrocious actions against the digital denizens of *GTA III*, but the fact that players can choose to commit such violent acts in the first place is what concerns Koppel the most. He asked Crenshaw "is there a limit, in your mind. In other words, if there was a clever enough game, with good enough graphics that involve, for example, extracting information under torture from someone. Is there a limit of what you don't do if the graphics are good enough and if the story is intriguing enough?"⁴⁵ Ted Koppel's phrasing of this question to Crenshaw displayed his concern that if violent video games did not have a moral ceiling to stop at, the horrifying actions that players can choose to participate in will increase. For Koppel, these avenues of trying to limit what players experience,

⁴⁵ ABC News, "Just a Game: Playing Grand Theft Auto III," 15:56-16:16.

whether by guilt or by determining whether video games would create a limit to immoral actions were important to him for making the violent content in *GTA III* clear.

Koppel did not limit himself to asking moral questions to Crenshaw only, as he also quizzed James Garbarino about the violence that kids and teen were consuming by playing games like *GTA III*. When asked about the evidence of kids being affected by the violent content they consume, Garbarino equated the evidence to the chance of a smoker getting cancer from participating in that activity; the chance of developing cancer from smoking is low and not everyone who smokes will get it, but why even take the risk of getting cancer at all?⁴⁶ Similar to the way that Koppel talked about *GTA III* encouraging crude and horrible behavior, the smoking and cancer analogy was a scare tactic to convince parents not to even risk their children being exposed to violent content and copying the behaviors portrayed in the virtual world. This concern about the violent and sexual content was only starting with *Grand Theft Auto III* and grew to be a bigger issue with the next iteration in the franchise.

Eyes Wide and Coffee Brewing: The rise of GTA: San Andreas and Hot Coffee

After the release of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* on PC, something new appeared soon after: the Hot Coffee mod. Game modifications allow for a video game to be altered in some way, shape, or form from the original code created by the developers. In the case of Hot Coffee, the mod instead allowed access to content that was left in the game's code but hidden from the player and inaccessible by normal means. Soon after the release of Hot Coffee, news spread like wildfire as PC players downloaded the mod from the world wide web. For parents and adults who did not understand just what *San Andreas* had to do with a caffeinated beverage, BBC news

⁴⁶ABC News, "Just a Game: Playing Grand Theft Auto III," 23:49-23:55.

succinctly described Hot Coffee as “unlock[ing] mini-games in the recently released PC version of San Andreas that lets players make game characters have sex.”⁴⁷ When parents and news outlets caught wind that explicit content was accessible to players who owned a PC copy of *San Andreas* and who knew how to surf the internet, it sparked the outrage that had developed from *GTA III*. Compared to kids becoming obsessed with *Pokémon* cards, Hot Coffee was a serious threat to the moral wellbeing of kids who had access to pornographic content in a game that already contained heavy violence and mature themes deemed unsuitable by parents. Although the game developer, Rockstar, tried to back-pedal and say that the content only existed because “hackers took apart, rebuilt, and then recompiled the game’s underlying computer code,” their statement was ineffective against the storm of negative press that followed soon after the game and mod’s release.⁴⁸

Following the release of Hot Coffee, news outlets were unflinching in negatively framing the violence and sexual content in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. NBC news spoke about *San Andreas* and the Hot Coffee mod in a segment aired on July 14, 2005, just a month after the release of the PC port of the game. News anchor Brian Williams spoke about *GTA* as a disease or a threat, saying that “if it’s not in your house, there’s a good chance your neighbor’s got it” and asked if “parents can trust what’s on those warning labels.”⁴⁹ The news segment also included a brief interview with a man named Ronald Moutan, who was picketing stores that sold *San Andreas*. He stated that “You can’t really go too far from your children because you don’t know

⁴⁷ “Clinton wades into GTA sex storm,” *BBC News*, July 14, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4682533.stm>.

⁴⁸ “Clinton wades into GTA sex storm.”

