

**PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME:  
GAMES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEREOTYPES IN MORAL PANICS  
FROM 1976-1999**

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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## ABSTRACT

### PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME: GAMES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEREOTYPES IN MORAL PANICS FROM 1976-1999

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Beginning in the 1970s, games went from being trivial and innocuous elements of childhood culture to major touchstones of North American popular culture. Games came to symbolize the dangers of a rapidly shifting technological and cultural landscape. This led to a series of moral panics that were centered upon these new, often complex, and increasingly realistic games that were apparently a source of moral corruption for children and teenagers. This view of games as a moral hazard for young people was often taken up by the news and mass-media, opening the path for many moral entrepreneurs to leverage ‘common sense’ Media Effects thinking and gamer stereotypes for their own personal gain. This thesis tracks the historical development of these interrelated phenomena from *Death Race* in 1976, the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, the *Mortal Kombat* hearings and finally to *Doom* and the Columbine Massacre in 1999.

Keywords: video games, realism, role-playing games, moral panic, moral entrepreneurs, stereotypes, Media Effects.

## PREFACE

This thesis began its life as a very different project, as will be covered in the Introduction. Because of this, it is worth noting one of the major reasons for such a radical departure, even if it does not fit within the scope of the thesis itself.

During the writing of this thesis, I was involved in a historical research project with one of my supervisors, Katrina, that set out to develop a video game centered on the history of the Sierra Leone Estuary during the 1700s. This was *Bunce Island: Through the Mirror*. During the development, I took on many roles, most notably that of historical research into Atlantic piracy, and the practice and integration of photogrammetry as a core element of the project. With game series like *Assassin's Creed* and *Red Dead Redemption* as models for *Bunce Island*, realism was emphasized from the start as being an important element to the game's potential use as a pedagogical tool. However, this emphasis on realism in game form was not seen by everyone as being a positive feature. It was this questioning, particularly by the somewhat skeptical Africanist Paul Lovejoy, that led to this historical exploration of the other side of gaming history.

## NOTE ON FORMATTING

I have used Chicago Style throughout, with full bibliographical data in the initial footnote for each source. Shortened notes are used sparingly and only when contextually appropriate. I have also opted for a slight modification of the standard style and moved the publication date immediately after the author(s). As this is a historical work that follows a rather condensed time period of only about 25 years, this modification allows for much easier access to important information (dates) via the footnotes. This change is also reflected in the full Bibliography.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support and input of many other people. Firstly, I would like to thank my parents for their incredible and ongoing support, I could not have gotten here without their help. I would also like to thank my amazing supervisors, Hugh and Katrina, who, along with being my supervisors, I am also lucky enough to call my friends. And although this thesis does not go into much detail about *Bunce Island: Through the Mirror*, I owe much of its inspiration to the team, especially the other students; Rachel, Wacera, Hayden, Zach and Charles. Most importantly, I thank Mary for her unending support (and I'm sorry it took so long!).

## DEDICATION

For Mary,  
who believed in me even when I didn't.  
And for Pop,  
who did not see this finished, but was proud nonetheless.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*D&D: Dungeons & Dragons*

TTRPG: Tabletop Role-Playing Game

*RDRII: Red Dead Redemption II*

*AC: Assassin's Creed*

PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME:  
GAMES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEREOTYPES IN MORAL PANICS  
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INTRODUCTION

*It's Just Like Minecraft!*

In writing the introduction to this thesis I was tempted to emulate the thrilling style that Adam Chapman uses in his introduction to *Digital Games as History* (2016). Rather than starting off with some sort of defense of video games and their place in the historical discourse, Chapman begins with a first-person account of his experience actually playing a video game, the 2002 WWII first-person shooter (FPS) *Medal of Honor: Frontline*. Adam Chapman himself did not storm the beaches of Normandy in 1944, but it certainly feels as if he could have been there after reading this account of his simulated encounter with an important moment in history. This is quite an unexpected start to an academic volume, but it communicates both the scope of the work and provides a powerful implicit argument about the importance of video games without simply referencing growing player bases and the economic power of video games. I would likely have taken a similar tact, although my introduction to the power historical video games might have been an account of the lead up to the final mission as Arthur Morgan in *Red Dead Redemption II*. And while it might have been a stirring introduction to this project, upon further reflection, such an introduction just did not fit as well with the scope of this current project. Chapman notes that playing that level from *Medal of Honor* was the first time he had a “palpable sense... that maybe video games could be history.”<sup>1</sup> From my perspective, growing up about fifteen years later, there never seemed to be any question that video games could be history and

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<sup>1</sup> Chapman, Adam. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, 5.

my friends and I certainly treated them as if they were standard historical texts that could be studied and understood.

I mean that last point quite literally. During my time at high school, there were no history classes beside the obligatory tenth grade Canadian history class required to graduate. However, as we had done for years before, my friends and I would play, and comment on, discuss and argue over our own historical perceptions and the impressions that we had developed from a whole assortment of games. Chief among these were classic strategy games like *Civilization IV* (2005), *Total War: Rome* (2004) and the various Paradox Interactive games (though I am still hopelessly lost trying to play those very complex games like *Hearts of Iron IV* and *Crusader Kings II*!). I am sure that most of our talking points from our high school years would make us cringe to hear them now, but we all had fun, and upon reflection our ‘discourse’ was perhaps not too different in structure from a university seminar. In any event, the point is that video games are so thoroughly ingrained in contemporary culture that those who have grown up with them do not question their historical value. At least for my generation, who grew up in the late-2000s and 2010s, video games are aspects of culture that have been thoroughly internalized and discussing them both casually and critically has always come naturally, whether those games are based in history or not.

I also want to take some time to recognize that historical video games are often not taken in passively, but engaged with actively by their players. Even if that engagement is as simple as guessing at what time and place the next *Assassin’s Creed* game might take place in, these games still manage to get their players to think about history in different contexts. More often than not players also engage with history critically as well, perhaps not with the same tools and techniques that professional historians are trained to use, but they nonetheless use video games to

form historical meanings and understandings. Video games are more or less ubiquitous in the Global North, and it is important to keep that in mind as many people form their historical perceptions in part around the representations they witness and embody in the simulated historical worlds of video games, not merely or even primarily from books or history courses.

### *Everyday History and Video Games*

I emphasize the ubiquity of video games because I see it on a daily basis. Having played video games and been party to video game discourse for such a long time, video games and this discourse became so commonplace as to almost be invisible. My first experience in really coming to understand the historical and even didactic potential of video games came not from playing them directly, but from observing the weight and value that others gave them. These observations mostly come from my experiences working as an interpreter at a living history museum that represents a time period of 1825-1899 in what was Upper Canada. Being an interpreter has given me the opportunity to actively engage with the ‘average’ person who might be casually interested in history but has likely never had an education in history beyond the odd undergraduate course. It is amazing how often visitors reference video games, having clearly internalized something about them and then make use of them in discussions with us interpreters about the buildings, time periods, craft and culture. Some favourites are popular games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), which is a fantasy game with swords and sorcery, but offers the player opportunities to build skills in crafts like blacksmithing, carpentry and wood milling. These simulated crafts are often the visitor’s only ‘first-hand’ experience with these sorts of specialized techniques and thus provide context for many aspects of a nineteenth century village. *Red Dead Redemption II* is also commonly referenced as it takes place in the same time period as the later buildings in the museum (1899) and provides good context for towns of the time. There

have been many times someone has walked into the Menie General Store in awe because they feel they have experienced it before in *RDR2*. The same thing happens when people who grew up in rural Ontario in '40s and '50s walk in and are transported back to their childhood. Both have some sort of personal experience with an old general store.

Regardless of the game being referenced, there is always an opportunity to talk about how it represents a specific historical time and place, and how this might change through time and over space. From the perspective of an interpreter who approaches history as a conversational exchange, it is clear that many people are actively engaged with historical video games and integrate their own observations into their working models of history. It is a shared point of reference from their everyday life that allows insight into the historical world. They may not always be comfortable talking about the 'pure' history on display, but they are comfortable and familiar with their favourite video games (or other media) to be confident when discussing them. Video games are often the point of departure for many people who enter the museum and their primary context for the historical worlds represented by the museum.

And then there are the children. Interpreting to children can be a challenge at first, but they tend to be much more predictable in many ways than adult visitors. When the village runs the spring school program there are often one hundred or more children visiting a day, and I can, almost guarantee that I will hear the phrase "it's just like *Minecraft*!" when a class enters the Blacksmith shop. It is actually quite shocking - both the regularity of the exclamation and the longevity that *Minecraft* has had over children's perception of craft and technological development. When confronted with the 'real world' environment of the blacksmith or carpenter shops, and even our village's 'settler's first house,' a cabin constructed from logs (often the first thing one must make in a game of *Minecraft*), these comparisons seem inevitable. It is worth

noting that while this is purely anecdotal, it is a clearly repeated pattern over years (at least the many that I have been working) that is only becoming more common. While each visitor or group of visitors is different and the benefit of conversational interpretation is its dynamic ability to adapt to individual's needs, such repeated patterns warrant deep thought. It is obvious that games like *Minecraft* and their procedural arguments are being internalized by a notable number of people and even though it is not strictly a historical game, it still readily provides an understandable and compelling model of historical processes that is accessible even to young children in grades two and three.

As much as museums would like to think that video games might supplement their portrayals of history, it is often the other way around, and museums indeed are the ones that must supplement the video games now. Museums are strange, confusing and often suboptimal environments for children to actually learn in because of their discrete separation with the real world that they actually inhabit. Video games, however, are inhabited daily by many, and thus, their implicit and explicit arguments tend to be easier to understand even than the expositional ideas of historical institutions (universities among them). *Minecraft* can be a complicated game by any measure, but there is something compelling about it that is unavoidable and likely unavailable to the normal apparatus of historical institutions. Like museums, which are now supplemental to many people's formation of historical understanding, in all practical senses academic history is often supplemental to the procedural histories at play in games that require their players uninterrupted attention. In other words, people play video games and then, if the game is compelling enough, might become interested in researching the historical setting on its own and turn to institutional knowledge like museums or the academy *after* forming their vision of the historical world from their favourite games.

In my own interpretive practice, I readily engage with the visitors' ludologically informed sense of history. Whether that be enthusiastically showing a visitor a copy of an Eaton's catalogue that would have been available to store patrons to look through, and which is the main system for purchasing supplies in *Red Dead Redemption II*; or asking children who play *Minecraft* what an anvil is used for in the game and then for them to infer what I might use my anvil for in the blacksmith shop, these are valuable pedagogical approaches. Active historical interpretation is an exercise in humility, and part of that is letting go of the idea that institutions necessarily hold the keys to the past, especially for the majority who are only casually interested in the pursuit of history. I am fully aware of the ironic nature of that statement and conceptual framing as I write an MA thesis and have worked at a museum for years. I am also not interested in the so-called 'decentering' of the institution to the extent that it is often argued for, but rather, the understanding that historical thought is much more complicated than the top-down History-with-a-capital-H perception through which institutions disseminate 'proper' history to the masses. With increasingly self-aware popular historical media and culture, that notion just does not hold up for the majority anymore (in practice if not in theory), if it ever had in the first place. It is much more a conversation, and unfortunately, the institutions seem to be (or have historically been) the most ungenerous of conversationalists.

### ***A Challenger Approaches***

Jerome de Groot issued an 'invitation to historians' in 2014. This 'challenge' was to urge professional historians and those in related academic disciplines to seriously acknowledge, work with and think through the rapidly developing domain of popular history and to consider how the academy relates to these increasingly culturally significant media artefacts.<sup>2</sup> At the time of

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<sup>2</sup> De Groot, Jerome. 2014. "Invitation to Historians" *Rethinking History* 18.4.

writing this, that invitation is almost 10 years old, but the point still stands. In fact, the age of the article in question is emblematic of one of the bigger problems that faces the academy in the era of the popular proliferation of all sorts of media. While the production of television, film, games and more ephemeral media like podcasts and YouTube videos is constantly changing and updating, academic knowledge seems always two steps behind. This especially seems to be the case for media that is predicated on innovation and novelty video games. A video game that came out in 2014 is old news, an entire console generation or two old, and even if it is still relevant it is certainly not going to garner the attention of most gamers – unless there is a re-release or remastered version, itself an innovation.<sup>3</sup> A 2014 article on the other hand, while not new, does not have the same ‘age’ that a video game likely would. In any case, it is difficult to keep up with these ever-evolving cultural landscapes and may be a pursuit that will never be adequately expressed in the literature - which necessarily moves much slower than the development of these digital media and culture. It is often that our academic world is ‘playing catch-up’ with the media environment and historians must become more comfortable working with much larger data sets, and with data that is always changing before our eyes. With this in mind, de Groot’s invitation reads much more like a challenge than an invitation, and it is no small challenge at that.

Whether or not this project, or any singular project, can ever fully respond to or answer de Groot’s challenge, this will be an attempt to delve deeper into the complexities of a specific medium; video games and the cultural perceptions around them. To orient the project as something of a response to de Groot’s challenge is to immediately establish its scope and the

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<sup>3</sup> Some games are perennially popular, like *Minecraft*, *Grand Theft Auto* (especially online and role-playing) and *Skyrim*, though these are not the norm. Even in these ever-popular titles, patches, updates and new features or new community mods are almost always the driving force behind a game's continued popularity.

fields and disciplines that will be utilized. Primarily, this is a cultural work, as opposed to a purely historical work; I am not so much interested in the specifics of the content in any particular game, but rather how these games might come to be understood meaningfully by the communities who have a stake in the game, and, most importantly for this study, those who reject video games. As this deals directly with video games, games studies literature is required to do justice to the complexities of video games as a media, along with supplemental uses of various media theory. Theory here is particularly important, as we are in rather uncharted waters, but that theory, by the end, will also be practically employed in relation to an actual video game in development.

### *Normal History*

Reflecting upon his own unexpected encounter with a historical re-enactment outside the British Library, de Groot notes in relation to the audience's reception of the performance that "it was *normal* – this was how people's historical imaginations were fired and resourced, through standard tropes of performance, embodiment, material configuration of the past in the present."<sup>4</sup> There is a lot here in this short sentence, but it gets at the essence of how the past and history is normally presented to and understood by the non-academic majority. This form of popular history is something that is expected to arouse some sort of engagement, or 'fire the imagination' while also, perhaps inadvertently or secondarily 'resourcing' it with historical content and knowledge. This is not the goal of written, professional history, which is not written necessarily in order to engage a broad audience, but is written for an audience that is already deeply engaged in historical discourse. Harlan points out that while 'real' (read: published academic) history attempts to reconstruct the past in terms of Lowenthal's concept of past as a foreign country to

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<sup>4</sup> de Groot 2014, 600. Emphasis in the original

be studied and understood on its own terms,<sup>5</sup> the performative aspects of popular history ('heritage,' according to Lowenthal,<sup>6</sup>) engage with the past in terms of present sensibilities and interests.<sup>7</sup> To make use of Lowenthal's metaphor, popular history starts closer to home or even at home. These sorts of popular histories are more 'normal' precisely because they take place in and amongst everyday life, usually in the form of leisure activities like watching television, casual reading and game playing that can more often than not provide incidental encounters with the past. These incidental encounters occur in media that would likely have been consumed anyway, but the rising popularity of historical media of all sorts indicates a growing preference for it as well.<sup>8</sup>

Historical discourse like this proliferates the world of media, everything from the new *National Geographic History* magazine's meteoric rise in popularity with a circulation of 275 thousand monthly copies after just a few years,<sup>9</sup> to the popularization of period and costume dramas like *Downton Abbey*<sup>10</sup>, and even the explosion of family genealogy websites, DNA kits and television shows.<sup>11</sup> There is no lack of interest in the past and there are more than enough popular sources to satisfy that growing interest. The size and ubiquity of this phenomenon is important to realize, and the implications of this new historical culture is vast. It is perhaps a controversial statement, but the institutional paradigm of public and popular history as being

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<sup>5</sup> Lowenthal, D. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Lowenthal, D. 1996. *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Toronto: The Free Press.

<sup>7</sup> Harlan, David. 2007. "Historical Fiction and the Future of Academic Historiography" in *Manifestos for History* eds. Kieth Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alun Munslow, 120.

<sup>8</sup> de Groot, Jerome. 2009. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> National Geographic. National Geographic History Media Information Kit 2019/20. Digital. [https://www.nationalgeographic.com/mediakit/assets/img/downloads/2019/NGH\\_2019\\_Media\\_Kit.pdf](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/mediakit/assets/img/downloads/2019/NGH_2019_Media_Kit.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Mattison, Jane. 2014. "Downton Abbey: A Cultural Phenomenon. History for the Many." *Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation* 1.5.

<sup>11</sup> Donnelly, Debra J. and Emma L. Shaw. 2020. "Docudrama as 'Histotainment': Repackaging Family History in the Digital Age." *Public History Review* 25.

understood as secondary to academic history and a watered-down version for the masses, does not hold up. For the vast majority of people interested in history, these non-academic experiences and encounters with the past are the default and normal ways of understanding history and that is important to grasp from a cultural and critical point of view.

### *Video Games in the Media and Historical Landscape*

What does this mean for video games? To put it simply, video games engage players with the past in various ways, most of which are different from the ways that academic and written history engage their audiences. This can make them tricky things to grasp from an academic perspective as the problems of history, pedagogy and procedurality are superimposed upon each other whenever the simple question of “what do video games communicate about history?” is asked. To better understand the ways that video games work, what they teach and how they can be used to teach, one must understand games in general - their procedurality and arguments from their mechanical systems. Games, however, are not isolated things and their development as cultural artifacts is important to understand as well. Games do not merely exist in a vacuum, they influence one another and are influenced by other media, and the cultural preconceptions concerning games and video games greatly influence how they are developed and understood.

This thesis began with the idea of investigating the rather narrow topic of video games and ‘historical authenticity.’ However, for many reasons, that topic turned out to be somewhat of a personal dead-end. The highly theoretical focus of the concept was interesting, but ultimately much too ill-defined for any practical application. The concept of historical authenticity tends to either be instrumentalized in order to either disguise something’s historical (in)accuracy, or as a means to artificially boost the status of a piece of media or publisher, or both at once. This instrumentalized use of the idea of historical authenticity in the context of video games is best

laid-out in Esther Wright's *Rockstar Games and American History* (2022). On the other hand, the theoretical approach to authenticity demonstrates just how conceptual and imprecise authenticity is. There are a few underlying elements to a theory of authenticity, such as authorizing agents, subjective and objective authenticities and so on, but at the end of the day, authenticity is such an indeterminate subject that there can really never be any type of definition beyond individual conceptualizations (at least to my liking). For instance, it can be 'selective' by playing with popular tropes in the media landscape that are already familiar to the audience in an attempt to demonstrate the accuracy and historicity of a game or other media artifact.<sup>12</sup> It can be construed as being 'hot,' when it comes to engaging people in historically centered experiences, or 'cold' if it is merely an object to be authenticated.<sup>13</sup> Authenticity can bring out the dirt of 'real-life' by displaying a down-to-earth and inhabited representation of the world that is not just the sterilized artifacts behind the museum glass.<sup>14</sup> And again, even though there may not be an explicit motivation behind it, these definitions tend to instrumentalize authenticity in order to demonstrate a specific historical or theoretical idea. Authenticity is a blurry enough concept to be used whenever and wherever one might need it. The concept might be helpful in demonstrating a particular historical idea, but authenticity in itself is a mostly empty container with useful connotations – there are only declarations of authenticity for a particular end or authenticity modified for use in a particular argument.

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<sup>12</sup> Salvati, Andrew J. and Jonathan M. Bullinger. 2013. "Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kappel and Andrew B.R. Elliott. New York: Bloomsbury. 153-168.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, Erik and Scott Cohen, 2012. "Authentication: Hot and Cool," *Annals of Tourism Research* 39.3: 1297.

<sup>14</sup> Gable, Eric and Richard Handler. 1993. "DEEP DIRT: Messing up the Past at Colonial Williamsburg." *Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 34: 3.

### *Realism and Its Discontents*

A discussion of authenticity might then be particularly fruitful, especially for a theory centered thesis. However, in light of the significant work and research conducted for a video game development project, detailed in the preface, a wholly theoretical thesis seemed less than ideal. The new scope of the thesis is therefore much less theoretically focused, and instead of an exploration of authenticity, is a sort of cultural history of video games themselves. And while this introduction has so far focused on a positive understanding of video games and their potential place in historical practice, the thesis as a whole presents a history of the opposite view and its development. Over the course of about 25 years, from the mid-1970s to the early-2000s, games rose to prominence as a cultural touchstone in the Global North and that meteoric rise in the place of games and gaming in culture came with equally cataclysmic growing pains. What a game was, was rapidly being redefined and this caused many battles to erupt that questioned not just games themselves, but more importantly their status as safe and innocuous amusements. For many, games went from being trivial artifacts of childhood play to the very thing that threatened and endangered innocent children. These ways of thinking and engaging with the power and potential of games will be examined as a history in itself. Though video games can help us understand historical time periods through their representation, as historical artifacts themselves, their own histories can shed light on important cultural discussions. These discussions of video games and their place in our world are now often very different, but the impact of the widespread negative associations with video games can still be felt. This exploration in particular was spurred on in no small part by the questions and concerns of academics who had little experience with video games and their worries about realistic representations of the past in *Bunce Island: Through the Mirror*. These questions were not invalid, but they did stem from a very different

understanding of the power and functions of video games and the concerns about realism in particular, turned out to be quite an effective point of departure.

Although on the surface the difference between ‘authenticity’ and ‘realism’ seems trivial, from a conceptual level they are very different. As noted above, authenticity has a tendency to be instrumentalized in its meaning and connotative capacity - it can mean almost whatever anyone finds it useful to mean. Realism, however, is conceptually much simpler and while its effects and implications might be up for discussion, what it is in essence can often mostly be agreed on. Games and especially video games have been mired in discussions of realism, its usefulness, and effects, for the better part of half a century and has been a defining feature of their cultural identity. It is also a strange and unlikely bridge between two dominant views on video games - one side saying that realism is the strength of video games for education and the other agreeing, but noting the less virtuous and potentially dangerous aspects of video games.

A focus on realism was not derived from theory, but from practice. The backdrop of this thesis is an experiment in video game development that set out to create a game to bridge the gap between academic history and the experiential power of video games. Initiated by a team of historians and students who were almost all avid gamers, high-fidelity realism was the obvious choice from the very beginning. So obvious in fact, that it was barely even seen as a choice - clearly a high degree of realism was the best decision for a historical game. There is likely a lot of truth in that, but having to design around realism it quickly became evident that while it may be the obvious choice, that did not make realism any simpler either theoretically, representationally or practically. Questions surrounding the power of realism and its effects, both positive and negative, became imperative to understand and hopefully incorporate into a successful final product.

A surprising feature of realism is that it seems to bridge the gap between the video game believers and the naysayers. This thesis explores the importance of realism in the arguments of the video game naysayers. Interestingly, their position often presents a much clearer understanding of how realism might function in games, it is given an incredible amount of power, and, while it might not always be their explicit argument, is always core to their understanding of games. These negative views on video games and their connection to realism often comes in the form of moral panics or moral entrepreneurship and these in turn not only provide insight into realism itself, but also into an especially dominant cultural narrative around the inescapable dangers of video games that have so long coloured their cultural status.

While the initial questions of this thesis began in the theoretical realm concerning the concept of authenticity, it became clear that it is impossible to understand the cultural value of video games apart from their historical context. Thus, it was decided that a historical study would be most effective in this regard. There are several publications that concern video game histories, however, many of them are coloured by a certain nostalgia for the early days of video games and the childhoods of the authors and the audience. What is presented here, however, is meant to a history from a particular angle, that of understanding the history of games by means of the gaming panics, a sort of cultural history from the outside. Important to this is an understanding of change over time, which tends to be fairly evident in the technological innovations that took place in video games, and also the changing cultural value of video games themselves. The landscape of video games changed significantly from the arcades of the mid-1970s to the home-console and computer dominated world of the late-1990s and early-2000s. This change is tracked here in terms of negative cultural associations having to do with the development of certain gamer and teenager stereotypes played up by various forms of media

(news, television, books, political and religious) and by those who exploited those media outlets for their own gain. These stereotypes and what might be called ‘moral entrepreneurs’ functioned within an environment of ‘media effects’ thinking - essentially, the notion that the media that one consumes directly contributes to one’s real-world behaviour, especially among children and teenagers.

These three elements of stereotypes, moral entrepreneurship and a broadly internalized Media Effects understanding underpin the historical accounts of this thesis and will be the lens through which they are explored. Additionally, all of these elements also participate in the cultural discourse around realism in video games and/or its effects in the real-world. To demonstrate this, the thesis is primarily composed of a series of historical studies into individual instances of moral panic centered on a game. Most are video games starting in 1976 with the arcade *Death Race* and then the much larger controversies in the 1990s surrounding *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap* and *Doom* and *Doom II*. Although the panic concerning *Dungeons & Dragons* is not technically a *video* game panic and was part of a different, much larger series of panics called now the Satanic Panic, it is very important to understand how these phenomena function and is also covered in detail. The *D&D* panic functions in many ways as sort of model, especially in terms of stereotypes and moral entrepreneurs, for the following panics while providing a much better historical account from both sides of the panics.

The concept of realism is central to each of the moral panics and often acted as a catalyst and rhetorical target for each of the panics. However, in the cultural discourse of the panics, especially in the rhetoric of the moral entrepreneurs, this idea of ‘realism’ is rarely defined and meant to be taken at face-value. Like the stereotypes that persist, yet change, with each panic, the idea of what realism is and how it functions also shifts with each game. Thus, while the rhetoric

tends not to make any distinction between how the games portray realism differently from one another, it is important to note that each one is 'realistic' in different ways. For example, *Death Race* might arguably display some visually realistic elements (for 1976), but the discourse tended to be centered on the kinesthetic realism of the steering wheel, gear shift and gas pedals that allegedly taught the player the motions of driving a real car. With *Mortal Kombat*, however, the focus shifted to the visually realistic digitized sprites of the characters that depict more realistic violence with blood and gore. Finally, while the blood and gore were still very much present in *Doom*, the dangers of realism were no longer understood to be confined to merely the visual realm, though that was certainly still an issue. Instead, what was focused on was the ability of gamers to create mods of real places and supposedly use these mods as virtual training grounds in a sort of realistic simulation. None of these elements of realism are exclusive to any single game and there is generally significant overlap within each one. Throughout the thesis, the term 'realism' is used in a general sense to refer mostly to the simplified rhetoric found in the media and amplified by moral entrepreneurs. It is important to note, however, that as a concept, realism is not as simple as the moral entrepreneurs would like it to be. As this is mostly a historical work, the theoretical underpinnings of each of these 'realisms' is not discussed at length except where relevant and with the understanding that like the stereotypes, the concept is much more nuanced than can be adequately covered here. An important exception to this is when realism is discussed within the context of the Satanic Panic. The notions and ideas about realism concerning *Dungeons & Dragons* function differently from the video game examples in that the game is not so much understood to be *realistic*, but actually *real*. This notion, which seems to flip the notion of realism on its head, is discussed in detail in the relevant sections.

Finally, being a historical project, there are many different kinds of sources employed, and these sources tend to change from chapter to chapter with each panic. For instance, in the *Dungeons & Dragons* panic in the mid-1980s, many of the primary sources are magazine articles and pamphlets. By the late-1990s and early-2000s, these types of sources tend to have shifted to online news articles, video recordings and webpages. In these later sections there are also many legal documents cited as well. These primary sources are, of course, backed up with academic books and articles, although most function to provide frameworks for interpreting the data rather than as interpretations themselves. As stated above, there are few academic sources that approach these histories at all, and far fewer (if any) that track the cultural changes through each of the panics. This thesis began with the idea of presenting a theoretical approach to questions of video games that take place in historical times and places, but ended as a presentation of history itself. Rather than understanding the context of the historical representations within video games, here we take a step back and consider the cultural contexts of the video games themselves. This history is embedded within the history of Game Studies, which itself began as a formal discipline in the early-2000s almost as if in response to the history of panics from 1976-1999.

The following thesis demonstrates the shared history of each of these panics mainly through the themes outlined above; stereotypes, moral entrepreneurs, media effects thinking and the ideas of realism. It is broken down into two parts; the first of which introduces the study of games in the 20th century and then covers the initial three panics in chronological order (*Death Race*, *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Mortal Kombat/Night Trap*), followed by a second part that begins with a recap of the major themes of the first part and then an exploration of the panic following the Columbine Massacre brought about in-part by *Doom* and *Doom II*. Because of the

complexity, sensitivity and size of this panic, it is covered in two chapters as opposed to the one that the others are given.

## PART 1

## CHAPTER 1: A History of Game Studies

In order to understand the academic field of Game Studies, it is helpful to consider it within the broader historical context and influences which have shaped the discipline. There is a lot of cultural baggage that must still be navigated when discussing video games at both an informal level and at an academic level. This chapter provides an introduction to the cultural and historical landscape of games (not just video games) in general and games studies in particular. Following a short introduction to games studies, a cultural history of games is presented with particular attention to the popular perceptions of games and game playing framed by the various ‘moral panics’ that happened throughout history that has led to the modern ‘video game debate.’ The skepticism of video games in general from the modern moral panic is particularly important to understanding the perception and reception of historical games both in popular culture and particularly within the academic community.

### *Game Studies Origins*

Game Studies is not so much a discipline unto itself, but at present represents a topical hub or nexus of many disciplines and subdisciplines that each contribute aspects of their own understanding to the broader Game Studies project. This is both a great benefit to games studies as an interdisciplinary field, but also a challenge as the academic work tends to be very nebulous and spread out among a series of radically different branches. When Espen Aarseth heralded a new field of research in Computer Game Studies in 2001 with the launch of the open access journal hosted at [gamestudies.org](http://gamestudies.org), he pointed out that everyone was coming from a different discipline and thus had very different academic and ideological assumptions.<sup>15</sup> To some extent, this is still the case in 2025 and it creates difficulty in choosing where to begin an academic

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<sup>15</sup> Aarseth, E. 2001. “Computer Game Studies, Year One.” *Game Studies* 1.1, para. 7.

study, how to go about it and what types of sources to use. There is no lack of literature, which, as noted above, might be both a good thing, but also a challenging thing to deal with, as each discipline that contributes to the field of Game Studies might rely on its own particular methodologies and theoretical frameworks. These choices, however, essentially orient the work in one way or another, and they must be consistent throughout the work or else it will be pulled in all directions.

Firstly, this work will be oriented toward Game Studies with a particular emphasis on the cultural history of games, gaming and gamers in the last quarter of 20th century. From an academic perspective it is often not useful to isolate video games from other types of games like traditional games and board games, table-top roleplaying games, or even sports as there tends to be overlap in function, even if they are presented differently. This is true in both the primary sources, the games themselves, and also the secondary literature. This study relies on specific cultural theories; it is instructive to note that theories are, much like games, varied by discipline and context, and I have chosen mine accordingly. Cultural theory means something different to almost every scholar, which necessitates a selective approach to large fields. If we treat historical video games primarily as historical and cultural representations, as opposed to attempting to fit video games in with the conventions of academic written history, we land in the realm of the philosophy of history. More specifically this study begins to take shape in the domain of what might be called progressive history following scholars in the post-modern tradition such as Hayden White,<sup>16</sup> and in the ‘history-from-below’ tradition following Marcus Rediker,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> White, H. 1973. *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; White, H. 2014. *The Practical Past*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Rediker, Marcus. 2010. “The Poetics of History from Below: The Art of History.” *Perspectives on History* 48.6.

including microhistories.<sup>18</sup> Film Studies additionally provides a set of helpful theoretical foundations to this study. While there has historically been some tension between the two fields of Film and Game Studies, Film Studies provides the foundational literature on visual representations of historical worlds following Rosenstone.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Adam Chapman's descriptive analysis of historical video games *Digital Games as History* (2016) is based on the theory Rosenstone develops on historical film which in itself integrates a good amount of White's historical theory on representation. Again, it is important to remember that games scholars almost always come from other disciplines, although that is changing as programs and degrees in the field are becoming more common, thus it is necessary in games studies to take on an interdisciplinary approach.<sup>20</sup> In short, games studies is a wide field, with many disciplines and subdisciplines, and it is impossible to cover every perspective so trade-offs must be made with respect to emphasis.

### *Game Studies in the 20th Century*

The current state of Game Studies is complicated both by this decentralized approach and by the history of video games themselves. The actual history of Game Studies is relatively short and as mentioned above, a convenient moment for the start of game and video game studies as we know it now might be 2001 with the first edition of the digital, open-access journal *Game Studies* hosted at [gamestudies.org](http://gamestudies.org). That is not to say that there were no publications before then, however. There are a few games studies articles and monographs that are still mainstays in the academic world published before 2001; Espen Aarseth's seminal monograph *Cybertext*,<sup>21</sup> or

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<sup>18</sup> Ginzburg, C. 1976 (T. 1980). *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Transl. John and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, xxi.

<sup>19</sup> Rosenstone, R. A. 2014. *History on Film/Film on History*. 2nd Ed. Taylor and Francis.

<sup>20</sup> Aarseth, E. 2001. "Computer Game Studies, Year One." *Game Studies* 1.1.

<sup>21</sup> Aarseth, E. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Richard Bartle's typology of MUD players,<sup>22</sup> to name a couple. There are also a number of philosophically inclined works that deal with games and play that were written throughout the 20th century. The following section focuses on these early academic works in the study of games in order to situate the broader histories of the particular games that will be studied in the following sections. Like Game Studies as defined in 2001, many of these works push back against the notion of games as being trivial vestiges of childhood even before games and gamers took on the overtly negative associations.

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1949) is perhaps the most important for the current study as it attempts to lay out a cultural history of games and what he terms 'play element in culture.' The first half of the book gets quite a bit of academic attention as it is really one of the first sustained pursuits to work through and create a definition of not only what a game can be, but also how and why they are played. The second half tracks how games influenced all sorts of cultural institutions from war, law, religion, poetry and art in something of an arm-chair structuralist anthropology of all civilization through the lens of play. Needless to say, the historical value of these later chapters is perhaps lacking from a modern perspective, but it still stands as one of the most important texts when addressing the cultural value of games and play. Roger Caillois's 1958 *Man, Play and Games* is a response to Huizinga that attempts to rein in some of Huizinga's historical overstepping and give a systematized definition of games. Where Huizinga emphasized the cultural significance of play, Caillois offered a much more granular and detailed typology of games that emphasized mechanics more than their social or cultural functions. Both Caillois and Huizinga are now well cited and explored, especially in theory-oriented studies. They work together well in that *Homo Ludens* generally supplies the functions

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<sup>22</sup> Bartle 1996, "Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs:" *Journal of MUD Research* 1.1; MUD stands for 'Multi-User Dungeon,' a precursor to Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMO).

of play while *Man, Play and Games* provides a succinct ontology for the mechanics of actual games on a more individualized level, while also directly responding to the perceived shortcomings of Huizinga's work.

During the 1970s several books expanded the theoretical limits of games studies away from the philosophizing of Caillois and Huizinga and into the realm not just of games and play, but into the notion of playfulness itself. The two works that really stand out here are Bernard De Koven's *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy* (1978) and Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (1978). Both of these works firmly situate themselves within the philosophical tradition, explicitly from De Koven's subtitle (even if it is more of a practical guide than a philosophy *per se*), and Suits structured his monograph rather playfully in the form of a Socratic dialogue between Aesop's Grasshopper and his disciples. However, these are quite different in orientation from the earlier philosophies of games in that they indulge themselves, and the reader, in a sort of playful experimentation of form. De Koven asks the reader simply to be a player and to recall for themselves how they have played games and to perhaps make the argument that it is really not about the game, but the social world that games facilitate. He also makes the distinction between the playing-mind and the gaming-mind.<sup>23</sup> The gaming-mind is determined, focused on the rules and how to navigate within them to maximum effect. The playing-mind is concerned with the game just as much, but from a meta-game level that is concerned with social functions of the game, and to play a game well is a negotiation between the two. Here we can perhaps see some integration between what Caillois and Huizinga argue for, but with a much more pragmatic, and often fun, presentation that often reads more like a guide than a sustained philosophical treatise. Suits in *The Grasshopper* similarly emphasizes

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<sup>23</sup> De Koven, B. 2013 (1978). *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 40.

playfulness in the often hilarious and absurd mix between fable and dialogue. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to determining a definition of ‘playing a game’ as the “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”<sup>24</sup> The rest of the book meanders around the implications of such a definition and wanders into some ideological questions concerning utopia and the value of leisure as opposed to work (in reference to the values of the original fable). What is so interesting about Suits is the practical, or really the impractical, implementation of his definition into the structural form of *The Grasshopper*. Much of his argument could be easily summed up in standard academic prose, but instead, the book itself is a meta-game for both the author and the reader as the presentation itself is an obstacle that often obscures meanings, or at least makes the discussion less succinct. It would likely not be as memorable a work to read if those obstacles, meandering conversations, tangents, strange jokes, riddles and parables were not in place to draw in the reader and demonstrate implicitly the main philosophical argument that invites the reader to play the Grasshopper’s game.

While the study of games from the philosophical side was slow and rather disjointed in its development, there were other significant precursors to games studies in psychological literature as well. Most important among these are Jean Piaget and Brian Sutton-Smith. Piaget is well known for his work in child developmental psychology and as early as the 1930s used games and children’s perceptions and understanding of rules as an analogue for their understanding of moral systems and how these systems are developed as a child gets older in his 1932 book *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. His work meshes very well in some instances with Huizinga, especially his observation that rules can go from a “sacred reality” when children are

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<sup>24</sup> Suits, B. 2014 (1978). *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. Third Edition. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 43.

very young, to a system of interpersonal “mutual agreement” when the child is older.<sup>25</sup> Piaget posits that the rules of the game are first conceptualized by young children as limits and how the game must always be played. These rules are passed down from the older children and are imposed by the superior status of these older children much the same as moral systems are imposed by adults onto children. Rules go from being black and white, static and extrinsically enforced structures to being negotiated among peers as the child matures and begins to play not only the game but also with the rules of the game. What differentiates Piaget’s work from the other authors mentioned is that the game itself is never central to the core argument. Rather, games are used instrumentally as a demonstration or case study in order to articulate the psychological arguments of the text. His work is still important to games studies, however, in that he is one of the few to deal with games in such a detailed and academically rigorous manner that is still rather well known in the world of psychology. His work also makes the implicit argument that games can be a powerful means of understanding psychological phenomena beyond the assumption that they are merely an artifact of childhood and not fit for rigorous inquiry.

One of the more striking features of Piaget’s work is that there is very little in the way of a preamble or initial defense for using games as a way to study psychology; he jumps unapologetically into a description of the games and their functions. Even now it is not uncommon for a defense to be raised for studying games in the early pages of a book or article, but Piaget starts with the simple line: “Children’s games constitute the most admirable social institutions,”<sup>26</sup> and leaves it at that. His work represents a very different way to understand games and play than more recent theory-oriented games studies publications often do. His

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<sup>25</sup> Piaget, G. 1932 (Reprint 1999). *The Moral Judgement of the Child*. New York: Routledge, 18; 96-97.

<sup>26</sup> Piaget, G. 1932 (Reprint 1999). *The Moral Judgement of the Child*. New York: Routledge, 1.

interest in the implications of play and rules beyond the game and thus begins and ends with the child and as the title states, the moral systems derived from the early playing of games. At the very least his work is an early precursor to games studies and his status among the most influential of developmental psychologists seems to have lent some credence to the early study of games in the psychological literature, but did not extend much further than that. Once again, the work of Piaget is more of an outlier, a solitary example of how games might be studied, but still does not constitute the origin of any sort of sustained tradition.

Similar to how we see the philosophical game studies analysis start to develop rapidly in the 1970s with De Koven and Suits, there was a concurrent push in the psychological literature in the same decade to consolidate the research on games and play systematically. For example, Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Study of Games* (1971) and its companion volume *Child's Play* (1971) attempt to bring together scholars from far ranging disciplines like folklore, anthropology, military studies, and business in edited source books. This part of Sutton-Smith's early work is often ignored in the current game literature - likely because it is rather disjointed in its presentation. There is no single thread that runs through the volume other than the theme of games. However, the book is less about making a sustained argument and more about demonstrating the diversity of work that had already been done, even if it was disjointed and presented piecemeal. From this perspective, even if it was rather unsuccessful in contributing much to any individual argument about games, the book as a project in interdisciplinary research and collaboration might be seen to have been a precursor to the interdisciplinary field games studies later became. Juul notes this in his review of *The Study of Games* that while some of the individual writings may be strong, they "do not really talk to each other."<sup>27</sup> The book is rather

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<sup>27</sup> Juul, J. 2001. "The Repeatedly Lost Art of Studying Games." *Game Studies* 1.1, para. 2.

interesting as a look into the history of Game Studies in that it was the first attempt to really promote an interdisciplinary approach to understanding games. Unfortunately, its usefulness is limited and it still tends to be a rather obscure volume that has become overshadowed by the theoretical and philosophical work that tends to suit the discipline of Games Studies better. It is a good case study in interdisciplinary work, however, in that it foreshadows the nebulous nature of the field where there are lots of individual contributions that are phenomenal, but the underlying assumptions of different disciplines make it difficult to reach a shared conclusion.

These 20th century intellectual studies on games became very useful with the advent of the field of Games Studies, but in their time, they were mostly relegated to obscure corners of philosophy departments and were barely read outside of a few scholars. Their obscurity can be seen easily enough by the lack of continuity between them in both time and space. Other than the link between Huizinga and Caillois, each work is isolated both in methodology and scope, perhaps foreshadowing the nebulous nature of the future work in game studies. Once the 21st century came around and after the explosion of the games industry, there was a massive shift in the amount of effort and energy put toward the study of games and these 20th century writers were finally being recognized for their foundational work on games and play. Piaget is the obvious outlier here as his work was fundamental to certain disciplines in psychology, although his importance was not well-known by Games Studies until it was more or less rediscovered to be relevant by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in *Rules of Play* (2004).<sup>28</sup> They similarly (re)popularized Huizinga's idea of the magic circle in the 21st century Games Studies literature as well. This is particularly interesting as Huizinga has more or less become known to scholars as the "magic circle guy" even though his 'magic circle' is more of an off-hand remark in an

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<sup>28</sup> Salen, K and E. Zimmerman. 2004. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 94.

explanation of the ‘play-ground,’ a place symbolically set apart from everyday life in order to play.<sup>29</sup> There is not even an entry in the index for the ‘magic circle’ in *Homo Ludens*, yet his work has taken on a new relevance in the 21st century because of the emphasis placed on a single, relatively insignificant phrase (although very important idea) within Salen and Zimmerman’s textbook. Similarly, Piaget’s work is cast in a whole new light as well when it becomes oriented toward Game Studies. This reframing is not a bad thing by any means, but it demonstrates both how much the discipline of Game Studies has advanced in an incredibly short period of time, but also how it is able to pull at and integrate vastly differing works under a single, overarching banner.

It is generally inadvisable from a historical perspective to attribute certain attitudes to a discrete period of time, like saying that there was a marked shift from one century to another. Historians sometimes use terms like ‘long centuries’ to avoid chronological determinism based on the turning of centuries. However, for the case of Game Studies, there is a significant shift in thinking after it exploded as a legitimate field in the 21st century. Part of this was a breaking-away from ‘pure’ parent disciplines like media theory, literature, psychology and philosophy to form games studies as something independent, and yet still necessarily connected to those disciplines. The timing of the advent of games studies is important as well. Much of the interest in studying games likely comes down to the proliferation of new technologies with which to play new types of games and that came down to the popularization, and denunciation, of video games as mass media. Once Games Studies was more or less declared to be independent,<sup>30</sup> work began to take on a much different attitude, there was no longer as much need to ‘prove’ that games

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<sup>29</sup> Huizinga 1948, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Aarseth, E. 2001. “Computer Game Studies, Year One.” *Game Studies* 1.1.

were worthy of academic study as a discrete field, though analysis of games in many disciplines still necessitates justification, like that of history, for example.

Sources like those foundational works mentioned above were few and far between throughout the 20th century. Games were for the most part not taken seriously; they were things only suited to children, the interests of a small but dedicated contingent of eccentric academics notwithstanding. Now, in the 21st century, some of those works have been afforded at least some sense of legitimacy for games scholars, but when they were published there was a general disdain at the idea that games might be a topic worthy of intellectual and academic discussion. This distrust of games was nothing new and there are many historical examples of skepticism around games and those who play games. A 1982 review of *The Grasshopper*, for instance, glosses over the structure and definition of games to primarily focus on the utopian arguments that Suits lays out in the latter part of the book, missing almost entirely the explicit and implicit arguments about play.<sup>31</sup> From a Game Studies perspective, those are perhaps less important than the definitional and experimental aspects that deal with games which were seen as merely a context to Suits' utopian metaphysics of leisure and were simply less relevant to the audience of a philosophy journal. And truthfully, most of these works might be said to be ahead of their time and thus only understood as core texts to the games studies 'canon' once there was a 'Game Studies' in the first place. And though there were several serious studies of games and play in the 20th century, the lack of continuity between them and their sporadic publication could not support an independent discipline until games became more important in people's everyday lives.