⁴⁹ NBC News, “A Dirty Little Secret: Sex Scenes in Grand Theft Auto,” Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 14, 2005, video, 0:34-0:46, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

what they could be exposed to.”⁵⁰ This NBC article provided information to parents that was important, but also utilized language and interviews that were meant to drive fear that kids could be getting “exposed” to this content whether it is in their home or the home of somebody they know like a friend or a neighbor. The way this news segment talked about *San Andreas* is reminiscent of Wertham’s primary concern that comic books would degrade the welfare of children if they continued to consume them. The news also spoke of the video game in a way to simultaneously make parents afraid of what their kids could be doing unsupervised, as well as angry that game developers and outside forces could change a game that did not have explicit content to start have it via game modification off the internet.

NBC was not the only news station to reveal to its audience the moral dangers of *San Andreas*. ABC News took a swing at Hot Coffee around the same time as NBC. However, in Dan Harris’ interview with Dr. Walsh from the Institute for Family and Media, he outright claims that “unbeknownst to millions of parents, kids could be engaged in literally directing porn scenes.”⁵¹ This was a departure from the language that was used in the NBC article, framing *San Andreas* in a worse light than NBC did with its own article and demonstrating ABC’s desire to draw a stronger reaction about the game and Hot Coffee. This warning also makes stronger pulls on parents’ feelings towards violent video games and put them on alarm for what their children may be consuming. Rather than relying solely on the rhetoric of the newscasters to warn about Hot Coffee, the statements provided by Dr. Walsh and State Representative Leland Yee of California leaned on the emotional side of the argument to get their point across that *San*

⁵⁰NBC News, “A Dirty Little Secret: Sex Scenes in Grand Theft Auto,” 1:29-1:34.

⁵¹ ABC News, “Pornography added to game already notorious for violence,” Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 11, 2005, video, 0:58-1:08, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

Andreas was a dangerous piece of content for children to consume. In addition to ABC and NBC running stories about *San Andreas*, legislators and Senators other than Leland Yee put their hat in the ring to stop immoral content from falling into the hands of children.

Around the same time that ABC and NBC aired their news segments on the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, other legislators came forward with their own thoughts on *GTA* and other violent games on the market. New York Senator Hillary Clinton was among the legislators who spoke out against both the content of *San Andreas* and Hot Coffee, as well as the ease of access kids had of purchasing M-rated video games at retailers. In an article by the *New York Times*, Clinton was reported as asking the Federal Trade Commission to look deeper into the “the source of this content [Hot Coffee].”⁵² The ESRB also put out a statement the same day as the *New York Times* article, where they declared that the ESRB was “currently in the process of conducting a thorough and judicious investigation with regard to this issue... We are committed to ensuring the integrity of the ESRB rating process and making certain that the ratings are reliable and accurately representative of game content.”⁵³ This attention from Senator Clinton and the reassurance from the ESRB of their own investigation shows the lengths that were being taken with *Grand Theft Auto* and how its content was damaging enough to warrant the government’s attention. The way Senator Clinton tried to tackle violent content in games is similar to how the judicial court became involved with legal cases of backmasking in heavy metal and other popular songs during the 1980s, and also follows from the *Doom* hearings years prior.

⁵² Raymond Hernandez, “Clinton Urges Inquiry Into Hidden Sex in Grand Theft Auto Game,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), July 14, 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/14/nyregion/clinton-urges-inquiry-into-hidden-sex-in-grand-theft-auto-game.html>.

⁵³“Statement by ESRB President Patricia Vance regarding announcement by Senator Hillary Clinton,” accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.esrb.org/blog/statement-by-esrb-president-patricia-vance-regarding-announcement-by-senator-hillary-clinton/>.

Senator Clinton took her crackdown on violent games past the written word and onto the airwaves during a televised conference in December 2005 that explained a piece of legislation that she was introducing to Congress to discuss: the Family Entertainment Protection Act. This article as described by Senator Clinton was to “prohibit the sale of violent and sexually explicit video games to minors, and will give parents the tools they need to make informed decisions.”⁵⁴ Clinton did acknowledge that some games were not violent and good for kids, but called out against games that included violent content like “spraying other players with Uzis, to drive over pedestrians, to kill police officers, to attack women, and in some cases to engage in cannibalism...we have forty years of research to tell us that violent media is bad for our children. According to the most comprehensive statistical analysis yet conducted, violent video games increase aggressive behavior as much as lead exposure decreases children’s IQ scores.”⁵⁵ Even though Clinton made a similar comment as Senator Brownback during the Senate hearing in 2000, comparing lead poisoning to children playing violent video games was a clear move made by Clinton to sway parents into agreeing with the legislation she proposed to Congress.