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<sup>31</sup> Cooper, W. E. 1982. "Review: The Grasshopper: Games Life and Utopia." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 12.2: 409-415.

More than twenty years out from Aarseth's declaration of games studies as a discipline and there is a much different cultural environment around games and game playing. It is no longer something that is merely the occupation of children, but a cultural phenomenon at many levels. Almost ten years after Salen and Zimmerman's groundwork textbook on game design, *Rules of Play*, Zimmerman wrote the *Manifesto for a Ludic Century*, which outlines many aspects of how games, because of an increasingly digital and procedural world, are a new literacy and create new modes of thinking and understanding.<sup>32</sup> The 20th century may have given rise to the beginnings of the formal study of games, but it would be the 21st century that cemented the importance of games in the cultural realm. All types of games, video games, board games, role-playing games are more popular and more accessible than ever. Now it is possible to buy what were once specialty games like *Settlers of Catan* in Walmart, rather than needing to make a trip to the specialty toy and game shop. Even traditionally very niche games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are part of the cultural zeitgeist and understood to be a fun pastime with friends rather than the strange and morally suspicious game it was seen to be in the past. Games of all sorts are everywhere and people are more interested and play a wider variety of games than ever before. This ubiquity of games, which are no longer just a specialist hobby, has people thinking about them in new ways, and publishing both games and game studies like never before.

The cultural significance of games in general, and video games in particular, often comes down to the value that is prescribed to them. At the beginning of the 20th century, games were not studied often, and very rarely taken seriously. They were a remnant of childhood, frivolous and inconsequential. By the turn of the new millennium, notably after video games had become a global industry, there had developed a small conclave dedicated to the formalized study of games

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<sup>32</sup> Zimmerman, E. 2013. "Manifesto for a Ludic Century." Kotaku. <https://kotaku.com/manifesto-the-21st-century-will-be-defined-by-games-1275355204>.

in their many diverse forms. So many cultural shifts and baggage contributed to the world of games studies, and still does. It was a long and bumpy road for games to travel from the sole possession of children, and perhaps some eclectic adults, to become a widespread cultural phenomenon in the form of video games, board games and table-top role-playing games. The cultural understanding of games shifted from the frivolous games of youth, to deeply sophisticated artifacts that are capable of teaching in both passive and active ways. In other words, games became imbued with a certain amount of potential. Most of this potential, however, was centered on their questionable content and its potential to lead vulnerable children into becoming dangerous delinquents, or much worse. Outside of the academic realm, games were becoming a massive cultural domain that challenged many of the assumptions held about games. In some ways, these foundational works were prophetic in noticing the profound influence and importance of games and play. Many of the traditional assumptions about games, such as their triviality, or that they were childish distractions were challenged and questioned in the last quarter of the 20th century. These works prefigure these questions and even attempted to answer them before they became culturally relevant. Rather than dwelling on the philosophical implications of games and game playing, the following chapters turn to the other side of this history - the games that presented these challenges and the answers that were often supplied by news media and various 'experts' that caused a series of moral panics to break-out.

The popularity of games, and their now central place in popular culture did not happen overnight. It is also not a straight line from Huizinga to now. Indeed, Huizinga likely did not factor into very much of this seismic cultural shift. The cultural landscape of the mid- to late-20th century was in many ways an earthquake of new technologies and new ideas. Games were one aspect that got caught up in this and transformed. It was, however, a very painful transition,

and its implications are still very much present in the media and cultural landscape of the 21st century. The following chapter fills in the gaps of this intellectual history by examining some of the more substantial events that are still a part of the zeitgeist of games and gaming even now by examining the beginnings of a cycle of moral panics. Each of these panics builds on the stereotypes, fears and threats of what came before. Pool-halls became arcades, new types of complicated games became commonplace and as these games gained massive industries, their content came into question on a national and even global scale.

## CHAPTER 2: Cultural History of Games

### *Cultural History and the Perception of Games and Video Games*

This chapter tracks the cultural perceptions and associations of games and game playing, specifically focusing on the modern, mainly 20th and 21st century instances of media panic that have coloured the discourse around video games since the beginning of games studies as a discipline. Since we are dealing with the intersection between videogames and history, we cannot forget that historians as individuals and as a whole are just as influenced by their cultural surroundings as anyone else, so it is valuable to interrogate the cultural conceptions surrounding games before delving into specific historically driven games. These cultural influences have led to a general suspicion of videogames and of historical video games in particular. These perceptions are changing rapidly as digital technology is increasingly becoming both more accessible and more powerful, but the underlying assumptions of decades of both suspicion and neglect take their toll on the discipline.

I will begin my cultural study of games and game playing with a brief historical study of games. Focusing primarily on ancient sources, Homer and Herodotus, I intend to demonstrate the conception of games as a fundamentally non-productive activity. This idea of games as non-productive is important for understanding the public and media discourse surrounding games and gaming both in the recent past and today. I will then demonstrate this aspect of non-productive game playing and its precedence both in early games studies scholars like Huizinga and Caillois, its intersection with leisure. Finally, I will analyze some media examples, mainly news articles and television shows, from both the 20th and 21st centuries to show how these discourses continue to shape both the popular and academic approach to video games. The important thing to note concerning media panic and one of the reasons it is so important to discuss, is that at its

core, the arguments concerning the potential dangers of video game consumption are very similar to the arguments for their use in a didactic capacity. Both sides claim that video games can and do teach the player something practical for use beyond the limits of the game itself.

### ***Historical Examples***

Even though the formal discipline of game studies is recent, games have often been cultural artifacts to think with historically. Even Herodotus provides an explanation to the origin of knucklebones (*astragaloï*) and other games in the description of the Lydians in book one of his *Histories*.<sup>33</sup> It is not particularly important if Herodotus' story is accurate in the scientific sense, or if it actually happened or not, as we can still get an idea of how games might have been conceptualized even as far back as Ancient Greece. In Herodotus' aetiology, he describes games and their initial function, for which they are created to be a distraction from the terrible eighteen-year famine that the Lydians (modern-day Western Turkey) suffered through. As a response to the famine the people devised a handful of games, namely knucklebones (like dice) and ball games, that would be played every other day. The people would work and eat on one day and spend all of the next day playing games in order to take their minds off of their hunger and the hard and unrewarding work of the previous day.

Herodotus does not explicitly analyze this practice, but the implications of his story for the perception of games are reasonably apparent. Games are first and foremost materially unproductive as one cannot work and play at the same time. But, in this instance, even though they are fundamentally unproductive they can also be useful as a distraction from the reality of the famine. It is important to note, however, that while the games are seen to be useful in their

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<sup>33</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 1.94.

particular use against hunger during the famine, their unproductive nature is usually what tends to be emphasized in the ancient world.

Another ancient reference to game playing is in the form of Penelope's suitors who, in the *Odyssey*, spend their time playing games outside of Odysseus' home in Ithaca and idly eating away at the riches of his estate while he is missing.<sup>34</sup> The consumptive aspect of game playing is opposite to what is seen in Herodotus; the suitors are living a life of excess at the expense of the still missing Odysseus and their game playing is an extension of their excessive and illegitimate consumption of his wealth. They have no work to do because everything is provided for them at Odysseus' and Ithaca's expense. There is no usefulness to the suitors' games, only an idle, and perhaps more importantly, immoral, wasting of time and resources as they leech off of Odysseus' and his estate's awkward obligation to their 'guests.'

There are also similar themes present in other ancient writings such as Aesop's tale of the *Grasshopper and the Ant*, which was also the model for Suits' work mentioned previously. In the fable, the frivolous grasshopper plays and dances all summer while the industrious ant spends the summer preparing for the coming winter. When the winter comes there is nothing for the grasshopper to live off of and the ant rebukes the grasshopper for the time he's wasted and now must suffer the consequences of his inaction.<sup>35</sup> While the grasshopper is not strictly playing games, the playfulness of his dancing and singing renders the same consequences - lack of material payoff. Again, we see that playing is viewed in a negative light, but opposed to both Homer and Herodotus, playing for the grasshopper is not merely a symptom of something bigger like the famine or the immorality of the suitors, but the problem itself. There is no utility to the grasshopper's playfulness. Although Aesop presents a much more simplistic understanding of

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<sup>34</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.124-131.

<sup>35</sup> Aesop, *Fables* 126, "The Ant and The Cricket."

play than either previous example, it is perhaps the most important because of its ubiquity. Both the previous examples are very small parts of much larger works that have very little to do with games and game playing as a whole, but Aesop's fable is easy to understand and as a fable has a clear moral element. It is also very easily transferable and there is no shortage of references and retellings - it is still commonly known and understood. The fable's pervasiveness is perhaps best seen through Bernard Suits' rhetorical adaptation of the Grasshopper as a Socratic philosopher in his book, or more accurately, dialogue, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*.<sup>36</sup> Suits uses the fable as a point of departure for his own arguments and to defend the playing of games from a grasshopper who is at peace with his decision to play rather than store food for the winter. Suits' arguments here are not that important, but rather that he, along with other early games scholars make use of ancient sources in their interrogation of games. And, perhaps because of this, they all come to definitions of games as being inherently materially unproductive.

These are just a few examples of easily accessible sources that mention games in ancient history, and the intention here is not to dwell on any of the particular examples, but to provide a short overview of one of the more important cultural understandings of games, their unproductive nature. Even in this small handful of examples, the moral function of games might change from a useful distraction, mere fun or more insidious and consumptive idleness, the common feature among them is the recognition of the trivial nature of games and that one cannot produce anything while playing. Work and play become dialectically opposed and this opposition, which is not particularly difficult to see and understand even after a cursory examination, is often at the root of both the moral and practical arguments against games and game playing.

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<sup>36</sup> Suits, Bernard. 2014 (1978). *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. Third Edition. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

### *The Unproductive Nature of Game Playing*

This observation is not difficult to find in historical sources, whether it is stated implicitly or explicitly, but whenever games are studied critically or theorized, the unproductive aspect is often included in the definition of games. Non-production in this case is always cast in the material sense, nothing can be gained for profit from playing games. Games are indeed productive in the symbolic and cultural realms, even in their simple value as cultural artifacts that can be analyzed, but if one plays a game to profit materially, it becomes work. Both Huizinga and Caillois are very concerned with this, as well. Huizinga, who being almost completely concerned with the cultural implications of game playing, still includes the lack of “material interest and ... profit,”<sup>37</sup> in his essential definition of games. Caillois, who was much more interested in the categorization of games from an ontological perspective, deals more directly with the problem that gambling poses to this definition. He comes to much the same conclusion with the more nuanced view that games may profit the players materially, but that the gambling game is zero-sum and does not produce any *new* material wealth.<sup>38</sup> Gambling might have the effect of making one person better off, but the others have lost that wealth, it is a zero-sum game. Similarly, when one plays a game or sport for profit, they are no longer strictly ‘playing’ a game, but working for rewards external to the game based on the outcome of the game. In any case, when Caillois establishes his general definition of games, he includes their unproductive nature as point four of six.<sup>39</sup>

In the early days of games studies as a discipline (early 2000s) it was quite common to attempt a definition of games. One of the more successful attempts was by Juul, who lived in a

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<sup>37</sup> Huizinga, J. 1948 (Transl. 1949). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Angelico Press, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Caillois, R. 1958 (Transl. 1961). *Man, Play and Games*. Transl. Meyer Barash. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

world very different in which games were both academically and culturally more visible and important, than the worlds of either Huizinga or Caillois and was primarily concerned with video games. Juul's definition, like Caillois', also has six parts, but he deals with games in much less rigid terms now that he must also take digital games into consideration. Juul is not as convinced as Caillois that a game played for external profit ceases to be a game, rather, that play-instances can have negotiable consequences and can "be played with or without real-life consequences."<sup>40</sup> This has little effect on most game playing, which is still unproductive, but allows some additional space for things like professional sports, esports and other games that are played for profit besides just gambling.<sup>41</sup> The notion of negotiable outcomes is particularly powerful because it affects both sides of the game instance. Not only are there negotiable outcomes, the more obvious of the two being the winnings, but also negotiable inputs, or what you put into the game at the outset (and/or during gameplay).

### ***Too Much Time and Money at the Arcade***

These inputs are what is often seen as being problematic, or at least not worth the immaterial rewards the games might provide. While games are generally unproductive in respect to quantifiable, material outcomes, their inputs can very easily be quantified, usually in time and money. This was the case when arcades became popular in the early and mid-1970s. There could be real social status accrued from having the high-score. A couple of media examples of the importance of this status can be seen in The Who's 1969 hit *Pinball Wizard*. In the song, the narrator recounts his awe at the seemingly magical skills of the 'Pinball Wizard,' and notes that he must give up his 'crown' to this wizard. Another, more comical example can be seen in the *Seinfeld* episode "The Frogger" in which George, unwilling to let his high-score from his high

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<sup>40</sup> Juul, J. 2005. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Rules*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 36.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 41-42.

school days be lost forever, purchases and attempts to transport the *Frogger* cabinet from the pizza parlour to his apartment. Part of the comedy from the *Seinfeld* episode comes from this recognition that a high-score is indeed an achievement, but also a childish one as George, now in his 30s, tries to preserve his high school score.

Using the example of arcade games, the symbolic capital and cultural clout that a child or teenager might gain by getting a high score on the leaderboards of a certain arcade game was not, from many parents' perspective, worth the rolls of quarters and many hours spent at the arcade in order to achieve that high-score. The positive outcome is something potentially very valuable but unquantifiable (to the player and their social world), whereas the input, the amount of money and time spent has the potential to get very high, very quickly. It is understandable from this example why games, especially early forms of either new and expensive home consoles,<sup>42</sup> or coin-operated arcade cabinets,<sup>43</sup> were viewed with suspicion. There were very few tangible outcomes of playing arcade games, and no material benefits from their play. The intangible outcomes, however, are important to note.

Much of the general suspicion of video games which would eventually turn to panic had its start with the video arcade and with the dubious and questionable status of coin-operated amusements. Without turning too much to the historical and cultural precedents of the arcade cabinet, it is enough to say that it inherited quite a bit of the social and legal skepticism of earlier coin-operated machines like pin-ball and slot machines. Not only were these sometimes seen as immoral, especially to display and operate in public places where children might see, or worse to be tempted to gamble themselves, but they already had a long history associated with criminal

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<sup>42</sup> A Nintendo Entertainment System could cost anywhere from \$90-\$160 in 1986 and popular new games were usually around \$35-\$50.

<sup>43</sup> Games were usually a quarter a play ~ \$0.90 in 2022.

activity like money laundering and were often heavily regulated.<sup>44</sup> Coin operated pinball became popularized as a luck based gambling amusement in the 1930s and saw great success during the Great Depression as low cost and accessible entertainment.<sup>45</sup> Since the player had no control over the ball after it had been launched, pinball was essentially a randomized game of chance (unlike the later tables that had flippers controlled by the player). If the ball landed in a certain hole or nook, the player might win a free play which could be used immediately or accumulated for a prize. The use of pinball in order to relieve some of the stress of living through particularly difficult times hearkens back to the utility the Lydians saw in the development of their own games. Even though it cost money to play, it was inexpensive, usually a penny for a few balls, and had the potential to provide momentary escape from the economic hardships of the era as well as the chance to win small scale luxuries. Unfortunately, unlike the Lydian's games which were seen as at least useful, pinball required a cost beyond just spending the time playing and that cost was often not recuperated by the player. Along with the moral implications of gambling, and coin-op's linkages to the criminal world, there could be quite dramatic displays of prohibition, such as Fiorello La Guardia, mayor of New York City, publicly destroying machines with sledgehammers or throwing the machines into rivers in 1942.<sup>46</sup>

The history of coin-op machines and pinball, and the moralizing behind them, set the stage for the popular perceptions of arcades and video games in the media. The 1980s, when video games were just beginning to permeate consumer culture, seem to be a particularly chaotic and complex time in terms of media and moral panic. Newman rightly notes that while the

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<sup>44</sup> Kocurek, C. A. 2015. *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Ebook. Coin-Op's Dubious Past.

<sup>45</sup> Flanagan, M. 2009. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Kocurek, C. A. 2015. "Against the Arcade." in *Video Game Policy: Production, Distribution and Consumption*, eds. Steven Conway and Jennifer deWinter. New York: Routledge, 207.

panics tend to have more staying power in cultural memory than the positive outlook, there was just as much push for the productive and didactic use of video games as there was panic.

Technology and culture were changing rapidly and that was interpreted both as an opportunity and a threat.<sup>47</sup> Many saw new consumer technology as a benefit for the future and as “potentially the most powerful educational tool ever invented,” a sentiment that was just as common as the naysayer’s catastrophism.<sup>48</sup> However, the panic is what sold and is often what the period is remembered for beyond personal nostalgia of youth. Simply put, while there was just as much optimism about technology and video games and even the first academic conferences, like the early and influential 1983 Harvard education conference “Video Games and Human Development: A Research Agenda for the ‘80s,”<sup>49</sup> it was the panic, by means of broader controversy and media, that has tended to affect many people’s memory of the times.

### ***Panic at the Arcade!***

As is often the case, the controversy and media spotlights on these arcade games also drove a great deal of their popularity. One of the first major instances of concern and panic about a video game centered around the media coverage of the *Death Race* (Exidy, 1976) coin-op arcade cabinet. While there was no official link between with the 1975 film *Death Race 2000*, it is clear that Exidy was setting up their new release to play into the film’s infamy, and it certainly succeeded in that regard.<sup>50</sup> *Death Race* itself was nothing special as a game, but its popularity and place in video game history was cemented by the controversy that erupted around it and that

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<sup>47</sup> Newman, M. Z. 2018. *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 154.

<sup>48</sup> Loftus and Loftus 1983, x, as quoted in Newman 2018, 172.

<sup>49</sup> *Video Games and Human Development: A Research Agenda for the '80s, Papers and Proceedings of a Symposium Held at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*, Cambridge, MA, May 22–24, 1983 (Cambridge, MA: Monroe C. Gutman Library, Harvard School of Education, 1983).

<sup>50</sup> Kocurek, C. 2012. “The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of Death Race.” *Game Studies* 12.1.

controversy would become a mainstay of the news media and games industry for years to come. Indeed, according to Phil Brooks, the General Manager of Exidy, in an interview for the New York Times he mentioned that ““every time a story comes out... we get more orders.””<sup>51</sup> This media presence that leads to greater popularity of the questionable games that it derides would become a common theme going forward into the increasingly larger scale panics that started with *Death Race*.

Perhaps the first instance of video arcade related panic was the infamous *Death Race*, and it is in itself an instructive and almost archetypal example of what would develop into a much more generalized media discourse around arcades and video games. The premise of the game was simple enough, one or two players control their pixelated car sprites and points are earned by hitting the humanoid, or rather stick-figure like, ‘gremlins.’<sup>52</sup> When the gremlins are hit, a grave marker in the shape of a cross appears where they were hit and the player’s score increases by one.<sup>53</sup> Even though Exidy, the arcade cabinet manufacturer, insisted that the humanoid sprites running around were nothing more than gremlins, there is not enough detail to say one way or the other. Thus, it is very possible to interpret the game as encouraging violence against innocent pedestrians. This, of course, led to controversy and, as is often the case for panics and overreactions, moral guardians and ‘experts’ weighed in, like statements from the National Safety Council’s head of research condemning the game.<sup>54</sup> This type of ‘expert’ testimony would become a mainstay of future game panics as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Blumenthal, Ralph. December 28, 1976. “Death Race Game Gains Favor but not with the Safety Council,” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/28/archives/death-race-game-gains-favor-but-not-with-the-safety-council.html>.

<sup>52</sup> See Figure 1: Screenshot of *Death Race*.

<sup>53</sup> Old Classic Retro Gaming. August 28, 2013. “Arcade Game: Death Race (1976 Exidy) [Re-Uploaded].” Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBBtt72aJLA>.

<sup>54</sup> Kocurek, C. 2012. “The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of Death Race.” *Game Studies* 12.1.

While the panic around *Death Race* was relatively short-lived, just a few months in length, it established a couple of important patterns regarding the cultural reception of video games and violence. The first pattern is that video games, no matter how simple in presentation, could garner an incredible amount of attention through their controversies. And the common response to that is twofold: first, media representations that demonize video games, video arcades and the effects of video games on their, usually, child and teenage players became common staples in the news media. Second, the marketing of games began to take advantage of that controversy, fueling their own negative attention and infamy even further with the idea that all press is good press. In line with this, Kocurek points out that games like *Carmaggedon* and the very popular *Grand Theft Auto* series actively engage the media discourse of simulated violence that began with *Death Race* to act essentially as free advertising. The satirical and self-aware nature of the *Grand Theft Auto* games often ironically play into their dangerous status.<sup>55</sup>

In the same manner as the earlier coin-operated gambling, there is a preoccupation with notions of (squandering) money and (misspent) youth. Arcade consoles cost money to play, but there is an important shift that happens with the panic around *Death Race*. These games were no longer understood as merely something to engage with passively and a waste of money, they were apparently now capable of actively teaching. As stated above, some saw this as a positive; but what does a game like *Death Race* teach? According to Dennis Row, the safety consultant of the Automobile Club of Southern California in 1976, it taught the opposite of what his organization tried to teach, mainly how to *avoid* pedestrians. Alas, *Death Race* “develop[s] the opposite skill - how to hit people” according to Row.<sup>56</sup> A few months later, the *New York Times*

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<sup>55</sup> Wills, John. 2021. “‘Ain’t the American Dream Grand’: Satirical Play in Rockstar’s Grand Theft Auto V.” *European Journal of American Studies* 16.3 (Electronic Version), 2-3.

<sup>56</sup> Young, Larry. December 29, 1976. “Local Safety Authorities Denounce Game,” *The Spokesman Review*. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1314&dat=19761229&id=eiFOAAAIBAJ&pg=6835,5559430>.

published a sort of post-mortem of the *Death Race* controversy and at the end they interviewed a dad and his 13-year-old girl who had just played a game of *Death Race*. The interviewer asked for an opinion in reference to the potential that the game might be teaching violent behaviour, to which the girl responded “that’s stupid and besides, I don’t even know how to drive.”<sup>57</sup>

This is precisely the challenge when it comes to considering the didactic capabilities of games. If they are able to teach the player something, it is seemingly up to the designer to determine what they will teach the player and how. Exidy, the designers of *Death Race*, chose to teach their players to play the game not with buttons, a directional pad or a joystick, but with a gas pedal and a steering wheel.<sup>58</sup> This seems to be a sticking point among the critics who bring up the notion of simulation in *Death Race*.<sup>59</sup> There were other arcade games at that time that used gas pedals and steering wheels by both Exidy and Atari, but none of them drummed up controversy like *Death Race* did. One of these games was Exidy’s own *Destruction Derby*, a precursor to *Death Race* that features identical gameplay but with the players targeting other cars rather than the gremlins. This game was not controversial, nor was it often mentioned alongside *Death Race* despite its similarity. For all intents and purposes, *Death Race* is just a repacking of *Destruction Derby* but with a different name, different cabinet art and slightly different sprites. However, the mix of realism, or at least the idea of simulated violence by means of an actual steering wheel, mixed with a questionable name and artwork, led to the reception of *Death Race* as something much more sinister for parents and concerned citizens than a regular racing game or even the relative safety of a demolition derby.

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<sup>57</sup> Harvey 1977 quoted in Kocurek 2012.

<sup>58</sup> See Figure 2: *Death Race* cabinet.

<sup>59</sup> Young. 1976. “Local Safety Authorities Denounce Game.”

The example of *Destruction Derby* and *Death Race* is important in understanding the underlying assumptions that became popular concerning video games even from this relatively early period. Video games had not been in the commercial sphere for more than a few years before they had their first controversy. On the one hand, *Destruction Derby* was passed by almost completely because it is nothing more than a trivial, if perhaps too expensive game. *Death Race*, however, became more than a game, but a simulation that teaches people to do terrible things. It is from this point that the discourse around realism in video games began in a nascent form. And right from the start of this public discourse, it is not so much the didactic capacity of video games that is up for discussion, but the application of a realism that makes their didacticism dangerous. Realism, when applied to a game that is not questionable or controversial, like *Destruction Derby*, is nothing more than a neat curiosity that draws the player in. But, when it is mixed with the wrong name, the wrong subject matter and the media gets a hold of it, it can become controversial and potentially lead to a panic. There is little question of this in the media sources and once *Death Race* makes the leap from game to simulation, it becomes a dangerous piece of technology precisely because it can teach real life skills seemingly so efficiently. After *Death Race*, video games cannot merely be an unproductive activity. They can tempt the wayward child away from productive pursuits, but in doing so they also teach malicious lessons, like how to run over pedestrians when behind the wheel of a car, and give them the tools to do so (while getting rewarded for it).

### ***Formation of Stereotypes and Moral Panics***

Realism and violence tend to be the main concern when it comes to moral panics, however, it is also important to understand the substance of these panics, especially as most of the game panics are linked in multiple areas. Realism tends to be the catalyst by which instances

of panic arise around video games. Casting *Death Race* as a simulation, for instance, was a leap that made it dangerous for the player. Similarly, the following chapters deal with panics that also began with the idea that there was just something much too real and therefore dangerous about the games, precisely because games are good at teaching. If games teach bad things in a realistic way, it seemed that something had to be done. However, the realism of particular games tends to be the inciting incident, but not the whole story. Stereotypes are both created and confirmed in moral panics, and they are a constant underlying element that is fundamental to a moral panic. This short section outlines the latent stereotypes that often form the foundation of panics while also, in the case of video games, reinforce a cycle of panics.

The most accessible form of commercially available video games in the early years were coin-operated cabinets. As noted above, these coin-op amusements and especially their dedicated arcade venues are seemingly direct descendants from other cheap amusement and coin-op venues, like pool-halls and pin-ball tables. Arcades, video games, and those who played video games thus naturally inherited many of these negative associations and stereotypes before any specific panics even occurred. Arcades were often understood by their detractors to be dark places filled with truant and delinquent teenagers who would waste their time and money both on their trivial amusements and on more serious behaviours like illicit drugs and alcohol. Before arcades were commercialized, there was potentially good reason for these assumptions. Arcades of the 1970s were almost always dark places with lights deliberately turned down so that the cabinet screens would be more clearly visible and the majority of the clientele were adolescent and lower-class men.<sup>60</sup> Even as arcades became increasingly sanitized and family friendly, the initial negative associations were hard to shake. The early 1980s, after the initial *Death Race*

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<sup>60</sup> Hertz, J. C. 1997. *Joystick Nation: How Video Games Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds*. Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 49.

incident, saw huge increases in both the number of arcades and the number of complaints from school teachers, parents and police in media sources like newspapers.<sup>61</sup> However, it was clear even from that time that there was only a small correlation between delinquency and arcades, and especially the claims concerning time and money that children spent at arcades were very much overestimated by those who were concerned.<sup>62</sup> These associations, inherited from the pool-halls and gaming dens of earlier decades, mixed with potentially confusing and threatening new technologies, wasting time and money, and the arcade as a gateway to things like drugs led to the reification of stereotypes around games and gamers. Stereotyping, in turn, has the potential to lead to moral panics.

Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972) is a seminal and influential work in the field of the sociology of moral panics. It is an in-depth study of the Mod and Roker subcultures of the early 1960s from both the inside with an extensive amount of fieldwork, and the outside through an examination of mass media reporting and commenting on the subcultures and events. Much like video games and gamers, these groups were also subject to media stereotyping that, with an appropriate catalyst, led to a panic. The communities themselves that Cohen studied are not necessarily as important as the patterns that arose around them that reappear in later instances of moral panics. One of the key features that occurs across moral panics is the creation and confirmation of stereotypes through language and the mass media. The creation of these stereotypes is complex and often occurs around some form of youth deviant behaviour that arouses suspicion, like all of the negative associations of the arcade. Most importantly, the stereotypes, as extreme and one-dimensional caricatures that Cohen calls 'folk devils', are often seen as both a new and very big threat that take shape when

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<sup>61</sup> Ellis, Desmond. 1984. "Video Arcades, Youth and Trouble." *Youth & Society* 16.1: 47.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 60-61.

they are identified and named.<sup>63</sup> Once they are named, in this case, arcades and gamers, they can be seen for what their stereotypes demand of them as threats to order, decency and morality, especially among the youth and adolescent population.

Stereotypes can also be pernicious. In Cohen's case study, the Mods and Rockers were rather transient threats that gave way to other discrete movements, like the hippies or later punk subcultures. Video games, however, were not a fad youth aesthetic, but an increasingly successful cultural and market force. Cohen's tentative model of a moral panic is broken down into six stages. These include the initial problem and initial solution (initial problem: earn money from arcades, solution: publish increasingly realistic and mature games), societal reaction, control culture and the creation and exploitation of stereotypes, increased polarization and finally the confirmation of stereotypes.<sup>64</sup> Cohen's six stage model has also been used in an exploration of a later video game and media panic, the 'Pokemania' phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>65</sup> The relevance of this model to the *Death Race* panic is clear. The threat is set up as arcades and gamers; the societal reaction points out the dangers of the arcade generally and violent and realistic games in particular; the media reports and uses fear to exploit stereotypes about games and gamers; the debate gets heated among the players, arcade operators and the media and concerned citizens; violent games become more popular, the stereotypes are confirmed and become entrenched even after the initial issue is resolved or forgotten about. This model of moral panic is particularly relevant when it comes to video games because *Death Race* is just the beginning, and each subsequent panic builds on the stereotypes of the last and adds to

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<sup>63</sup> Cohen, Stanley. 1972. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers*. New York: Routledge Classics, 220.

<sup>64</sup> Cohen 1972, 226.

<sup>65</sup> Yano, Christine, R. 2004. "Panic Attacks: Anti-Pokémon Voices in Global Markets." in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* ed. Joseph Tobin. Duke University Press.,

it, both creating new stereotypes and reinforcing old ones that stick around long after the actual incident or panic is relevant.

The reified versions of these stereotypes are particularly clear in popular media representations of video games and gamers. Even though the popularity of arcades were waning by 1995, the *X-Files* episode *D.P.O.* (the antagonist's high-score initials) centers around Darren Peter Oswald, a dead beat young man who spends all of his time at a sketchy arcade. He can control electricity and uses it both to get high-scores in the arcade and also wreak havoc around town by altering traffic lights and causing accidents. He is also shown to be socially inept and has no understanding of social or romantic relationships. Oswald is the whole package when it comes to negative stereotypes, he plays violent games in seedy arcades and then, inspired by the violent games, takes his teenage angst out on people in real life in a cynical and socially desperate way. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* also plays with video game stereotypes and the negative effects of games in "The Game" when the crew of the Enterprise is infiltrated by a highly addictive game that almost the entire the crew gets obsessed with and cannot control. Interestingly, it is Wesley Crusher who manages to save the day and somewhat flips the stereotypes about delinquency on its head by being the only one to see the problem, even though he is himself a teenage. Even though Wesley defies the stereotype, the episode also makes the potential addictive and obsessive qualities of video games seem even more dangerous in light of video game panics of the time.<sup>66</sup> Both of these stories are just single, 'monster-of-the-week' style episodes that play with extremes and are thus the perfect vehicles for clear views of what exactly the stereotypes and concerns about gamers were at the time. They are extreme examples, but also do not display anything that is particularly against the narratives of video games and arcades at

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<sup>66</sup> Reed, Emilie. 2021. "I Find this Disgusting but I Can't Help Myself" Videogame Panics and the Sinister Origins in SF Media." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 14.2, 177.

the time. It is this type of media that both exploits the stereotypes while simultaneously confirming them in a way that ends up perpetuating the fuel for subsequent moral panics. Video games, unlike shorter lived subcultures, did not disappear, but became more popular, and so popular media still reflects stereotypes that were created in moral panics almost 20 years before.

Stereotypes are difficult to disentangle from the groups that are labeled by them. Indeed, it has only been rather recently that video games have begun to shed their mostly negative stereotypes that first began to form in the 1970s arcades. The social stereotypes of troubled and delinquent young men who play video games are no longer as prominent, but the negative associations with violent video games remain.<sup>67</sup> Especially in a post-Covid world where social and ‘cozy’ games like *Among Us* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* have become mainstream household names, and symbols of social connection in times of crisis,<sup>68</sup> the purview of positive associations with video games has increased along with many people’s familiarity and comfort around video games. Because video games only ever got more popular, and more realistic, however, the negative associations and stereotypes that cast video game players as violent has not as readily been shed. These newer discourses and panics, while perhaps carrying more weight in the public sphere due to higher stakes with bigger issues like mass shootings and a much larger video game market, still reflect the initial patterns of stereotypes and a growing concern for realism and violence.

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<sup>67</sup> Kowert, Rachel and Julian Oldmeadow. 2012. “The Stereotype of Online Gamers: New Characterization or Recycled Prototype?” *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global - Game in Culture and Society*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Washington Post Staff. June 2, 2021. “The Games that Got Us Through the Pandemic.” *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/06/02/video-games-covid-19-pandemic/>.

## CHAPTER 3: *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Satanic Panic

### *Panic!*

The last quarter of the 20th century was a time of both rapidly changing technologies and rapidly changing cultural values. These changes seem to have led to a whole host of fears that unfortunately still haunt the cultural landscape in numerous ways. These new cultural discussions of video games and their uses and abuses for and by children occurred in parallel with several other media and moral panics in North America. While this is not the place for a full treatment of the political and cultural histories that underlie the rise of these panics such as the rise of the Moral Majority movement and the Evangelical Christian Right, it is worth investigating more fully other fears that blamed games and gamers for a whole host of society's ills. Not only were video games seen as something to be feared and rejected, but another new type of game, the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG).<sup>69</sup> While the various recurring and ongoing criticisms, panics and fears associated with video games do not have any particular name associated with them, the panic surrounding TTRPGs was part of a rather sustained group of panics called the 'Satanic Panic.'

It should be noted that while TTRPGs are decidedly not video games, they do share much of the same DNA with video games in terms of major settings, themes and even mechanics. TTRPGs in the 1970s and 1980s, like video games, were also a new and mysterious type of game, and that led to suspicion about their content and capabilities. The rules of TTRPGs are often directly transferable to digital games, with many video games even implementing popular TTRPG rulesets, settings and branding. The *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* ruleset was

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<sup>69</sup> I have used the more modern terminology in TTRPG, however, most early TTRPGs were referred to as FRPs (Fantasy Role-Playing) at the time (mid-1970s to 1990s). TTRPG generally distinguishes these types of games from video games, while FRP distinguished the role-playing game from its miniature wargaming roots.

adapted first in Strategic Simulation Inc.’s “Gold Box” series of games in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s with games like *Krynn* series (1990-1992).<sup>70</sup> Later iterations of the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules were developed as video games with the Infinity Engine games like *Baldur’s Gate* (1998) and *Planescape: Torment* (1999), and most recently adaptations of the 5th edition *Dungeons & Dragons* rules appeared in *Solasta: Crown of the Magister* (2021) and *Baldur’s Gate 3* (2023).

TTRPGS are not played like video games, however, because they are descendants of table-top wargames and are played in person around a table, often with one ‘game-master’ or ‘referee’ who prepares the game,<sup>71</sup> and two or more players with individual characters. What is more important for the current discussion, however, is that like video games, TTRPGs represent a radical departure from traditional ideas of what games fundamentally are and what they are capable of while also exploding in popularity around the same time as video games. Most of the game is not presented in a neat and tidy box like a board game, but as a series of large, dense, textbook-like hardcovers that explain different parts of the rules. Starting with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the full rules of the game were not published in a single volume, but many; the ‘core’ rules of *D&D*, for example, are spread throughout three volumes, the *Player’s Handbook*, *Dungeon Master’s Guide* and *Monster Manual*. Even more confusing is that the games are generally played mostly verbally, sometimes with a gridded game board and miniatures, and sometimes completely in the imagination and conversation of the players. A game of *Dungeons and Dragons* is just as far removed from something like *Monopoly* (1935) or *The Game of Life* (1960), as many video games are. Because of this, the cultural perceptions and responses to these

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<sup>70</sup> Maher, Jimmy. March 18, 2016. “Opening the Gold Box, Part 3: From Tabletop to Desktop.” <https://www.filfre.net/2016/03/opening-the-gold-box-part-3-from-tabletop-to-desktop/>.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Game master’ is generally the system agnostic term that is used now, though ‘referee’ was often used in early TTRPGs like *Rune Quest* (1978). Many TTRPGs also use thematically appropriate terminology for this role, like the ‘Dungeon Master’ in *D&D* or the ‘Keeper of Arcane Lore’ in *Call of Cthulhu* (1981).

two new types of games tended to be similar. Like arcade games, TTRPG products were expensive and games could take many hours at a time to play.<sup>72</sup> Initially, TTRPGs did not necessarily bring with them the same types of stereotypes that were associated with arcades as they were mostly carried by bookstores and hobby shops. However, the games took on many of these associations after some began to conflate them with witchcraft, satanism and the occult. Established stereotypes were thus already mingling with the increasingly popular TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, and like with *Death Race*, all that was needed for a panic was some sort of inciting incident.

Interestingly, the TTRPG industry was and still is much smaller than the video game industry, and perhaps because of this the people in the industry are much more transparent and accessible regarding their products and even motivations. With the much smaller scale of the industry, game writers and developers were much closer to the communities of gamers, because they were by necessity gamers themselves. Gaming media like *Dragon* magazine in North America or *White Dwarf* in the UK often featured sections written by game designers. Most of these articles were practical features like advice for players and game masters, maps, rules modification and monsters. However, there were just as often reflection pieces and historical and philosophical musings on the games by both designers and hobbyists alike. Thus, while TTRPGs are not the same as video games, they represent a very similar cultural space and also provide different and often much more accessible data related to the actual development and thought process behind design choices. The communities of TTRPG players, having been derived from an already existing and passionate community of wargamers in the 1970s, were self-aware of the games and their communities and no strangers to both practical and philosophical discussions

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<sup>72</sup> Although in the long run, TTRPGs represented a much lower price per hour of entertainment considering play is often possible with only a single copy of the rulebook(s).

concerning their hobby through these types of magazines.<sup>73</sup> There is just as much literature from their discourses surrounding the recurrent issues of the ‘satanic panic,’ from within the community itself, most of which is much more accessible today than the opposing sources published by anti-TTRPG groups and individuals.<sup>74</sup> While TTRPGs are not video games, many of the same concerns and issues occurred in a very similar fashion.

### *The Satanic Panic!*

The Satanic Panic in current popular culture does not generally refer to a single incident, but to a wide array of interconnected panics centered around children’s safety and media consumption. While a single event, the McMartin Preschool allegations and trial (1983-1990), might have been a catalyst for the panic, occurring at a time in which the language of ‘epidemics,’ like AIDS and drug crises, was commonplace. Something like a spiritual epidemic might have been just as readily apparent in this political and cultural climate.<sup>75</sup> Many conspiratorial ideas melded together and reinforced each other in the form of “concurrent rumors that were promoted by law-and-order conservatives and the Christian media: satanist livestock killing, devil-worshipping corporate executives, and rock musicians who dubbed their songs with subliminal, demoniacal messages.”<sup>76</sup> The conspiracy became a self-referential system, very similar to current 21st century conspiracies like PizzaGate or Q-Anon, which are increasingly seen as the inheritors of the Satanic Panic.<sup>77</sup> With his conspiratorial mindset, anything might be subject to the workings of the devil and his followers, and many of these things were seen as

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<sup>73</sup> Peterson, Jon. 2020. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 164.

<sup>74</sup> Byers, Andrew. 2016. “The Satanic Panic and *Dungeons & Dragons*: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective.” in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influences of RPGs*. ed. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco. 33.

<sup>75</sup> Beck, Richard. 2015. *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s*. New York: Public Affairs Press. xii.

<sup>76</sup> Nathan, Debbie and Michael Snedeker. 1995. *Satan’s Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt*. New York: Basic Books. 4.

<sup>77</sup> See *Behind the Bastards* podcast “The Satanic Panic: America’s First QAnon.” parts 1 and 2. Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31B2ZP-8JR8>.

connecting to one another in a systematic network designed to lead children to become sacrifices to Satan or even worshippers of Satan themselves. Anything from pop-music to daycare was seen as a potential satanic threat to children and adolescents. It is no wonder that a game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, with references to devils, demons, evil characters and magical spells would be consumed by this way of thinking on a mass scale.

The criticism of TTRPGs, most especially *D&D* because of its popularity and accessibility, followed a similar trajectory as the panic around video games. There are the same fears around new and unconventional games, the amount of time that players spend with the games, but most importantly for TTRPGs, it is the ‘realism’ and the didactic value of these games that might be seen to really cause the panic. There is not much in the way of argumentation concerning whether or not TTRPGs, as games, are capable of teaching, by the mid-1980s the idea that games can be good teachers is taken as a given. This didactic element of games, however, only became widely discussed when it was seen to be negative, similar to how *Death Race* ‘taught’ the player to drive recklessly, but non-controversial arcade racing games were not known to teach driving. Of course, TTRPGs’ didactic value was seen as being centered around the content (magic, demons) of the setting (sword-and-sorcery, fantasy) of the game, not the mechanics. And while the games might teach useful things like math and strategy, that was seen all as an effort to seduce the player, their teachers, and parents into a false sense of security as the clearly satanic and occult content is what the games are *really* teaching to the children who play them. At least according to their detractors.

### ***Constructing the Panic***

Many pamphlet style essays and other forms of media like evangelical tracts were disseminated in Christian communities in order to educate children, their parents and local

ministers on the dangerous effects of TTRPGs. The most infamous of these were the *Chick Tracts*, named after their writer and artist Jack Chick, who has published hundreds of comic book style tracts that deal with everything from the story of the Gospels, to the dangers of Catholicism and Islam, and, of course, *Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>78</sup> These tracts were designed to be small, easy and quick-to-read pamphlets that could be left in strategic locations to be read by whoever finds them. While many of the tracts from the 1980s and '90s are no longer in print, they are still available to read digitally on the company's website and available for special orders of 10,000 copies or more. The website also still hosts articles both from its periodical *BattleCry* and a small assortment of older republished articles, most notably William Schnoebelen's *Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons*,<sup>79</sup> and *Should a Christian Play Dungeons and Dragons*.<sup>80</sup>

The comic book Chick Tract *Dark Dungeons* follows the story of Debbie, a player in a game of *D&D* whose Dungeon Master, as Debbie eventually finds out, is herself an actual witch.<sup>81</sup> When Debbie's character levels up to 8th level, we find out that "the intense occult training through D&D [sic] prepared Debbie to accept the invitation to enter a witches' coven."<sup>82</sup> Just as video games like *Death Race* are seen as teaching children violence, so too are TTRPGs seen as leading children directly to the world of the occult and satanism. Debbie is not just playing a game that might teach her strategy and critical thinking skill like a game of Chess would, she is undergoing "intense occult training" at the hands of a coordinated and malicious

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<sup>78</sup> *Dark Dungeons* and *The Death Cookie* (reference to the Catholic eucharist and the theology of transubstantiation) are perhaps the best known. Older tracts like these are still available to view on the Chick publications website, and many hundreds of others are still being produced and in-print. <https://www.chick.com/>.

<sup>79</sup> Schnoebelen, William. Before 2001. "Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons." *Chick Publications*. <https://www.chick.com/information/article?id=Straight-Talk-On-Dungeons-and-Dragons>.

<sup>80</sup> Schnoebelen, William. 2001. "Should a Christian Play Dungeons and Dragons?" *Chick Publications*. <https://www.chick.com/Information/article?id=Should-A-Christian-Play-Dungeons-and-Dragons>.

<sup>81</sup> See Figures 3 and 4: *Dark Dungeons* cover and detail of page 4.

<sup>82</sup> Chick, Jack. 1984. *Dark Dungeons*. Chick Publications. 5. <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=0046>.

coven bent on recruiting her into their fold. Chick Tracts are usually considered to be particularly absurd and extreme in their representations of things that do not align perfectly with their certain brand of the American right, but this view of TTRPGs was not an outlier opinion during the Satanic Panic.

Dr. Gary North, an American right wing Christian commentator and economist who wrote a monthly newsletter called *Remnant Review* from 1974 until 2017<sup>83</sup> also weighed in on the problem of *Dungeons and Dragons* sometime in the 1980s with the following:<sup>84</sup>

Without any doubt in my mind, after years of study in the history of occultism, after having researched a book on the topic, and having consulted with scholars in the field of historical research. I can say with confidence: these games are the most effective, most magnificently packaged, most profitably marketed, most thoroughly researched introduction to the occult in man's recorded history. Period.

*Dungeons and Dragons* is not the only introduction to the occult according to North, but the best one out there and it is marketed and packaged in a way that does not even think to disguise its real intentions. This notion of *D&D* and other TTRPGs as actual manuals for occult practices is the core idea behind much of the anti-TTRPG panic. Role-playing game publishers, and those who played them, were understood to be practitioners of satanic magic, spells, rituals and sacrifices that used commercially successful products like rule books to seduce children by means of a fun game. The economic side, while certainly present, is much less pronounced than

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<sup>83</sup> North, Gary. "This is Gary North's Oldest Newsletter, Started in May, 1974." *Gary North's Specific Answers*. Webpage. <https://www.garynorth.com/public/department48.cfm>.