As part of her explanation, Clinton reiterated the importance of her legislation. She exclaimed that “this legislation is not about government censorship or regulation of content, quite simply, it is about protecting children, and empowering parents...if you put it just really simply, these violent games are stealing the innocence of our children...so the time has come to put on the brakes.”⁵⁶ The rhetoric used in this argument against violent video games is similar to the response to comic books provided by Wertham, who worked to limit children’s access to mature comic books to preserve their welfare and prevent general juvenile delinquency. Both

⁵⁴ FutureMajority, “Hillary Clinton Hates On Video Games,” YouTube, December 7, 2006, video, 0:31-0:42.

⁵⁵ FutureMajority, “Hillary Clinton Hates On Video Games,” 1:33-2:30.

⁵⁶ FutureMajority, “Hillary Clinton Hates On Video Games,” 3:43-4:23.

Clinton and Wertham crafted their argument to scare the readers and listeners into keeping their children away from the media that was leading to their moral destruction.

As a final note on the Clinton Crusade against violent and sexual content, a view of the Family Entertainment Protection Act is in order. Should this legislation have passed, game retailers would have been subject to a civil penalty for damages. The act also permitted the FTC to conduct a survey on how many times minors tried to buy an M-rated or Adult Only-rated video game.⁵⁷ Also, the document stated that the Protection Act “Expresses the sense of Congress that whenever the FTC determines that the content of a video game is inconsistent with the rating given to such game, it shall take appropriate action under its authority to regulate unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce.”⁵⁸ This would allow the FTC and government to intervene and ensure that a game is properly rated and appropriate action could be taken against the publisher and developer for hiding such objectionable content from the ESRB. Similar to the bill introduced by Senator Wyman during the Heavy Metal panic, Senator Clinton’s Protection Act never made it past introduction to the House of Representatives.

Was GTA a Moral Panic?

The violence and sexual content within the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise shaped it to be the biggest moral panic yet. It combined the horrific violence that parents despised in *Doom*, and experienced the same kind of explosive popularity that *Pokémon* had during its trading card and video game boom. The moral panic aspect of *GTA* was pushed further than what *Doom* elicited because of the player’s freedom of action within the game. While Crenshaw argued in the

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, “S.2126 – Family Entertainment Protection Act.” Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/senate-bill/2126>.

⁵⁸ U.S. Congress, “S.2126 – Family Entertainment Protection Act.”

Nightline program that the player has the freedom to do any number of activities that do not involve violence, the fact that players could make the free choice to commit digital atrocities, of which running over pedestrians and killing police officers was a heavy talking point of Ted Koppel, marked an easy avenue for adults to have deep problems with the franchise.

The release of the Hot Coffee mod for the PC version of *San Andreas* only dragged *GTA* further into the abyss of controversy. While parents were disgusted with the violence in *GTA III*, the sexual content that appeared thanks to Hot Coffee was simply too much for parents to bear and action was taken. This draws similarities with how the ESRB and comic book code each created self-regulating measures to ensure that customers were made aware of a game's content, and that comics would not have certain kinds of content at all respectively.

Another aspect of this panic is the role that the news played in the general perception of *Grand Theft Auto*. ABC and NBC both utilized language that made the game sound like an epidemic that needed to be stopped. *Nightline* quoted teens saying that the game let them get their anger or that they enjoyed the game and its violence because it was something that kids their age were not supposed to have, thus making its mature themes more tantalizing. The news media also attempted to equate moral actions in the real world with actions committed in the virtual world of video games. Ted Koppel did this with Crenshaw during the demonstration segment of *Nightline*, as well as in his own questioning on player choice in a game world that supports immoral decision making with little repercussion. Koppel's use of guilt-filled language and of players making immoral choices shows Koppel's concerns with the violent content within *GTA III*, as well as how violent games could contain more immoral content in the future that could leave a serious impact on a child as they develop. Clinton also worked to apply video game morals to the real world by making references to shooting guns and killing police officers. Both