<sup>84</sup> Archives on North's website only go back to 2004 and the main source of the quotation is not properly referenced in Leihart and Grant 1987 (cited below). A reference to the same, but slightly altered quotation in a 2003 article (<https://believersweb.org/dungeons-and-dragons-concerns-for-the-christian/>) cites *Remnant Review* from 12/5/80. The reference to North's book is vague and does not provide a solid base for dating the quotation. North is likely referring to his 1979 book *None May Call it Witchcraft*, though that was altered slightly and re-released as 1988's *Unholy Spirits: Occultism and New Age Humanism*. The fuller quote in Leihart and Grant 1987 could conceivably be referring to either, or a rework of an earlier quote. North published more than 30 books between 1968 and 1994, and several were re-released, so along with *Remnant Review*, tracking down where he first said something is not easy and may not always be possible. This is also quoted, but similarly unreferenced by Pulling's B.A.D.D. pamphlet (cited below) on page 4.

the video game and arcade panics were - after all, these are physical books, a much more understandable (and controllable) medium even if the game and content are questionable. The games and the marketing always take a back seat to the form and the content, which in the case of *Dungeons and Dragons*, are seen as literal textbooks of the occult.

The furthest extent that this is taken to is in a pamphlet from the organization B.A.D.D., or Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons called *Dungeons and Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence*.<sup>85</sup> The majority of this 40-page pamphlet is dedicated to quoting spells from various *D&D* books and then directly comparing them to ‘real’ spells and rituals from different sources.<sup>86</sup> The sources that the authors use to prove that these spells from the *AD&D Players Handbook*,<sup>87</sup> and *AD&D Dungeon Master’s Guide*,<sup>88</sup> often have the appearance of being credible or even academic sources, but many of them are dubious at best. W.J. Walton, of the RPGAdvocate, published a page-by-page commentary on his website of this pamphlet and outlined some of these sources.<sup>89</sup> Many, like *The Necromancers* are edited volumes of fantasy/horror fiction according to Walton. *The Devil’s Dominion* is another anthology that was used in this pamphlet, but collects *folklore* concerning Satan and Hell.<sup>90</sup> The pamphlet’s use of these sources is important, however. From within the pamphlet, it seems as if the sources are trustworthy, perhaps even academic volumes by their names and the way they are cited.

However, many like those noted above, are either a mix of fiction and folklore compilations, or

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<sup>85</sup> Dempsey, Mary, Pat Dempsay and Pat A. Pulling. 1984 or shortly after based on the dates of the suicides allegedly incited by playing *Dungeons and Dragons* on page 1. *Dungeons and Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence*. Self-published by Pat Dempsey and Pat Pulling.

<sup>86</sup> See Figure 5: Cover of B.A.D.D. pamphlet.

<sup>87</sup> Gygax, Gary. 1978. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Players Handbook*. USA: TSR Games.

<sup>88</sup> Gygax, Gary. 1979. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Masters Guide*. USA: TSR Games.

<sup>89</sup> Walton, W.J. “As BADD as it Gets: An Anti-*Dungeons & Dragons* Propaganda Booklet.” *The Escapist*. <http://www.theescapist.com/BADDbook.htm>.

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.theescapist.com/BADDbook07.htm>

other panic mongering books, like Mike Warnke's 1972 book *The Satan-Seller*, which itself was debunked by the Christian publication *Cornerstone* in 1992.<sup>91</sup>

This publication also seems to go out of its way to misquote sections of the material in such a way as to hide the game elements of the spells it examines. It often leads the reader to believe that the player must actually carry out the instructions of the spell and of course does not explain that casting a spell in most cases is a matter of book-keeping spell slots, simply declaring that you cast your spell and possibly rolling a series of dice. Ironically, the authors of the pamphlet seem to have quite a difficult time themselves in understanding fiction from reality in this regard. Pages six and seven of the pamphlet misleadingly quote in-game spell preparation times, which is described as about one week per spell level, in a way that makes it seem as if that is actual time the *player*, not the in-game character, is meant to spend studying a spell. What it does not quote, however, is that this also comes at a cost of 200 gold pieces per spell level per week, something a bit more difficult to make sense of in our modern world.<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, a simple introduction on how to run a game as a Dungeon Master turns into a magical spell. In describing when it might be appropriate to arbitrate rules debates, the *Dungeon Master's Guide* reads: "Know your game systems, and you will know how and when to take upon yourself the ultimate power."<sup>93</sup> The idea of "ultimate power" is easy enough to misinterpret as magical as the pamphlet does,<sup>94</sup> although the previous sentence in the DMG makes it unambiguous that this is about the rules of the game that might be "disregarded altogether in favor of play." Of course, the idea that anything in the rule books, especially regarding spells,

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<sup>91</sup> Trott, Jon and Mike Hertenstein. 1992. "Selling Satan: The Tragic History of Mike Warnke," *Cornerstone* 98. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110629063019/http://www.cornerstonemag.com/features/iss098/sellingsatan.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Gygax, Gary. 1979. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Masters Guide*. USA: TSR Games, 115.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* 9.

<sup>94</sup> Pulling et al. 1984. 22.

might be altered or changed in any way is incompatible with the argument that these texts are manuals.

It is important to note that while this pamphlet does not look neat or well organized by today's standards, it is packed with what appears to be an incredible amount of well-researched data that directly links the *D&D* books with sources that seem legitimate. To see a description of an in-game spell and then see something even vaguely similar described by what looks like a direct quotation from an academic volume would be frightening to concerned parents. To an already fearful and uninformed audience, this pamphlet, printed in haste, shows that these books and the games that children and teenagers are playing really do teach children how to actually perform spells and rituals. B.A.D.D.'s *Dungeons and Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence* is just one example of the disinformation spread by the organization, but B.A.D.D. and the people running it would become major players in the panic well into the late 1980s. However, much of their material was of a similar quality to the pamphlet, including the lack of proper citations and statistics which would eventually contribute to the organization's downfall.

### ***Pat Pulling is Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons***

*Dungeons & Dragons* and other TTRPGs were only gaining more popularity throughout the 1980s, and so too were those who opposed these supposedly dangerous games. Many people in the evangelical Christian community with a media presence made comments on the risks of role-playing, but one activist group in particular set their sights on TTRPGs and targeted them above all else: B.A.D.D., or Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons. The history and motivations of those involved in the formation of B.A.D.D. is quite tragic and should not be taken lightly, while at the same time recognizing the sheer amount of misinformation and disinformation that the group distributed and advocated for. In many ways the history of

B.A.D.D. is the history of its founder, Patricia ‘Pat’ Pulling, who started advocating against TTRPGs after her son, Irving, tragically committed suicide. After his death, she began campaigning against what she understood to be the cause of his suicide, his involvement with *Dungeons & Dragons* which led to a curse being placed upon him. The following year in 1983 she founded B.A.D.D. and subsequently marketed herself as an ‘expert’ in both the dangers of TTRPGs and so-called ‘Occult Crimes.’ She also appeared on radio shows and at conferences, and ran training courses for pastors, parents and even police officers on the apparently increasing threat of satanic and occult crimes (including those supposedly stemming from *Dungeons & Dragons*). This eventually led to her publishing *The Devil’s Web: Who is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* (1989) which is part personal narrative and part expose of a great satanic conspiracy that almost exclusively targets children and teenagers through the usual suspects of sex, drugs, and rock and roll - with the addition of TTRPGs. B.A.D.D. made many arguments about *Dungeons & Dragons*, but the core of their campaigning was to demonstrate that *D&D* was a vehicle for satanism and the occult to infiltrate the minds of teenagers, and would either lead to children becoming Satanists, or be driven to suicide by means of exposure to both latent and explicit satanism, black magic rituals or curses. These two elements, the hidden or occult dangers behind TTRPGs, mixed with the very tangible and terrifying dangers of suicide made for very effective marketing of a panic.

Pat Pulling was one of the central figures around which the TTRPG panic revolved, though much of what she believed about TTRPGs and advocated against had been thoroughly debunked by 1989. Unfortunately, the majority of B.A.D.D. 's publications were ephemera in the form of photo-copied pamphlets and radio interviews which mostly no longer exist. Thus, the legacy of B.A.D.D. beyond *The Devil’s Web*, is known almost entirely through the work of

Michael A. Stackpole, a game designer and fiction writer who published *Game Hysteria and the Truth* in 1989,<sup>95</sup> and *The Pulling Report* in 1990.<sup>96</sup> The initial essay, *Game Hysteria*, outlines the issues with Pulling's published material from an insider perspective of someone who is intimately familiar with TTRPG systems and the industry as a whole. *The Pulling Report*, published the next year, is essentially another edition of *Game Hysteria* with a tighter focus on Pulling herself. Both articles detail Pulling's lack of credentials, questionable police training methods and an almost complete lack of understanding of how TTRPGs are played in spite of her status as a so-called occult crime and TTRPG expert.

*The Pulling Report* is lengthy and goes into detailed responses to what is published in *The Devil's Web* and supported by Stackpole's own research into Pulling's activities with B.A.D.D. from its founding in 1983 to 1990. Part of the reason that the report was so convincing, and condemning, is that Stackpole goes about his research with an academic approach and properly cites his sources. B.A.D.D., along with other anti-TTRPG people and groups, tended to not do a very thorough job with their sources (for an example, see note 82 on Gary North's quotation), and Stackpole goes to great lengths to demonstrate their shaky and misleading grasp on statistics and even on the very games that they purport to be experts in. By 'doing the math' on Pulling's statistical claims, Stackpole takes great pleasure in demonstrating that by her own numbers, youth who play TTRPGs were actually significantly less likely to commit suicide than those who did not. Stackpole breaks down Pulling's numbers in the following manner: She claims that there are 4,000,000 players (assumedly mostly teenagers and young adults). The recorded suicide rate for 15-24 year-olds was between 11.7-12.8 per 100,000 between 1975

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<sup>95</sup> Stackpole, Michael A. 1989. *Game Hysteria and the Truth*. <http://www.theescapist.com/archive-gamehysteria.htm>.

<sup>96</sup> Stackpole, Michael A. 1990. *The Pulling Report*. <http://www.theescapist.com/archive-pullingreport.htm>.

(when *D&D* was released) and 1980. Therefore, following the population average suicide rate, there would be an expected 468-512 gamer suicides per year. However, in *The Devil's Web*, Pulling cited 125 deaths related to TTRPGs, with only about half being suicides, or roughly 62 suicides in 14 years (less than 5 per year).<sup>97</sup> By Pulling's own numbers, the suicide rate among TTRPG gamers would be astronomically lower than the general population. The point of this exercise in *The Pulling Report* was not to make light of suicide or make the scientific claim about any potential link, or lack thereof, between TTRPG players and suicide, but rather to demonstrate the absurdity of the statistics that Pulling and B.A.D.D. use. When looking at the numbers, it is clear that one of the primary claims of Pat Pulling and her group, that suicide is a very real risk of TTRPGs, simply does not add up.

Along the same lines of this treatment of the spurious and confused statistics that Pulling often cited, Stackpole also makes use of his own knowledge of the TTRPG industry to demonstrate just how little Pulling understands of the games she is apparently an expert in. In his "Expert Witness" section, Stackpole analyzes the examples of TTRPGs other than *Dungeons & Dragons* that Pulling mentions for parents to be aware of in *The Devil's Web*.<sup>98</sup> This is meant to demonstrate how out-of-date any knowledge Pulling might have had about the TTRPG industry is as many of these games were either no longer popular or out of print by 1989. According to Stackpole, the final count of Pulling's games for parents to be wary of results in "5 out of print, 5 in serious decline, 2 [that] are not role -laying games at all, 1 [that] is still popular but goes under a different name."<sup>99</sup> This is just another example of the numerous claims made by Pulling that are systematically dissected by Stackpole in *Gaming Hysteria* and the *Pulling Report*. The rest of

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. § "Suicide and Games," 5.

<sup>98</sup> Pulling, Pat, 1989. *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* Huntington House: Lafayette. 97.

<sup>99</sup> Stackpole, *The Pulling Report* § Expert Witness.

the report follows a similar structure with different topics, like how violence or magic is seen to function according to Pulling. Stackpole also goes even further by extending his reach past pulling to debunk the claims of B.A.D.D.'s other members and the few sources that Pulling actually cites. In the end, *The Pulling Report* does what it set out to do, and it does it thoroughly. However, for many it was not all-together convincing.

The biggest issues with *The Pulling Report* are that it can often come across as a personal attack on Patricia Pulling and that it does not treat the spiritual arguments as anything more than a simple fantasy. Both of these elements, in spite of the abundance of statistical evidence and Stackpole's much greater knowledge of TTRPGs, makes it a very easy document to refute or ignore from the other side. After all, it is called the *Pulling Report*, and can very easily be read as an attack on Pulling herself, a woman who lost her son to the evils of *Dungeons & Dragons*, from an avowed skeptic and atheist who himself is a game designer and thus obviously benefits from people playing TTRPGs. *Ad-hominem* attacks are one thing, but the bigger issue is that as a skeptic, Stackpole really does end up dismissing the spiritual concerns about the game almost out of hand. He understands that the games are often portrayed as recruiting devices for the occult, but his skeptical outlook makes it very easy to dismiss any sort of talk of magic or demons. This, of course, is internally consistent, but also does not make his arguments any more convincing to those who might be worried about these games precisely because of their faith or religious worldview. It might not only come across as an *ad-hominem* attack against Pat Pulling, but also as an attack on anyone religious as he conflates faith with magical and conspiratorial thinking.

This posture toward downplaying the importance placed on the spiritual side of the discussion is not lost on those he is writing against. An article written by William Schnoebelen for Chick.com in 2001 offers a sort of update on the *D&D* situation for those still interested in

the topic. Similar to Pat Pulling's lack of updated sources, he does not seem aware that *Dungeons & Dragons* was in its third edition by 2000 and only cites the second edition books. In any case, he rails against both Stackpole's characterization of Pulling and disregard for the religious worldviews. Unfortunately, Schnoebelen is probably right when he writes that "many of his points only make sense if you look at the issues through the eyes of a humanist or atheist. In short, he does not get the underlying spiritual concerns."<sup>100</sup> This is mostly accurate and especially convincing if one approaches the issue with the assumptions of Schnoebelen's likely audience of hard-line evangelical Christians via Jack Chick's publications. For many, Stackpole's impressively thorough treatment of Pat Pulling and B.A.D.D.'s less than trustworthy reporting was the nail in the coffin of the whole thing, but for better or for worse it did not approach the subject in a convincing manner for the 'true-believers.' The satanic panic was very much on the downturn by 1990, and even the McMartin's Preschool trials were wrapping up and resulted in zero convictions for the alleged abuse in the name of Satan. But the panic was still in the air for many and would linger, especially with dubious and untrustworthy material like TTRPGs.

### *Satan's Catechism*

Before shifting entirely away from the satanic panic, another source should also be mentioned. *A Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons: The Catechism of the New Age*,<sup>101</sup> by Peter Leihart and George Grant, is an essential work when it comes to anti-TTRPG media, perhaps just as important as Pat Pulling's work. It presents the most thoughtful and distilled presentation of any of the panic mongering materials, but still shows much of the same

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<sup>100</sup> Schnoebelen, William. 2001. "Should a Christian Play Dungeons and Dragons?" *Chick Publications*. <https://www.chick.com/Information/article?id=Should-A-Christian-Play-Dungeons-and-Dragons>.

<sup>101</sup> Leihart, Peter and George Grant. 1987. *A Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons: The Catechism of the New Age*. Fort Worth: Dominion Press.

misinformation and lack of proper citations as the others. The thrust of the argument is reflected in the essay's name and posits that the books of *Dungeons & Dragons* function much like a Christian catechism and were essentially expository texts on satanism and new age spirituality. *D&D* thus "serves as an introduction to evil, a catechism of occultism, a primer for the ABCs of the New Age. It is a recruiting tool for Satan."<sup>102</sup> Even as *A Christian Response* represents likely the best researched and most accurate understandings of TTRPGs of these dubious and highly ideological polemics against *Dungeon & Dragons*, it still operates under the assumption that it provides actual instructions for spells and rituals - in fact, that is its entire argument. Spells are seen as being prescriptive of real-world activities, rather than simply part of the game. According to *A Christian Response*, "many of the spells, incantations, symbols, and protective measures are *genuine* occultic techniques. Several spells, for example, instruct the *player* to draw a protective circle when communicating with demons, a practice used by real witches" (emphasis my own).<sup>103</sup> Again, there is a leap from the in-game world of the characters to the real world of the player where the books, instead of providing rules and descriptions for within the game, provide formulae for spells, summoning circles and pentagrams in the real world. In other words, the many *D&D* books are understood to be textbooks of the occult and grimoires comparable to those of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa or Paracelsus.<sup>104</sup>

*A Christian Response* is likely the closest work to presenting a reasonable, though still hardline, position on the topic. In other words, there is a good reason this became the enduring work on the subject, and is still very accessible online. It is well written, presents a coherent and logical argument framed around a core concept, and provides a reasonably accurate description

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid 17.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid 9.

<sup>104</sup> Both were late medieval alchemists who wrote major works on occult philosophy. Agrippa is referenced in the B.A.D.D. pamphlet, pg. 22.

of how TTRPGs and role-playing actually work. This is much more than can be said for the likes of Pat Pulling and the B.A.D.D. group, who rarely provide useful citations and sources and never step beyond simplistic fear-mongering. What is so interesting about *A Christian Response* is that it takes the *idea* of role-playing seriously and presents the concept in a surprisingly positive, even theologically informed light explaining that “scripture *encourages* leisure, play and even role-playing” (emphasis in the original).<sup>105</sup> It is perhaps the only essay that really takes time to think about the game’s concepts and mechanics beyond a mere strawman that gets blown down in the presence of the satanic content. For all of its surprisingly good-faith argumentation, it is still evident that neither author has any actual experience playing the game even though two “former Dungeon Masters” are thanked for contributing.<sup>106</sup> This lack of experience is not a problem for writing a convincing article for others who have no experience, but it falls flat for those who actually do. However, according to the authors, even if role-play may be useful in some respects, the satanic content is still present and much too dangerous, no matter how useful role-playing might be. The risks of these dubious and potentially very dangerous TTRPGs are simply not worth trifling with.

*A Christian Response* is the go-to polemic against *Dungeons & Dragons* and TTRPGs and has accrued quite a legacy for itself over the years. The tone comes across as being stern, and serious, but not explicitly fear-mongering in the same way as the B.A.D.D. pamphlet or *The Devil’s Web*. It is also an intelligible document and there are actual coherent arguments that follow from one another, meaning it can actually be responded to in a meaningful way. There is even a modern response to the essay on a Christian media website entitled “A Christian Defense of Dungeons and Dragons,” that both demonstrates the legacy of the essay while also rebutting it

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid 15.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid Title Page.

many decades after the panic had died down.<sup>107</sup> “A Christian Defense” is only a single example of Christian TTRPG players defending the virtues of the hobby, including a piece by Reverend Arthur W. Collins of the United Methodist church in the September 1980 issue of *Dragon Magazine*, well before the hysteria of the satanic panic.<sup>108</sup> Many replies to the panic from the gaming community, Christian or not, also encouraged reasonable responses from gamers as well.

In many ways, *A Christian Response* is the final word on the subject having been published near the end of the media frenzy and panic in 1987. While it certainly is not the last thing to be published on the subject, it is the most sophisticated and essentially became the standard text. It also stands out because it was not published with the intention of merely being ephemeral like the work of B.A.D.D. There is of course the language of spiritual battle, but not in the conspiratorial ways that were presented by Pat Pulling.

### *Never-Ending Panic*

Just because the media frenzy started dying down does not mean that these views went away; they certainly did not. *A Christian Response* was the perfectly crafted answer to the question of *Dungeons & Dragons*, it was thoughtful, intelligent and mostly honest. Coming in at only 18 pages, it was cheap and easily reproducible to boot. Instead of debate, all one needed was that handy pamphlet. Of course, like all the other pamphlets, many of the sources are not used in context, and there is a particularly egregious lack of citation standards (though still much better than B.A.D.D. is known for), but that is not important; what is important is that clearly and succinctly answers any of the questions one might have about that terrible game, *Dungeons & Dragons*. And it seems to do so in a fair and reasonable manner (if you don’t count all those

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<sup>107</sup> Tallon, Phil. 2019. “A Christian Defense of Dungeon and Dragons.” *Love Thy Nerd* <https://lovethynerd.com/the-christian-response-to-dnd/>.

<sup>108</sup> Collins, Arthur W. 1980. “Reflections of a Real-Life Cleric.” *Dragon Magazine* 41: 6-8.

mysterious quotes!).<sup>109</sup> The legacy of the panic is still very much in the air in certain cultures, however. The fact that it can garner a rebuttal in 2019 with *A Christian Defense* says a lot, and even evangelical organizations like Focus on the Family still officially decry the dangers of *D&D* and TTRPGs.<sup>110</sup>

The panic around *Dungeons & Dragons* lasted a considerably long amount of time relative to most moral panics at close to a decade. At its height in the mid to late 1980s it was intense, but it was more than just a flash in the pan. For the most part, however, it did not really go anywhere. Those who were concerned had *A Christian Response* and those who could be convinced by *The Pulling Report* were and there was not much discussion across the divide. However, after the whole thing cooled off with the end of the broader satanic panic, the issue became more of a disagreement than a panic. There are still those who would likely vehemently oppose any type of TTRPG, but it is not all over the news media like it was. The effects linger, but it no longer constitutes a panic. And nothing really changed, TTRPGs continued to be published, including *Dungeons & Dragons*, and there was no visible increase in satanic rituals, curses or demon summonings. Without the likes of B.A.D.D. and Pat Pulling fueling the fire, it died down, merely smoldering now. By the early 1990s, the next panic was on the horizon, but this one, unlike the satanic panic, was much more focused and had a concrete and achievable goal: realistic and violent video games and *Mortal Kombat*.

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<sup>109</sup> See footnote 10 regarding the Gary North quote for an example of this.

<sup>110</sup> Focus on the Family. 2010. "Teen Questions about Dungeons and Dragons." *Teens Q&As*. Webpage. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/teen-questions-about-dungeons-and-dragons/>.