Koppel and Clinton tried to portray themselves as neutral in their discussion on violent video games but explained through their statements that they thought that kids should not be able to access violent games like *GTA* so they would not learn poor moral lessons. Considering the legislation that Clinton introduced to Congress for discussion, Clinton wanted a governmental version of what the Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America had developed as a guideline system to ensure that no terrible moral messages were given to children reading comic books. *Grand Theft Auto* truly encapsulated the moral panic that began to grow after Columbine and reached its peak with Hot Coffee.

So Where Do Video Games Sit Now?

Between *Pokémon*, *Doom*, and *Grand Theft Auto*, video games experienced a moral panic beyond the one experienced by comic books and heavy metal. The way that each franchise's moral quandaries compounded on each other over time required from adults an entirely new strategy for dealing with the immoral aspects present in this digital world. Compared to comic books and heavy metal, which relied on only sight or only sound to get its message across, the way that video games combined sight, sound, and an interactive element created a challenge for parents and political figures in determining how to ensure that children were not consuming immoral content.

In terms of games being a moral panic, parents treated video games in a similar manner as comics and heavy metal. However, parents went to much greater lengths to ensure the welfare of children's minds, further than comic books or heavy metal dared to go. Parents and legislators had no choice but to take more drastic measures with video games due to the real-world effects they had. *Pokémon*, while realistically a minimal panic in the grand scheme of things, led to

some kids being injured over pieces of cardboard with supposed value. *Doom* had gotten caught up in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999, which led to a broader discussion on what the big takeaway was for kids who got their hands on violent video games. Finally, *Grand Theft Auto* introduced a new level of realism, violence, and sexual content that had not been realized before in the digital world. This caused parents to truly consider what they were allowing their child to do in their free time. Compare this with comic books, which eventually led to the industry self-censoring its content for decades, or heavy metal, which caused an uproar over subliminal messaging and resulting in groups fighting tooth and nail to maintain the mental health of the kids and teens listening to the records. For what video games could provide for a young player, allowing them to participate in such actions, even if they were virtual, was just too much for parents to take, and resulted in the significant backlash that video games experienced during this time period.

There is no doubt that video games had a moral panic, but it is also important to consider that these panics faded as well. With video games, there was lots of talk about what to do about the violent and sexual content, yet there was no long-term action or effect. Take for example comic books, where that panic ended with the industry self-censoring its content and ensured good moral upkeep in its own stories. Video games on the other hand saw no change in the content that was allowed, nor any significant shift from the *ESRB* in how they handled the rating of games or what they considered an M-Rating or Adult Only rating. Another example is the legislation that was introduced by Senator Clinton to Congress. According to Congress' database, the Family Entertainment Protection Act was indeed introduced to the Senate, but it went no further than that. This is comparable to Assemblyman Wyman causing a commotion with backmasking in heavy metal, which was unable to hold enough water in the court system at

the end of the day. Considering this, it shows that a lot of the talk on video games was just sound and fury, possibly intended to rile up as many parents and legislators as possible about the harm that could come to the youth if they continued to have such easy access to violent video games.

A key aspect of that sound and fury is how the video game panic seems to have faded from public perception. The reason that this panic could have faded away like this has to do with the inaction of legislation and groups against video games. Going back to the comic code example, that panic faded away too, but only after radical changes had been made to the content that was allowed in such media in the first place. Heavy metal also experienced change in the form of court cases against the artist and the medium itself for its subliminal messaging, leading to a parental explicit content advisory label on records and CDs that contained such rhetoric or themes. To see that video games saw a bigger moral panic than comic books or heavy metal, only to slowly fade away into a new sense of normalcy suggests that moral panics truly are panics and not something that is world-ending with its mere existence.