## CHAPTER 4: Mortal and Legal Kombat

The trend of attacking games for their questionable content continued into the 1990s, and once again the focus turned to the rapidly growing market of video games just as it had in the '70s with *Death Race*. The Satanic Panic of TTRPGs was still fresh and the effects would linger in both conservative Christian cultures and the gaming communities.<sup>111</sup> However, due to the lack of evidence of anything to do with Satanic practices arising from youth playing *D&D*, the panic was swept from the spotlight as new moral dangers took the stage in the form of new violent and realistic video games.<sup>112</sup> In many ways this new panic around violence in video games was a toning down of the fear of TTRPGs that was endemic in parents and concerned citizens (after all, what can be more pressing than a battle for your child's soul?). But, the reach of this renewed panic around video games was much greater due to their much larger markets and called for widespread media coverage and national policy review and changes. For all of the evils of TTRPGs, they would remain relatively obscure in certain corners of nerd culture; video games, however, were quickly becoming a ubiquitous part of everyday life.

This chapter focuses on a much more condensed episode of moral panic in the world of 20th century gaming history - the controversy surrounding the arcade fighting game *Mortal Kombat*, the congressional hearings concerning the industry and the establishment of an age-rating system external to the industry. Several large changes in the perception of video games grew out of these affairs that would cement concerns over video games even into the current cultural climate in the 2020s. Some good things, like the Electronic Software Rating Board

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<sup>111</sup> It is common to see advertisements for the *Gold Box D&D* video games in gaming magazines at this time. *Mortal Kombat* is often discussed right next to these magazine ads, indicating a similar demographic between these controversial video games and at least the *D&D* brand if not the TTRPGs.

<sup>112</sup> Laycock, Joseph P. 2015. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion and Imagined Worlds*. Oakland: University of California Press, 103.

(ESRB) would be born from this, while at the same time giving rise to many negative views toward video games in general that are still very much present today. The effect that the hearings concerning *Mortal Kombat's* violence had, and still have, on many popular understandings of video games needs to be emphasized. While cultural concerns around demons in *Dungeons & Dragons* still exist in certain communities, the view that video games contribute to actual violence is still rather mainstream, especially with the continued associations between video games and mass shootings which will be examined in Section 2.

Along with continuing to trace the history of the moral panics around games in the 20th century, this chapter is also pivotal to understanding the current cultural discourse around video games. The moral panics specifically associated with video games in the latter half of the 20th century were all contending with violence amidst increasingly realistic visual and sensory representations as digital technology and techniques improved. This technological innovation led to a greater capacity for photo-realism in video games. Instead of cartoon and pixelated violence, now children were playing games that seemingly encouraged violence against 'real' or at least realistic people.

### ***Mortal Monday***

Video game markets had been growing throughout the 1980s with the release of successful home video game consoles like the *Nintendo Entertainment System* in 1985 (NES) and the SEGA *Genesis* and Nintendo *Game Boy* in 1989. Video games were no longer just the domain of the arcade, but now could be played at home on the family television. Arcades were still around, and would be commonplace until the mid-1990s, but now many arcade games could be purchased once and played an unlimited number of times at home and with friends and family. There were also new and different types of games, like adventure games that were

designed to be played over multiple sessions where progress might be saved as opposed to one-and-done, high-score based games. As video games became a part of family life, they shed some of the negative associations that they had picked up from the sketchy and morally questionable arcades. Video games were being domesticated and were becoming more familiar and safer as they moved from the arcades to the living room. But they still weren't perfectly tamed, and sometimes their wild, rebellious and dangerous side from many long years relegated to the dank corners of arcades, would come out with a vengeance. This was the case with one of the most infamous and also one of the most important games in video game history, *Mortal Kombat*.

*Mortal Kombat* was originally released as an arcade game in 1992 and the following year was released on all major home and portable consoles simultaneously - the *Super Nintendo Entertainment System*, *SEGA Genesis*, *Game Boy* and *Game Gear*. *Mortal Kombat* was an arcade hit, and its home release date of September 13, 1993 was marketed as 'Mortal Monday' in what would become an iconic TV commercial ad campaign.<sup>113</sup> In the commercial, there is little in the way of explanation about the game, only some gameplay clips interspersed with footage of kids and teenagers gathering in the streets and screaming "Mortal Kombat!" in a protest-like display. *Mortal Kombat* was already well known by gamers, so there was no need for the commercial to present anything other than the fact that it would be released on all four consoles at once on 'Mortal Monday', September 13th. In retrospect, the images of children and teenage gamers raging in the streets over the release of a much-loved game is now deeply ironic because of the reputation that *Mortal Kombat* would earn in the coming years. With all of the controversy that surrounded the game and its popularity, it would earn the reputation of being a dark, mature, and especially edgy, franchise that pushed the boundaries with every release. Even before it was

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<sup>113</sup> Wwwwmortalkombatpl. February 17, 2011. "Mortal Kombat 1 Mortal Monday Commercial by Retroware TV," Video, 0:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8V7TwlYCt0>.

the venerable fighting series targeted by parents and politicians, the marketing materials sells this almost punk aesthetic to children.

The original *Mortal Monday* commercial has become such a cultural icon that its imagery was used as the model of a high production-value television commercial for the 2023 video game *Mortal Kombat 1*.<sup>114</sup> As a reboot of the series' storyline that ended with *Mortal Kombat 11*, it included legacy characters from past iterations of the series, even including some of the 1992 *Mortal Kombat*'s characters as 'Kameos'.<sup>115</sup> The name *Mortal Kombat 1*, these 'kameos,' which included their original 'fatalities,' and the commercial all play with nostalgia and the edginess in the culture of the *Mortal Kombat* series, all of which are call backs to the original release. While a game like *Death Race* was important as a historical example of an early moral panic in the media surrounding video games, *Mortal Kombat* changed the media and cultural landscape of video games fundamentally. The dark, violent, intense and counter-cultural reputation that it earned as the target of a moral attack is still actively a part of the series' identity. The importance of the first *Mortal Kombat* is echoed even today in the significance placed on it and reinforced by the commercial redux and the continuing popularity of the series even today. In many ways, the *Mortal Kombat* series plays with nostalgia for the times before restrictive ratings were in play, while also contributing to the counter-cultural ideal that gaming culture attributed to *Mortal Kombat*. Much of the importance placed on *Mortal Kombat* and its continuing mystique is a result of the reputation it gained from being at the center of media attention for such a long time at the height of its controversy and the moral panic to which it contributed.

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<sup>114</sup> *Mortal Kombat*. August 29, 2023. "Mortal Kombat 1 - Official It's In Our Blood Trailer ft. Dave Bautista," YouTube Video, 1:51., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBH\\_KrEFetA&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBH_KrEFetA&t=4s).

<sup>115</sup> Game Informer. June 30, 2023. "Ed Boon Explains How *Mortal Kombat 1* Redefines Old Characters | Interview," YouTube Video, 14:05. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUkdHa-iiiw>.

## *Arcade Rivals*

*Mortal Kombat* is just like any other 2D fighting game in which two players fight head-to-head on screen by using the controller to move their character while executing various different attacks and blocks against their opponent. The core gameplay in *Mortal Kombat* is similar to many other 2D fighting games that were popularized by the success of *Street Fighter* in the late 1980s, also originally an arcade game. It was especially influenced by the genre-defining *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior* (1991, SNES port 1992), for which *Mortal Kombat* became a direct competitor. Arcade gaming was very much on the decline in the early 1990s, but the success of *Street Fighter II* reinvigorated the arcade as a communal and competitive space centered around these highly competitive skill-based fighting games.<sup>116</sup> Fighting games are inherently violent in that the players attack one another until one is defeated. However, *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat*'s model and marketplace rival, made use of colourful, stylized and anime-like visuals and characters to portray a much more palatable cartoon violence.<sup>117</sup> There was no blood and no death, the players fought for the K.O., knocking one another out instead of killing them. Other than the implicit associations with arcades, *Street Fighter* was never particularly controversial, but *Mortal Kombat* took the same recipe and added an extra dose of mature content in the form of realistic violence, blood and gore. Both of the games were seen as being rivals in the gaming media with *Electronic Games Magazine*'s May 1993 cover page showing characters from both games fighting each other.<sup>118</sup> The same issue's feature article was a rundown of the fighting game genre followed by an in-depth analysis of

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<sup>116</sup> Skolnik and Conway. 2017. "Tusslers, Beatdowns, and Brothers: A Sociohistorical Overview of Video Game Arcades and the *Street Fighter* Community." *Games and Culture* 14.7-8. 751.

<sup>117</sup> See Figures 6 and 7: Screenshots from *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter II*.

<sup>118</sup> See Figure 8: *Electronic Games* May 1993 cover.

both games making sure to touch on all the mechanical and thematic differences.<sup>119</sup> *Mortal Kombat* was positioned in such a way as to take advantage of this arcade resurgence by providing an alternative to the already popular *Street Fighter II* by employing similar mechanics and the same communal and competitive emphasis, but with a much more striking and shocking realistic visual style.

*Mortal Kombat* portrayed a world much darker and more realistic than the lighthearted musclemen and cartoon creatures of *Street Fighter*. For one, it made use of a newly developed digitization technique that allowed real people, martial artists and actors, to be relatively quickly and easily made into realistic looking sprites for the game.<sup>120</sup> This new technology not only allowed the studio to produce what was, for the time, a set of highly realistic characters that were impressive to look at, but were also reasonably quick to implement into the game.<sup>121</sup> Along with the focus on a striking realism that immediately set *Mortal Kombat* apart from its more fanciful rival, it also included an above average amount of blood and gore. Blood is just a part of the game, with red spurts falling to the ground when a character gets damaged and, as the name implies, fights are to-the-death. That amount of blood might have fallen under the radar, however, the real draw to the game were the legendary and mysterious ‘fatalities’ that the game allowed the player to attempt whenever they pulled off a winning move against an opponent. Fatalities were over-the-top finishing moves that are character specific; ranging from Kano ripping the heart out of the opponent, Sub-Zero ripping the head and spinal cord out and even an arena specific finisher that uppercuts the enemy off the stage and into a spike pit below. These often gory and initially shocking coup-de-grace finishers were not even originally in the plan for

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<sup>119</sup> Sushi-X (*Electronic Games* staff). May 1993. “Player’s Guide to Frenzied Fighting.” *Electronic Games* 1.8, 31-39.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>121</sup> Donovan, Tristan. 2010. *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant. 227.

the game. However, it became apparent that they were a hit with players and came to define the game in the eyes of both gamers and its critics. A 2003 interview with the designers of the game noted the cultural impact of specifically the popularity of the game and its fatalities. While these displays might not have been the worst in the gaming world at that time, none of the other games sold anywhere near the 6 million copies that *Mortal Kombat* did.<sup>122</sup> *Mortal Kombat*'s mix of familiarity amidst a trending genre and shocking and compellingly realistic visuals made it an instant arcade success.

By the 1990s, arcades were on the decline, but fighting games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* revitalized the arcade scene for a short while. However, their popularity also extended past the arcades and onto home consoles. As rival games, *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat* became drivers of the early console wars between Nintendo and SEGA.<sup>123</sup> *Street Fighter II* was only available on the newer and more graphically powerful SNES, while *Mortal Kombat* was released across all of the major consoles at the time; SNES, Genesis, Game Boy and Game Gear. What incited the latent console war, however, was that there was a major difference between the ports for each of these systems. The most obvious differences between the systems were of course the graphical fidelity, with the mobile systems, Game Boy and Game Gear, featuring pared down graphics compared to the higher resolution 16-bit home console systems, the Super Nintendo and SEGA Genesis. The SNES version offered higher fidelity graphics that more closely mirrored the arcade release, but it completely censored the graphical depictions of blood and the fatalities.<sup>124</sup> While fatalities were still available in the Nintendo releases, they were

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<sup>122</sup> 1Up.com. 2003. "Monday, Bloody Monday." *1Up.com*.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20110910113122/http://www.1up.com/features/monday-bloody-monday>.

<sup>123</sup> Harris, Blake J. 2014. *Console Wars: Sega, Nintendo and the Battle that Defined a Generation*. Dey Street: Ebook. Chapter 46: "Blood, Sweat and Tiers."

<sup>124</sup> Kunkel, Bill. December 1993. "Mortal Kontraversy," *Electronic Games*. 34.

not the gory, over the top fatalities that had been the focal point of the game for so many fans. SEGA's Genesis port however, had a bit of a loophole - it used a cheat code that switched off the censoring and allowed the full, bloody scenes and gruesome fatalities. This would become known as the 'Blood Code' and was disseminated widely in gaming magazines and in gaming communities as a sort of open secret.<sup>125</sup> The code was so highly publicized that the media, and more importantly parents, were even aware of this code.

Importantly, the reaction from the public was not all negative. The game was a hit with both children and teenagers, and while the violence was highly publicized, there are numerous examples of individuals not falling prey to the panic. A short ABC news clip from 1994, for example, follows a father who, even though he knows about the code, is not concerned and purchases the game for his daughter anyway, stating that "it's there, so I'm not going to hide my daughter from that."<sup>126</sup> This particular clip is odd in that it demonstrates both the media's take on the game, making it into a controversy, while also showing a perspective of someone who is both informed, and yet not worried about video game violence. It is also important to note that there is no mention of the various different releases of the game in this news segment, just a rather unnuanced approach that just covers the most questionable and seemingly outrageous portions of the game.

An interesting example of another individual positive reaction to the game comes in the form of a YouTube video game history and memoir channel called My Retro Life that creates "videos that memorialize the 'wonder years' of gaming."<sup>127</sup> The hook for this channel are the

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<sup>125</sup> Myers, Quinn. 2021. "An Oral History of 'Mortal Kombat,'" <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/an-oral-history-of-mortal-kombat>.

<sup>126</sup> Mortal Kombat Secrets - MKSecrets.Net. Jan 10, 2013. "Violence in Video Games - An ABC Report (1994). Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89uK7cMp6hc&list=PL0KKd0DG\\_q\\_J97tiBQlr9qJjMeyCRN-Y0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89uK7cMp6hc&list=PL0KKd0DG_q_J97tiBQlr9qJjMeyCRN-Y0).

<sup>127</sup> Esposito, Tyler. Patreon banner. <https://www.patreon.com/myretrolife/about>.

home videos that host's father was almost constantly recording, many of these home videos from the late 1980s to early 2000s are of birthdays and Christmases in which Tyler, the host and creator of the channel, receives video games and presents. Video games were something that both Tyler and his father enjoyed, so the stories often play on positive nostalgia for family, childhood and video games. The video "Mom VS Mortal Kombat in 1993" is similarly rooted in family memories of warm summer days spent at the local community center, which in the summer of 1993 had just installed the popular *Mortal Kombat* arcade cabinet right next to the *Street Fighter II* machine.<sup>128</sup> Funnily enough, the almost click-bait title does not refer to the game itself, but to Tyler learning some choice expletives from the older teenagers who played the game and asking his mother what they mean. Tyler's father, after learning about this incident, went himself to the community center to see what this game was about. After playing it, Tyler's father explained that swearing is bad, but there was nothing particularly questionable in his opinion about *Mortal Kombat* as a game. The openness to try out games for oneself is not something that was demonstrated often in the media, however, there are likely many more anecdotal stories like this lodged away in the memories of people who grew up in this time. After all, *Mortal Kombat* was a commercial success, and home video games were expensive and many would have been purchased by parents, not all of whom were scared by the mounting panic.

### ***Trials By Kombat***

A couple of parents with a measured opinion of the content of the game is not enough to stem the tide of a moral campaign, however. The presence of the game in homes across America with the knowledge that it could be easily tampered with to display the most brutal of violent murders lit a fire under a number of concerned citizens and parents. By the end of the year in

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<sup>128</sup> My Retro Life. June 8, 2023. "Mom VS Mortal Kombat in 1992 - My Retro Life." Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p\\_wQU8JTYII](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_wQU8JTYII).

1993, there would be congressional hearings conducted by the United States Senate in order to curb the spread of violent video games marketed and sold to children. These hearings were initially started after Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman became concerned about a game that the son of one of his colleagues wanted to purchase: *Mortal Kombat*. His colleague, Bill Anderson, thought it was too violent and did not purchase the game and brought it to Lieberman's attention. This raised the question in Lieberman's mind about the current advertising rules and age-rating systems that were at play in the video game market.<sup>129</sup> He found them both severely lacking and decided to bring the issues before the US Senate. To be fair to Lieberman here, Sega's proprietary age-rating system called the Videogame Rating Council which was established in 1993,<sup>130</sup> rated *Mortal Kombat* appropriate for teenagers 17 and up. Clearly, this mature rating did not match Midway's marketing materials. As noted above, the famous Mortal Monday television ad targets children, as well as the "So Real It Hurts" poster that shows kids who are clearly not even close to 17 playing the game.<sup>131</sup> This rather obvious discrepancy in age-rating and marketing practice in *Mortal Kombat* demonstrated a clear case for the creation of some form of external oversight in the video game industry beyond Sega's proprietary system. By the end of the hearings the Electronic Software Rating Board, or the ESRB, would be formed in order to address content concerns in all video games sold in stores regardless of developer, publisher or console. Some form of oversight for video games was likely necessary, or would soon become so with the rapid growth of the industry into the home

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<sup>129</sup> Ken, Steven L. 2001. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon and Beyond - The Story Behind the Craze that Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. New York: Three River Press. 467.

<sup>130</sup> Harris, Blake J. 2019. "Prologue and Part 1: Doom to the Power of Ten." *Content Rated By: An Oral History of the ESRB*. ESRB. <https://www.esrb.org/about/prologue-and-part-1-doom-to-the-power-of-ten/>.

<sup>131</sup> See Figure 9: Midway *Mortal Kombat* poster.

entertainment market, and *Mortal Kombat* was more or less in the right place at the right time to become the poster-child of this campaign.

These hearings were highly publicized events and came together rather quickly as *Mortal Kombat* hit store shelves on September 13, 1993, with the first hearing was held December 9th of that year, followed by another on March 4, 1994. With only three months between the release of *Mortal Kombat* and the first of the hearings there was a clear sense of urgency concerning the issues at stake. It was a true media event and the entirety of both hearings were broadcast nationally on C-SPAN and are still available in their entirety on the C-SPAN video library and YouTube.<sup>132</sup> The hearings brought widespread attention to the content of video games, with a specific focus on the violent content of *Mortal Kombat* and the violent and alleged sexual content of the other game the hearing presented, *Night Trap*. The reach and significance of the hearings extended further than just the United States, with similar television news segments on the CBC in Canada,<sup>133</sup> and the Nine Network in Australia.<sup>134</sup> It is more difficult to find a media reaction as a result of the hearings from the BBC, but a rather positive and thought-provoking longer-form review of *Mortal Kombat* was aired in October of 1993 before the media frenzy caused by the hearings.<sup>135</sup> Similar to the ABC clip with the father who provides pushback against the rising panic, the BBC coverage is from the world before the hearings, in which *Mortal*

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<sup>132</sup> C-SPAN. December 9, 1993. "Video Game Violence." Video. <https://www.c-span.org/program/senate-committee/video-game-violence/129470>; Kamikaze Productions. September 12, 2022. "1993 Senate Committee Hearing on Violence in Video Games." Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6FncsNES3s>; C-SPAN. March 4, 1994. "Video Game Violence." Video. <https://www.c-span.org/program/senate-committee/video-game-violence/172728>; Kamikaze Productions. September 12, 2022. "1994 Senate Committee Hearings on Violence in Video Games." Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHuI523NJk8>.

<sup>133</sup> CBC Archives. April 16, 2021. "Why Critics Panned *Mortal Kombat* as a Video Game and Movie in the '90s," *CBC Archive*. [cbc.ca/archives/why-critics-panned-mortal-kombat-as-a-video-game-and-a-movie-in-the-90s-1.5987155](http://cbc.ca/archives/why-critics-panned-mortal-kombat-as-a-video-game-and-a-movie-in-the-90s-1.5987155).

<sup>134</sup> Kelamy. November 11, 2016. "Segment on Video Game Violence in Australia (*Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap*) - 1993." Video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpkjT-4YsyA&list=PL0KKd0DG\\_q\\_J97tiBQlr9qJjMeyCRN-Y0&index=8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpkjT-4YsyA&list=PL0KKd0DG_q_J97tiBQlr9qJjMeyCRN-Y0&index=8).

<sup>135</sup> BBC Archive. Jan 21, 2022. "1993: Original MORTAL KOMBAT Review with Will Self | The Late Show | Retro Gaming | BBC Archive." Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgMPPr0UZObY&t=192s>.

*Kombat* may have had a reputation, but it was not yet tied into a political controversy and widespread moral crusade. It seems likely that one of the strong contributing factors to the media presence of the hearings was simply that *Mortal Kombat* was a good target that was already familiar in the minds not just for people in the gaming world, but anyone who had watched the news in the previous few months, even if the coverage was not yet completely coloured by the upcoming controversy.

As a result of this widespread attention on video games across the English-speaking world, age rating systems became standard practice for governmental and consumer agencies. In the UK, for example, the Video Standards Authority was already in place from 1989, but overhauled their system when video game ratings were becoming a cultural issue in 1994.<sup>136</sup> Australia ended up having its own hearings and adapting its national classification system for films and movies to video games in 1995,<sup>137</sup> while Canada also makes use of the ESRB.<sup>138</sup> Now, the ESRB rating is ubiquitous among video games sold in North America and many gamers would say that it is an adequate and helpful system, especially as many gamers now themselves have children. However, the institution of the ESRB is almost never how gaming culture remembers the hearings. Rather, it is often remembered as a moral panic and an attack on video games in general from a place of ignorance and fear that would colour the cultural landscape of video games for decades to come. This was among the first and certainly most significant instances of a widespread and seemingly concerted effort to demonstrate a causal link between

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<sup>136</sup> Games Rating Authority. "Our History." <https://gamesratingauthority.org.uk/RatingBoard/about-history>.

<sup>137</sup> Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995. <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2004A04863/latest/text>.

<sup>138</sup> It seems likely that the implementation of the ESRB in Canada has more to do with video game localization regions, belonging to the NA region along with Mexico and thus shares the same packaging standards with the USA. It was not until 2005 that the ESRB was officially endorsed by the Canadian Retail Council.

video games and real-world violence. This connection persists even today, decades later, in part due to the massive media campaign that followed the hearings as they played out.

### *Night Trap*

*Night Trap* is just as important to understand as *Mortal Kombat*, mostly because of the cultural status that game earned not from its own merits, but from the hearings. The game is essentially a real-time video point-and-click, called a Full-Motion Video (FMV) game, in which the player has control over the cameras and various traps positioned around a house that is being used by a group of teenage girls having a sleep-over. The catch is that the house is teeming with sneaky ninja-like vampires attempting to abduct the girls. It really is just a somewhat interactive hokey B-movie comedy that is tame even by the standards of the day and was compared to the so-called ‘video nasties’ of the previous decade, which were also controversial in their own right.<sup>139</sup> The controversial aspects for the game were the use of actual video footage along with the inclusion of a scene in which one of the girls wears a rather modest nightgown, which was seen as lingerie among the panel of experts. Similar to *Mortal Kombat*’s use of digitized sprites and the realism that this new technology brought to video games, and to video game violence, *Night Trap*’s ‘graphics’ are quite literally just a series of video clips that play out in a specific order depending on player interaction. The girls in the game were not just realistic representations, but actual people who were actually being shown to be the victims of the insane and cartoonish ninja-vampires. The original ESRB rating assigned a Mature classification for ‘Realistic Violence’ to the game, demonstrating just how much importance was placed on the notion of realism and the dangers of the game.