This analysis of moral panics sets the bar for the analysis of modern video games, as well as for other forms of media that become popular in the future. Video games during the 1990s and early-2000s represent the cycle of popular media acceptance where a certain medium gets popular, certain people or groups fight against its immoral content, and eventually the media settles into a state of normalcy within society. Further analysis will be necessary to confirm whether parents and legislators have allowed video games to settle in as society's pastime. As video games evolve from here, it will be interesting to see where parents draw the moral line in the sand against video games once again, or whether a new form of popular media will experience the cycle of moral panic as those media that came before.

Bibliography

- ABC News, "A Celebration of Violence and Crime: GTA III," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 1, 2002, video, 0:28-2:31, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.
- ABC News, "Just a Game: Playing Grand Theft Auto III," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 10, 2002, video, 14:40-23:55, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.
- ABC News, "M-Rated Games are Too Easy to Purchase," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, November 29, 2005, video, 1:00-2:20, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.
- ABC News, "Pornography added to game already notorious for violence," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 11, 2005, video, 0:58-1:08, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.
- ABC News, "The Fickleness of fads, and full on Pokemia." Vanderbilt TV News Archive, September 1, 1999, video 2:41-2:49, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.
- Brackett, John. "Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide: The Formation and Development of an Antirock Discourse in the United States during the 1980s." *American Music* 36, no. 3 (2018): 271–302. <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.36.3.0271>.
- CBS News, "Talking with Teens Committing Virtual Mayhem," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, April 25, 1999, 0:23-1:06, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.
- "Clinton wades into GTA sex storm." *BBC News*. July 14, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4682533.stm>.
- "Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc., 1954." U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/artifact/code-comics-magazine-association-america-inc-1954>.
- Dunham, Jeremy. "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas The best PlayStation 2 game ever?." Last modified December 13, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2004/10/25/grand-theft-auto-san-andreas-6>.

Finkelstein, Katherine E. "Pokemon Movie vs. School? For Young Fans, That's a No-Brainer." *The New York Times*, November 11, 1999.

FutureMajority. "Hillary Clinton Hates On Video Games." YouTube, December 7, 2006, video, 0:31-4:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1udjd2Aq3E>.

"Is Pokemon Evil? Well, probably not. But educators and parents still worry it's gone too far." *Newsweek*, Vol. 134, Issue 20 . https://go-gale-com.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/ps/i.do?p=MSIC&u=mli_n_s_bridcoll&id=GALE%7CA57437740&v=2.1&it=r&sid=ebsco.

Keegan, Paul. "A Game Boy in the Cross Hairs." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), May 23, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/23/magazine/a-game-boy-in-the-cross-hairs.html>.

NBC News, "A Dirty Little Secret: Sex Scenes in Grand Theft Auto," Vanderbilt TV News Archive, July 14, 2005, video, 0:34-1:34, <https://media.vanderbilt.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=ViewAssetShare&Key=2bfv58leohnh375177vjf801mw68u38&RW=766&RH=738>.

"Our History." *ESRB*. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.esrb.org/history/>.

Raymond, Hernandez. "Clinton Urges Inquiry Into Hidden Sex in Grand Theft Auto Game." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), July 14, 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/14/nyregion/clinton-urges-inquiry-into-hidden-sex-in-grand-theft-auto-game.html>.

"S.2126 – Family Entertainment Protection Act." U.S. Congress. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/senate-bill/2126>.

"Statement by ESRB President Patricia Vance regarding announcement by Senator Hillary Clinton." *ESRB*. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.esrb.org/blog/statement-by-esrb-president-patricia-vance-regarding-announcement-by-senator-hillary-clinton/>.

Tilley, Carol L. "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics." *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 383–413. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737440>.

"Ultimate Doom." Id Software. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/19970615015445/http://www.idsoftware.com/>.

U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children*. 106th, 2d sess., 2000. S. Hrg. 106-1096. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg78656/pdf/CHRG-106shrg78656.pdf>.

“Welcome to Liberty City where the only dirty word is hope.” Rockstar games. Accessed April 25, 2022.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20030110231537/http://www.rockstargames.com/GRANDTHEFTAUTO3/html/info.html>.

“Who We Are.” National Institute on Media and the Family. Accessed May 9, 2022.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20061228181421/http://www.mediafamily.org/about/index.shtml>.