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<sup>139</sup> Workman, Robert. August 18, 2023. “Wait, Why Was Night Trap So Controversial Again?” *Psychobabble - Video Games + More*. [https://medium.com/@robertworkman\\_Disruptor/wait-why-was-night-trap-so-controversial-again-1103cb78cab1](https://medium.com/@robertworkman_Disruptor/wait-why-was-night-trap-so-controversial-again-1103cb78cab1)

*Night Trap* is a prime example of the idea that all publicity is good publicity. It went from a low-budget and obscure game destined for the bargain-bin, to an overnight best-seller and cult classic because of all of the media coverage it gained from being one of the hearing's case studies. *Night Trap* was originally released for Sega-CD, a hardware expansion for the Genesis that allowed CD ROMs to be played, thus allowing video clips to become part of gameplay. By the end of 1993, the Sega-CD had sold around 300,000 units,<sup>140</sup> and by the end of the hearings, Tom Zito, one of the founders of *Night Trap*'s development company Digital Pictures, is quoted as stating that *Night Trap* sold 50,000 units in the week after the hearing.<sup>141</sup> The boost in sales and notoriety did not generally endear the game to most of those gamers, however, and reviews were not especially positive, earning 6th place in Computer Gaming World's 1996 *50 Worst Games of All Time* list, a considerable achievement for a game that was not even released on PC.<sup>142</sup> Even among the proliferation of negative reviews, it gained cult status and was remastered and re-released in 2017 as *Night Trap: 25th Anniversary Edition*, even after a failed crowdfunding campaign a few years earlier in 2014.<sup>143</sup> Nintendo even allowed *Night Trap*, which is now rated Teen by the ESRB as opposed to the original Mature rating, to be released on the Switch console, even though during the hearings the chair of Nintendo of America at the time, Howard Lincoln, assured Lieberman that "*Night Trap* will never appear on a Nintendo system."<sup>144</sup> 25 years later, the game is no longer the height of technological realism and thus no

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<sup>140</sup> Thorpe, Nick. 2016. "Sega's Big Gamble." *Retro Gamer* 153, 24.

<sup>141</sup> Tom Zito quoted in Kent, Steven L. 2001. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. 478.

<sup>142</sup> Computer Gaming World. November 1996. "50 Worst Games of All Time." *Computer Gaming World* 148, 88.

<sup>143</sup> Unqualified. February 2, 2022. "Night Trap Revamped: How Not To Ask For Over \$300,000 To Kickstart A Port Of Your Decades Old Video Game That A Single Developer Could Accomplish Anyway." [https://www.reddit.com/r/HobbyDrama/comments/sixqlw/video\\_games\\_night\\_trap\\_revamped\\_how\\_not\\_to\\_ask/](https://www.reddit.com/r/HobbyDrama/comments/sixqlw/video_games_night_trap_revamped_how_not_to_ask/).

<sup>144</sup> Howard Lincoln quoted in Michael McWherter. 2018. *Nintendo Once Vowed Night Trap Would Never Be On Its Systems, But Things Change: 25 years on, Night Trap is Coming to Nintendo Switch*. Polygon, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/4/20/17263846/nintendo-night-trap-howard-lincoln-congress>.

longer a threat but a curiosity from the annals of gaming history and is safe to be published for what it always was, a quirky, low-budget comedy game that riffs on familiar B-movie tropes.

*Night Trap* is in many ways a more interesting game from a cultural perspective than *Mortal Kombat* is. With *Mortal Kombat*, the violence and gruesome deaths actually exist in the game and actively contribute to its popularity and success. *Night Trap* was continually misrepresented as being filled with violence and sexual content, while the game had very little violence, and no sexual content beyond young women in nightgowns. A critic commenting on the failed crowd-funding campaign for *Night Trap* even laments the days in which its relatively light content was questioned, comparing it to the much more lenient ratings of today.<sup>145</sup> It is not a high-quality game, and certainly not representative of what most gamers would think to be an important game in 1993 if not for its historical status. With the rereleases, however, there is a growing interest in the game, but even so, it tends to be coloured with retro-gaming nostalgia and the curiosity of playing a piece of history.<sup>146</sup> While *Mortal Kombat* has an ongoing legacy with new releases every few years even now, *Night Trap*'s only legacy is its controversy. It gained popularity from its misrepresentation and thus now functions as a sort of symbol for the absurdity of anti-video game media. It is precisely the point that *Night Trap* should have been a failure, something obvious to anyone who takes video games seriously, that makes it such an important piece of gaming history. It has no right to be an important game, and yet it will always stand beside *Mortal Kombat* as one of the most important video games in history.

As dissimilar as the two games are in terms of genre, visuals, cultural reach and gameplay, they do share a couple of particularly important features that made them prime targets

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<sup>145</sup> Joho, Jess. August 12, 2014. "The Night Trap Revival Only Shows Us How Far We've Fallen Since 1992." *Killscreen*. <https://www.killscreen.com/night-trap-revival-shows-how-far-fallen-since-1992/>.

<sup>146</sup> Jeremy Jahns. April 13, 2020. "Night Trap: The GREATEST "Bad" Game of All Time!" Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bswEiQIqk-Y>.

for Lieberman. The first is that neither fits into the box of children's games. These are very clearly games that riff off of more mature media like Kung Fu movies and the increasingly popular comedy horror genre - neither of which might be seen as being kid's media. Video games, however, especially games as they had become domesticated by home consoles, were starting to be either understood to be trivial playthings or safe family fun. Both *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* are in clear violation of these ideals, and are even in the business of marketing these inappropriate materials to the predominantly child demographic that plays video games. These concerns are covered explicitly and at length in the hearings, and concerns over the content as such (violence, sexuality, drug and alcohol use) would always be a feature of the public discourse around media. The format of the ESRB is a prime example of this focus on 'content' as it lists what sorts of scenarios the player might find themselves playing through in short 1-3 word descriptions such as 'fantasy violence' or 'blood and gore.'<sup>147</sup> Beyond their obvious and questionable content they also both make use of new and visually impressive technologies that lend a certain realism to the games that had rarely been seen before in any video game, and especially so in home entertainment.

### *Ending a Panic*

Both *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* were games that happened to be in the right place at the right time to ignite the powder keg of moral panic around games once again. This panic, however, was unlike the previous panics that have been discussed as there was less outward fear and those involved worked toward the achievable and reasonable goal of age ratings. Their tactics for achieving that goal, however, did include inciting a panic via a strong media presence and changes in national policy. Joe Lieberman and his associates were also in the right place at

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<sup>147</sup> See all 30 current content descriptors at <https://www.esrb.org/ratings-guide/>.

the right time, and they fully took advantage of *Mortal Kombat*'s strong media presence and piggy-backed off of its name recognition for their goals. While the *Death Race* was a flash in the pan, and *Dungeons & Dragons* was an almost decade long and tiring battle, the explosiveness of Lieberman's moral crusade was decisive. Lieberman himself might be called a moral entrepreneur, and a rather successful one at that. According to Pozen, moral entrepreneurs are people who look to change the moral landscape of a society through the implementation of their own laws and institutions.<sup>148</sup> In other words, it was a highly controlled panic, and a panic that had a concerted effort behind it. *Death Race* was too small a concern, and TTRPGs were tangled so thoroughly into the religious landscape that any pursuit of lawfare was unlikely, instead relying on word and publishing within specifically Christian culture. Lieberman's controlled media panic campaign was just right to affect change.

This is not to dismiss the significance of the actual panic around these games. The crusade, of course, made careful use of its media presence in order to convince the public that a panic was needed. In the end, however, the results are much less controversial than anything the media coverage might have conveyed. ESRB ratings are ubiquitous now, and just a part of life. In many ways, the panic around *Mortal Kombat* is very much unlike the normal pattern of moral panic, because it actually had a goal and could come to an end. There are, of course, still broad cultural discussions around violence and realism in video games, but these are less pointed with much broader targets, like the dreaded First-Person Shooter genre, rather than particular games with definable goals.

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<sup>148</sup> Pozen, David E. 2008. "We are All Entrepreneurs Now." *Wake Forest Law Review* 43.1, 311.

## PART 2

## CHAPTER 5: *Death Race* to the ESRB

By the end of the 1990s, the world of video games was in a very different place than it was in 1993, and even more removed from the world of the mid-'70s arcades. The stereotypes that formed through and around the preceding panics had developed significantly, just as the video games themselves were now almost completely unrecognizable from the early, pixelated monochrome arcade cabinets. Home video game consoles like the Sony PlayStation (1995), Nintendo 64 (1996) and Sega Dreamcast (1999) were all capable of 3D graphics and the future of home consoles were bright with the XBox (2001) and Nintendo Gameboy Advance (2001) just around the corner.<sup>149</sup> These new technologies brought with them renewed fears in the power of and influence of digital technology, especially in increasingly realistic and violent video game worlds. The video game market continued to grow, and so too did the public attention that was placed on video games. Much of this attention was negative and carried on from the familiar objections and stereotypes from the previous panics. As the video game market and cultural interest in video games grew, so too did the stakes in these conversations grow higher as well. By the end of the 1990s, video games would be blamed for many crimes, including terrible atrocities like school-shootings.

The history of moral panic in this setting, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s North America, is more complex than ever. Like with the Satanic Panic, many areas of life and culture were targeted and these different instances of panic inform one another. This is especially true as universal fears of safety for children meet the absolute uncertainty and unpredictability of school-shootings. This fear was exacerbated with the now 'common sense' notions of media effects theory and popular culture like television and video games only growing larger and more

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<sup>149</sup> North American release dates noted. Other regions like Japan, Europe and Oceania often have different release dates.

visible in the daily lives of almost everyone. When the catalyst event of Columbine sent shockwaves through the culture, these points of tension exploded into a mess of panic and moral entrepreneurship on a level that had not been seen with the previous panics.

This chapter explores this cultural context before and after the Columbine massacre. As has been demonstrated, none of the panics happened in isolation, and the panic that resulted from Columbine was all-consuming and drew on many elements of the previous panics, especially the Satanic Panic. Like the Satanic Panic, this panic did not just disappear, but many of the sentiments and stereotypes that were formed are still around, and most importantly, still affect both the cultural attitudes towards video games and their study profoundly. The complexities of this history is important to grasp, and is done in isolation in this chapter without an explicit analysis of the Columbine massacre and its relationship to the video game *Doom*, which will be the topic of the following chapter. For now, understanding what led to and came from the panic surrounding the shooting is what will be analyzed.

### ***Never Ending Panic***

The moral panics around video games did not end in 1993 with the legislation concerning the ESRB and the organization's international institution. In fact, the three examples from the previous section represent just the beginning of what now might be called the ongoing video game 'debate' over violent and other questionable content in video games. With Columbine in 1999, the coverage was so intense that it sustained itself in the public imagination far longer than is usual for video game panics. While the media coverage around individual games might wane and gradually disappear with the news cycle, the underlying fears and concerns that feed the panics are much more pernicious and do not fade as quickly. Thus, while the intensity of the *panic* may fizzle out, the underlying fears often remain at least partially unanswered. These

unanswered and unresolved fears are subsumed into larger cultural discussions, and without the catalyst of a panic often lose a bit of their urgency. The events of Columbine were so tragic that this took a very long time to happen, and the panic that surrounded it remained unresolved. In light of these unresolved fears, the panic became what is now known as the ‘video game debate’ and now encompasses many elements of public discussion around video games themselves and those who play them.

This process is related to the formation of stereotypes that undergird cases of moral panic. As has been demonstrated with the historical studies into game panics, they are formed by the latent and often fear-driven cultural associations and stereotypes around games and gamers. Each individual panic is formed by these latent stereotypes and in turn also acts to inform later instances of panic. These panics often center around a specific catalyst like a particular game or events that brings these recurrent fears back up to the surface and into the public mind. These older panics thus still linger in certain ways, even if they are no longer front-page news, their effects and their associations remain and often get picked back up and incorporated into new panics.

For example, *Dungeons & Dragons* is no longer front-page news, but there are still accessible articles online that describe its dangers, as outdated as these articles usually are. By the mid-1990s, there was no longer a widespread satanic panic, but the same arguments that were used for TTRPGs were applied to different media. The *Harry Potter* books, for example, were subject to similar criticisms for their portrayal of allegedly real (or at least realistic) magic from the same communities of American Evangelical Christians that made the same claims about *D&D*.<sup>150</sup> The anti-Harry Potter movement employed very similar tactics to those employed by

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<sup>150</sup> Simmon, Leane. 2011. “The Perils of Shape Shifting: Harry Potter and Christian Fundamentalism.” *Pastoral Psychology* 62: 55.

the Anti-TTRPG movement as it was essentially understood to be the same problem, teaching children real magic. Books and other media by so-called ‘cult’ experts were published, like Richard Abanes’ *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick* (2001),<sup>151</sup> or even the hour-long documentary *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged*.<sup>152</sup> There’s even a Chick Tract in which one of the characters declares that “the Potter books opened a doorway that led untold *millions* of kids into hell,”<sup>153</sup> after a very similar story to the *Dark Dungeons* tract from almost 15 years before that shared the dangers of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Similarly, the panic around video games continued to present the same fears, but projected them onto new targets as new video games were released and panic around other events became relevant.

### *Trajectories of the Panics*

In the time after the *Mortal Kombat* trials and the establishment of the ESRB, the type of moral panic around video games changed dramatically as the world that video games made and inhabited changed as well. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, each one of the panics, while sharing many similarities, follows a different trajectory. The *Death Race* panic, for instance, was relatively contained and played out more like an awareness campaign than anything else. There was a small number of arcade cabinets, and while it was popular for a time, arcade games came and went and the whole episode quickly became irrelevant. There was no well-defined or actionable goal by those who incited the panic, and the game was too ephemeral

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<sup>151</sup> The use of the word “magick” is an explicit argument concerning the alleged reality and occult origins of magic within the Harry Potter books. “Magick” began being used by esoteric groups in the late 1800s and early 1900s in order to differentiate between their supposedly real ‘magick’ and the illusionary and slight-of-hand centric stage magic according to the definition given in Harvard’s Pluralism Project. See full definition here: <https://pluralism.org/magick#:~:text=In%20Paganism%2C%20%E2%80%9Cmagick%E2%80%9D%20refers,realit y%20are%20regarded%20as%20magick..>

<sup>152</sup> Matrisciana, Caryl, Director. 2001. *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged*. Jeremiah Films. 1 Hour. Uploaded to YouTube via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w34-uoTHXh0>.

<sup>153</sup> Chick, Jack. 2001. *The Nervous Witch*. 20. <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=5012>; See Figure 10: *A Nervous Witch* page 20.

to lead anywhere anyway, ending after only a few months. While it demonstrated the rise in video games as both a pastime and a site of cultural negotiation, nothing conclusive or substantive came from it. The main take away from this comparatively contained panic was its contribution to the transformation of stereotypes between the gambling dens and pool halls of previous generations and the new digital coin-op arcades. In other words, *Death Race* might be seen as a transitional panic as digital technology was becoming more common in everyday life.

Pat Pulling's crusade with B.A.D.D. against *Dungeons & Dragons* was the opposite in many ways. There was very little in the form of actionable goals, but lots of talk of extreme danger and fear-mongering. Legal actions might have been attempted, but media awareness and book-burnings were evidently most effective. The length of time is much different, as well. The *D&D* panic is nested in a much wider-scale series of interrelated panics, the Satanic Panic. These panics were all-consuming, anything or anybody might either be a satanic kabbalist, or be influenced by one - no one was safe. This kept up for more than a decade between the late '70s to the early '90s. This panic was years long, instead of months long, but still eventually just fizzled out with the lack of any real evidence and ample evidence to the contrary. However, that did not mean that the panic died out entirely. These long years contributed much to the cultural status of all sorts of media, particularly in the more conservative religious cultures. While the acute panic faded, there were still unresolved fears that contributed to a continued monitoring of the media landscape with particular attention to popular culture that involves magic.

Put in these terms, and considering achievable goals, the Joe Lieberman and the *Mortal Kombat* panic was by far the most successful. The panic comes across as being a measured manipulation of the media for a desired goal rather than occurring 'naturally.' Because of this forethought, the explicit goal, being the establishment of an external ratings system, was pushed

from the beginning rather than as a response to the proliferation of games like *Death Race* or *Dungeons & Dragons*. This allowed for a concise, and yet very effective media panic that played out just how it was intended to. This was a big deal for the game industry, which now answered to an external body and became the model for how game panics in the future would be oriented. This often included the politicization of video games through the news media and an *expectation* that legal action was the best way to deal with errant video games. In other words, the cultural conversation became much bigger and more encompassing, much like how ideas of satanism and the occult encompassed all parts of life in the 1980s.

### *Common Sense and Media Effects*

These panics were always in some way political in nature, but the explicit politicization seems to have become much more apparent during the 1990s. This was accompanied by an increasing awareness of popular culture and its supposed undermining of morality across the field, but specifically with respect to children and teenagers. For all of the video game panics that have been covered already, the notion that video games and other forms of media had a direct influence on behaviour was understood as simply being common sense. This perhaps comes from a long line of so-called ‘media effects’ literature and research that seemingly confirmed the link between media violence and aggressive behaviour that could be easily extrapolated to include video games.<sup>154</sup> Media effects studies grew out the behaviourist school of psychology in the early 1960s with the famous “bobo doll” experiments.<sup>155</sup> These experiments made a direct link between the passive demonstration of aggressive behaviour (punching the bobo doll) and children carrying it out in play. A later variation used a tape recording to demonstrate hitting the

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<sup>154</sup> Toppo, Greg. 2015. *The Game Believes in You: How Digital Play Can Make Our Kids Smarter*. Palgrave Macmillan, 194-6.

<sup>155</sup> Bandura, Albert et al. 1961. “Transmission of Aggression Through Imitation of Aggressive Models.” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 63.3. 575-582.

doll, and the children responded in the same way as the live researcher.<sup>156</sup> The second experiment seemingly confirmed the link between violent media and actual behaviour.

This type of thinking entails a couple of implicit assumptions that are important in the discussion of panics. Firstly, there is the assumption that engaging with media is a one-way process and that those who watch television or play video games are essentially passive in their consumption. The second assumption is that this passivity leads to sort of input/output process. Because the viewer or player is passive, they do not question what they see and because it is engaging, exciting and fun, they carry out the behavior that they see on television and in games in real life. This is why realism is always the crux of the issue when it comes to video game panics. Seeing real-to-life interactions on screen (the input) leads to the emulation of those actions and behaviours in real-life (the output).

This type of thinking was not new leading up to Columbine, and is really the core of the issue when it comes to game panics, or media panics, in general. The discourse around *Death Race* specifically was centered around this type of reasoning explicitly. The TTRPG panic used a slight variation, in which the books were less of a representation of realism and real in and of themselves (or at least the magic formulae). *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* are also a bit different in this respect. That they were realistic and violent was argument enough because the idea that realistic representations lead to real-life behaviour was already understood to be simple common-sense. This language of common-sense is important as it makes arguments against this view seem overly complex or evasive while allowing the common-sense view to remain unquestioned as the default understanding. An example of this is demonstrated below with the media theorist Henry Jenkins and his attempt to open up discussions concerning how children

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<sup>156</sup> Bandura, Albert et al. 1963. "Imitation of Film Mediated Aggressive Models." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 66.1; 3-11.

engage with media, and are not just passive consumers, amidst the dominant and common-sense media effects thinking in the aftermath of Columbine.

One of the processes that occurs with this common-sense media effects thinking is that the evidence for it almost becomes self-referential. With the advent of the ESRB, M-rated games, which are likely violent if not realistic and violent, are now more visible than ever. They are more visible both in the literal sense, but also in the cultural discussions around video games as they obviously contain questionable content. Thus, the very fact that there are M-rated games, and only an increasing number of them each year, can be seen as evidence that video games can be dangerous, especially for children (M-rated games are intended for ages 17+). One just has to go down to the local Walmart or GameStop and see for themselves how many M-rated games are on the shelves to be convinced that this is a problem. Of course, this only really works if the underlying assumption that video games *cause* violent and antisocial behaviour has already been integrated as so-called common-sense. This can be seen in a poll commissioned in 2003 by the then brand-new Common Sense Media.com that indicated that 81% of parents believed that media encouraged violent and anti-social behaviour in children.<sup>157</sup> While this example is from 2003, the sentiment that led to it was already being formed in the cultural discussions around video games and other media throughout the 1990s.

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<sup>157</sup> Rutenberg, Jim. May 21, 2003. "A New Attempt to Monitor Media Content." *New York Times*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170216230357/http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/21/business/a-new-attempt-to-monitor-media-content.html>.

## CHAPTER 6: *Doom* and Columbine

On April 20th, 1999 Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed thirteen people, both students and teachers, at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, USA. What makes this relevant to the current discussion is that one of the shooters, Eric Harris, played and also modified the first-person-shooter *Doom*. Both Harris and Klebold committed suicide during the massacre, and as such, were never held responsible for their actions. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, the cultural climate at the time was predisposed to look for answers in the popular culture and media that the shooters, and teenagers as a whole, engaged with. Harris and Klebold were known for their edgy aesthetic, always wearing trench coats and sun-glasses, which was at least in part inspired by their choice in movies, television and, most importantly for this discussion, video games.

This chapter will focus on the shooters' relationship with *Doom* and *Doom II* in particular, and other video games more broadly. Most of the evidence that surrounds the shooters' use of the games comes mainly from Eric Harris in the form of archived web-pages, personal writings and self-made modifications for *Doom II*. The substance of this instance of video game panic is different from the past panics, because there is substantial evidence against video games from many of these sources that Harris produced, including his own writings and game modifications. He wrote about getting into the mindset of viewing people as the various monsters and demons from *Doom* in order to make sure he felt little remorse and would remain motivated during the shooting. Many of the claims that were made about how they used *Doom*, however, were misrepresented in the media and ended up pointing the questions about video games in the wrong direction

Following a historical analysis of the event, there will be an exploration of the academic literature that responded to the event, the games and the panic as a whole. Interestingly, the early 2000s was also a time of massive growth around the serious study of games (see chapter 2), perhaps in part due to video games' greater visibility and controversies. Thus, there are actual responses to these issues that extend past the culturally dominant 'common-sense' paradigm that was popular at the time. Through this, both the potential power of video games in their capacity to teach and learn from, and also their limits will be explored somewhat in isolation from the less nuanced popular discourse that was explored in the previous chapter.

To understand the claims made about *Doom* following the Columbine massacre, a short history of the game is required. Of all of the games that have been analyzed so far, *Doom* is likely the most revolutionary and contributed to important elements that would become mainstays of video game culture. The most obvious of these were the rise and popularization of the First-Person-Shooter, which would go on to be one of the most continually popular, and continually controversial, genres of video game. Id Software, the developer of the *Doom* series,<sup>158</sup> had already released a couple of FPSs prior to *Doom*, including the obscure *Catacomb 3-D* (1991), *Hovortank One* (1991) and the much more successful *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and prequel expansion *Spear of Destiny* (1992). The success of these games paved the way for *Doom* which would also include innovations like built-in network support for player-vs-player 'deathmatch' games over LAN and online and the separation of data files from the game engine to allow for much easier modding. Each of these elements, the FPS, PvP and modding will be important for the discussion below.

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<sup>158</sup> For ease of reading, "Id" with a capitalized "I" is used throughout the text. It should be noted that the uncapitalized 'id' is the official name used by the company.

### *The Apogee Model*

Much of what made *Doom* popular and successful was taken from Id's earlier game *Wolfenstein 3D*. The marketing of *Doom* in particular followed from the success of the 'Apogee' shareware model that Scott Miller perfected in the late 1980s and that Id Software's earlier games had been published with.<sup>159</sup> This model took the idea of shareware, freely available software and demos that could then be registered for additional features, technical support or other benefits, and made it viable for video games. Miller's first 'Apogee Model' game was his own original video game *Kingdom of Kroz* (1987), which he broke up into three parts; the first was distributed freely as shareware, and the other two were sold separately by mail-order.<sup>160</sup> This turned out to be a successful business model and would be used by many games and game companies from the late-'80s to the mid-'90s. The shareware model became so popular that there were entire physical catalogues dedicated to distributing shareware on a mail-order per-disk pricing structure.<sup>161</sup> Shareware often included digital catalogue programs as well, and companies like Apogee, or even independent publishers, would advertise their other games and include ordering instructions in these digital programs.<sup>162</sup> Apogee was fond of these catalogues and even included a description of the 'Apogee Model' in them along with a list of all of their games, ordering instructions and website addresses for downloading the shareware yourself if you had internet access.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Plante, Chris. 2017. "Apogee: Where Wolfenstein got its Start." *Polygon*.  
<https://www.polygon.com/features/2017/10/26/16511514/wolfenstein-origins-apogee>

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> For instance, \$5 per disk as in the case in the *Public Brand Software Catalogue* (1993). The *Wolfenstein 3D* shareware would cost <https://archive.org/details/TSLSummer1993/page/n20/mode/1up?view=theater>,  
<https://archive.org/details/public-brand-software-shareware-catalog-v9n1/page/n1/mode/2up>.

<sup>162</sup> Sparcie. March 22, 2014. "Electronic Shareware Catalogs." Personal blog.  
<https://sparcie.wordpress.com/2014/03/22/electronic-shareware-catalogs/>. Also see archived and downloadable DOS catalogues from the era at: <https://dosgames.com/catalogs.php>.

<sup>163</sup> For instance, see the November 1995 Apogee digital catalogue page 29.  
[https://dosgames.com/catrun.php?cat=catalog\\_apogee\\_nov1995&run=CATALOG.EXE](https://dosgames.com/catrun.php?cat=catalog_apogee_nov1995&run=CATALOG.EXE).

Wanting to increase Apogee's output, Miller headhunted a team from Softdisk which published a monthly subscription called *Gamer's Edge* that sent out a new game every month on a disk.<sup>164</sup> This team, which was composed of John Romero, John Carmack, Tom Hall and Adrian Carmack, would go on to found Id Software and to produce games commissioned by Apogee. Both Romero and John Carmack are still active in video games and the tech sector, thanks in large part to the success of their games with Id. It was during this time that Id made the three-part *Commander Keen in Invasion of the Vorticons* (1991), a real-time side-scroller modelled after *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988) and released using the Apogee model. This was an instant success and the team then went on to develop *Wolfenstein 3D* for Apogee, which would also use the shareware model and ended up selling an unprecedented 4,000 copies in the first month.<sup>165</sup> It would go on to sell 250,000 copies by the end of 1995 and cement the FPS as a mainstay of the gaming world.<sup>166</sup> The success of *Wolfenstein 3D* prepared the way for Id to design an even more influential FPS, *Doom*.

### ***Doom***

*Doom* was published using the Apogee model, but Id Software decided to manage the distribution themselves, using the now commonplace shareware to mail-order system, to increase the company's share of the profits.<sup>167</sup> The game itself, however, would be on a whole new level. John Carmack spent a lot of time and effort developing a new proprietary game engine that was capable of rendering three-dimensional environments with textured ceilings, dynamic lighting

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<sup>164</sup> Softdisk Publishing. 1991. *Gamer's Edge* Subscription Form. <https://romero.smugmug.com/Video-Games/Dangerous-Dave-II-The-Haunted/i-5JjVLD4>.

<sup>165</sup> Friedman, Todd. Oct. 5, 2022. "John Romero - The Interview." *Old School Gamer Magazine*. <https://www.oldschoolgamer magazine.com/john-romero-the-interview-by-todd-friedman/>.

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.newspapers.com/article/fort-worth-star-telegram/91962014/>.

<sup>167</sup> Kushner, David. 2003. *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*. Ebook: Random House, 103.

and high-resolution texture mapping.<sup>168</sup> The technology that was developed for *Doom* was very impressive for the time, and it was heavily marketed as being innovative and the most realistic game to date. A press release document from 1993 details some of these improvements and states that “*Doom* offers the most realistic environments to date on the PC.”<sup>169</sup> Along with the new level of visual fidelity came two particularly important features that made *Doom* stand out and contributed both to *Doom*’s popularity and longevity - fully integrated multiplayer (both local and online) and openly available modding tools. All of these aspects together prepared *Doom* to take the world by storm and there are numerous examples of companies and universities banning *Doom* due to loss of productivity and overloaded network traffic.<sup>170</sup> With the success of *Doom*, *Doom II* was released a mere ten months later and became one of the bestselling PC games of 1994 along with other classics like *Myst* and *The Sims*.<sup>171</sup> The *Doom* series are legendary within gaming culture, and continued with several installments, most recently a reboot in 2016, followed by *Doom Eternal* in 2020 and another installment called *Doom: The Dark Ages* planned for 2025. Either in spite of, or perhaps because of all the controversy, the *Doom* games are mainstays of the gaming world even now.

*Doom* and *Doom II* did a lot of things well, and they were immensely popular long before the events of *Columbine* - indeed, they were already old news by 1999. Id’s next major FPS, *Quake*, was released in 1996 and only further improved on the successful features of *Wolfenstein* and *Doom*. The *Doom* games did have longevity, however, by means of both the multiplayer and

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>169</sup> Id Software. 1993. *Doom Press Release Email*.

[https://soulsphere.org/mirrors/www.rome.ro/lee\\_killough/history/doompr3.txt](https://soulsphere.org/mirrors/www.rome.ro/lee_killough/history/doompr3.txt)

<sup>170</sup> Kushner, David. 2003. *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*. Ebook: Random House, 124.

<sup>171</sup> Pitta, Julie. March 23, 1995. “News Analysis: Playing the Interactive Game.” *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-03-23-fi-46298-story.html>.

open modding capabilities. Modding was particularly important to the identity of *Doom*. The mods themselves were called WADs, an acronym meaning “where’s all the data?,” which refers to the custom file type that contains ‘all the data’ like any new or modified textures, sounds and level layouts. The early modding community was prolific and Id supported this community by commissioning some of the best creators of these WADs to create levels for two semi-official expansions: *The Master Levels for Doom II* (1995) and *Final Doom* (1996). Both of these were released by Id, but they had bought the rights to the WADs from their creators in order to publish them. WADs are still popular and there is an active community for *Doom* modding complete with yearly awards for new WADs called the ‘Cacowards’ after the Cacodemon,<sup>172</sup> one of the enemies in the games.<sup>173</sup> Both single player levels (or even whole new games, called ‘Megawads’) and death-match levels can be created, leading to overlap between the multiplayer community and the modding communities.

The history and cultural context of *Doom* is important to understand in the lead-up to Columbine. It is perhaps most important to note that, much like *Mortal Kombat*, *Doom* was well known in the gaming community and was not unheard-of beyond PC gaming cultures, particularly for its effect on productivity and network traffic in businesses and universities. However, it really did not garner much controversy or interest in the broader culture until Columbine in 1999. It was perhaps notable in the news media for its effect on various university networks and the loss of productivity in some tech companies, but it came just as Lieberman’s hearings were wrapping up and the ESRB was being instituted. It rode the tide of a retreating

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<sup>172</sup> Interestingly, the Cacodemon is also present in AD&D and was one of the elements that Pat Pulling was particularly focused on in *Dungeons & Dragons: Witchcraft, Violence, Suicide*.

<sup>173</sup> See Doomworld Forums and idgames archive. <https://www.doomworld.com/cacowards/>

panic when it was first released, but would somewhat surprisingly resurface six years later at the center of the largest video game panic to date.

### ***The Harris Levels: Murder Simulations***

The *Doom* games seemed rather likely candidates to incite the next big game panic with their new, almost paradigm shifting technology, violent gameplay and particularly dark and edgy subject matter. In *Doom*, the player takes control of a space-marine posted to a research compound on one of Mars' moons when catastrophe hits and a portal to hell is opened. This lets out all sorts of monstrosities to ravage the facilities, kill the inhabitants and possess those with weaker wills. There is blood, gore, horror, violence and action, all set in a demon-infested world. Mixed with the technological innovations of 3D-like graphics, atmospheric lighting and immersive sounds, *Doom* is a culmination of many of the perceived threats present in previous panics. In many ways, *Doom* was the perfect product to incite panic following on from the satanic panic, especially with its overtly demonic themes and levels adorned with pentagrams and mutilated corpses. Yet it managed to sneak into the gaming world with some notoriety, but no initial widespread panic outside the gaming world. And when panic did strike, a whole six years later, it had less to do with the content of the game, and more to do with how the game was used by Harris and Klebold, potentially as a tool to carry out their massacre.

*Doom* and *Doom II* were among Harris' favourite video games and he dedicated a lot of time and effort not just to playing the games, but also to creating WADs for him and his friends. It should also be noted that Harris was also an avid player of *Quake* (1996), but almost all of the controversy centered around the *Doom* games, likely due both to Harris' long-time fascination with the games and the news media's familiarity with it. Harris published numerous WADs for *Doom II* on his website publicly under the name REBDOOMER, a reference to the Columbine

High School sports teams, the Rebels.<sup>174</sup> Most of these are fairly simple multiplayer, arena style maps that can still be downloaded and played.<sup>175</sup> Many were designed for death-match multiplayer, among these were the simple maps like *bricks*, *Killer*, and some themed maps like *hockey*, and a *Mortal Kombat* themed map called *fightme*. Only one single-player WAD is still available, called *UAC LABS*, named after the fictional Union Aerospace Corporation which controls the Mars base in the *Doom* universe. None of these WADs were particularly noteworthy, being not much more than a handful of simple PvP arenas for friends to play on, but they were quickly incorporated into the media narrative following the massacre.

A rumour spread around quickly that Harris designed a level based on the actual layout of Columbine High School and that he and Klebold had used it to plan out and train for their massacre. This story was quickly debunked,<sup>176</sup> but it nonetheless led to many questions and accusations about the game and yet another moral entrepreneur and ‘expert’ in video games, Dave Grossman. A version of this rumour is present (without citation) in Dave Grossman’s *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill* (1999), a book that is surprisingly similar in structure to Pulling’s *The Devil’s Web*, but focuses on the media violence and video game conspiracy rather than the satanic conspiracy. While he had no evidence of this, according to Grossman, Harris had “reprogrammed his edition of Doom [sic] so that it looked like his neighborhood, complete with the houses of the people he hated.”<sup>177</sup> This contributed to Grossman and others’ use of the term “murder simulator” or “killing simulator” as an easy rhetorical device to demonstrate the dangers

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<sup>174</sup> Shepard, C. *REB’s Doom & Quake*. Webpage. <http://acolumbinesite.com/eric/doom.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Harris, Eric. 1996. *Eric Harris Doom WADs*. Digital Files. <https://archive.org/details/harrisdoom>.

<sup>176</sup> Mikkelson, Barbara. April 24, 1999 (Updated January 1, 2005). “Columbine Doom Levels: Did One of the Columbine Murderers Prepare by Designing New Doom Levels That Resembled His School?” *Snopes.com*. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-harris-levels/>.

<sup>177</sup> Grossman, D. and Gloria Degaetano. 1999. *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence*. New York: Crown Publishers. 77.

of video games like *Doom*. Grossman, along with Lieberman and Jack Thompson, who will be detailed below, is an important figure for this new video game panic, and his role in it and the idea of the “murder simulator.”

Although Grossman has been mentioned a couple of times already, and is positioned as an important moral entrepreneur in the same circle as Lieberman and Thompson, a full discussion of his work and influence has been put-off until now. As will be made evident, he is very relevant to the current discussion. Grossman made a name for himself as an expert in video game violence in the late 1990s and possibly coined the term ‘murder simulator,’<sup>178</sup> particularly in reference to first-person-shooters. He did this by leveraging his status as a (now retired) Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army and his previous published book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1995),<sup>179</sup> much in the same way that Lieberman used his status as a senator to gain trust in the media. Grossman was very involved with Lieberman and Jack Thompson, who is covered below, and appeared alongside both of them in a series of hearings following Columbine. He is also the only one of the three who is still actively involved in the debate around video games,<sup>180</sup> and published a revised and updated edition of *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill* in 2014, and published *Assassination Generation: Video Games, Aggression and the Psychology of Killing* in 2016.

With the publication of *On Killing*, he coined the term ‘killology,’ or the study of killing and its effects, although it was more of a personal project and brand than the academic field

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<sup>178</sup> This and similar terms like ‘killing simulator’ were used widely in the late 1990s and early 2000s, especially by the likes of so-called experts like Lieberman, Grossman and Thompson, who is covered below. Grossman, if not directly establishing the term, expends much effort defending it in *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*.

<sup>179</sup> *On Killing* is not without its detractors in the academic realm, see: Engen, R. 2008. “Killing for their Country: A New Look at Killology.” *Canadian Military Journal* 9.2: 120-128.

<sup>180</sup> Although Thompson seems to be making a handful of reappearances as of 2024 beginning as a guest on *My Perfect Console* ep. 64 in early 2024. See episode: <https://shows.acast.com/my-perfect-console/episodes/jack-thompson-former-lawyer-anti-video-game-activist>.

Grossman often made it out to be.<sup>181</sup> In the wake of the video game panic, he used his ‘expert’ status to branch out into speaking and training, specifically training local law enforcement in militarized tactics. Specifically for his police training courses, he was the subject of a 2016 documentary on increasing militarization in American police departments called *Do Not Resist*. According to the documentary, he was booked for over 200 days in a single year with these types of training sessions and presentations.<sup>182</sup> Recently, Grossman rebranded his personal website from Killology Research Group to Grossman On Truth,<sup>183</sup> and published *On Spiritual Combat* and *On Spiritual Warfare* for an explicitly Evangelical Christian audience. His constant appeals to the Evangelical Christian Right, along with his interest in influencing police policy is reminiscent of Pulling’s audience and her marketing of herself as an occult crime expert to police departments. Grossman’s credentials might be more valid, but he uses the same techniques and moral entrepreneurship that Pulling used in her time.

Many of the claims in *Stop Teaching*, and especially the statistical analysis that Grossman uses in it, were argued against in *Grand Theft Childhood* (2008) by Olsen and Kutner.<sup>184</sup> *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill* was reasonably influential for a time, so much so that media scholar Henry Jenkins also responded directly to the idea of games as passive training tools in the short essay “Reality Bytes,” breaking down the assumptions that Grossman brings to the table

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<sup>181</sup> Oladinni, T. June 5, 2020. “‘Killology’ is not a Satirical Field: Police Training Methods and Lethal Shootings.” *The Oxford Student*. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2020/06/05/killology-is-not-a-satirical-field-police-training-methods-and-lethal-shootings/>.

<sup>182</sup> Atkinson, Craig, director. “Conditioned Response,” clip of *Do Not Resist* (2016, Vanish Films). <https://vimeo.com/222913566/c1907b42a3>.

<sup>183</sup> Grossman on Truth. “FAQ: Why Did You Change the Company Name From Killology Research Group to Grossman On Truth?” <https://grossmanontruth.com/faq/>.

<sup>184</sup> Kutner, L. and C. K. Olson. 2008. *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 59-60.

regarding his idea of ‘murder-simulators.’<sup>185</sup> The core of Grossman’s view belongs firmly in the ‘Media Effects’ school of thought, but he takes it much further by introducing the simulation aspect. With *Doom* specifically, he references the WAD that the United States Military created under the Marine Corps Order 1500.55 to implement additional training resources for decision making skills.<sup>186</sup> This was called simply *Marine Doom* or *Marine I* and was designed as a tool to train communication and tactical decision making within a fireteam (2-4 man infantry group).<sup>187</sup> There are several issues with Grossman’s use of *Marine Doom*, most notably the goal of the WAD itself.

Grossman extrapolates from the existence of *Marine Doom* that, by virtue of a game’s realism and particularly their use of the first-person perspective, games can teach their players how to kill both practically and on an emotional level. However, the goals of *Marine Doom* are much more modest, being a single level, with a particular goal to demonstrate the importance of communication and decision making to those who are already being trained in the military. In other words, the game is being used for a specific, definable and measurable purpose in order to demonstrate a point to those who are already committed to training. It was thus used more as a supplement to real-world training than a full-course of training in itself. Grossman, however, sees video games, particularly realistic first-person-shooters, as being a full course in learning how to kill humans in real-life. To be fair to Grossman, this seemed like it could have been plausible, especially in the wake of Columbine. However, for someone who purports to be a

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<sup>185</sup> Jenkins, H. 2004. “Reality Bytes: 8 Myths About Video Games Debunked.” *The Video Game Revolution*, <https://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html>. Tie in site for PBS documentary *The Video Game Revolution*.

<sup>186</sup> United States of America Department of Defense. 1997. *MARINE CORPS ORDER 1500.55: MILITARY THINKING AND DECISION MAKING EXERCISES*. [https://web.archive.org/web/20060311001151/http://www.usmc.mil/directiv.nsf/0/86b631baa8c30301852565600071ec85/\\$FILE/MCO%201500.55.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20060311001151/http://www.usmc.mil/directiv.nsf/0/86b631baa8c30301852565600071ec85/$FILE/MCO%201500.55.pdf).

<sup>187</sup> Snyder, Daniel G. 1996. *Marine I*. Digital File. <https://www.doomworld.com/idgames/themes/marines/marine1>.

trainer in real-life (and does not use video games for this training), he seems to put a lot of emphasis on video games and disregards the importance of context and the limitations of training exercises.

While the “Harris Levels” and rumours of some sort of a lost Harris WAD are either completely false or distortions of the truth, these rumours like Grossman’s, are surprisingly persistent and are still actively sought out. The Lost Media Wiki has a whole page dedicated to the search, with editors even going so far as to scour the thousands of pages of police reports for potential leads and fragmentary evidence.<sup>188</sup> And there are some references to other WADs, and even hand-drawn maps for these levels in the police reports. Perhaps the most tantalizing piece of potential evidence, however, is the mention of a WAD called REALDOOM that is mentioned in readme files and ending screens of a few of the extant Harris levels and was not available publicly, but only if one emailed Harris directly.<sup>189</sup> Thus, there is just enough that is real in the story, i.e. Harris did make levels for *Doom*, that distortions and rumours like Grossman’s fueled the renewed game panic (and continue to contribute to ongoing search by internet historians).

### ***Harris on Doom and Columbine***

Harris kept several journals both in his notebooks and blog like updates on several of his websites. *Doom* comes up frequently in several of his written works and journals and he certainly thought about the game a great deal. It is from these journals that one can get glimpses into the world of Eric Harris, and that world is not one in which he plays *Doom* obsessively to practice his marksmanship. However, he does use the fiction of *Doom* as something of an inspiration.

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<sup>188</sup> LMW: Lost Media Wiki. “Eric Harris’s DOOM II WADs (Partially Found Video Game Mods; 1996-1998).” Accessed November 13, 2024.

[https://lostmediawiki.com/Eric\\_Harris%27s\\_DOOM\\_II\\_WADs\\_\(partially\\_found\\_video\\_game\\_mods;\\_1996-1998\)](https://lostmediawiki.com/Eric_Harris%27s_DOOM_II_WADs_(partially_found_video_game_mods;_1996-1998)).

<sup>189</sup> Midnight. October 30, 2023. “Columbine - DOOMs Most Controversial and Disturbing Mod.” Youtube Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9-LyXkglxk&t>.

Now is likely a good time to note briefly some of the scholarship concerning school shooters, which often does not reflect the foci of news media and moral entrepreneurs (like Lieberman, Grossman and later Thompson).

There is a substantial amount of professional and academic research into the motivations and internal lives of both actual and would-be mass shooters. It should be noted too that this research is complex and is often misrepresented in the mass media, especially in the emotionally charged environment of moral panic that often occurs in the wake of these tragedies.<sup>190</sup> Mass shootings (including school shootings) are extreme events that bring out all sorts of fears due to their violent, unpredictable and universal (anyone, or anyone's children, could be caught up in one) elements. School shootings and mass shootings, however, are incredibly rare and the perpetrator is usually either killed in the resulting altercation with law enforcement or commits suicide.<sup>191</sup> It is important to emphasize the rarity of mass shootings (which is in itself an even broader category than school shootings), and even though it often seems to be occurring more frequently, the numbers (though not necessarily the casualties) tended to remain quite consistent year to year, with an average of about 20 incidents per year in the United States until around 2010.<sup>192</sup> This makes them difficult to study from both a statistical basis, because there just are not that many, and from a psychological basis because there are even fewer perpetrators who survive.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Elson, Malte and Christopher J. Ferguson. 2013. "Gun Violence and Media Effects: Challenges for Science and Public Policy," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 203, 322-323.

<sup>191</sup> Winegard, Benjamin and Christopher J. Ferguson. 2017. "The Development of Rampage Shooters: Myths and Uncertainty in the Search for Causes." in *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings* ed. Laura C. Wilson. John Wiley & Sons. 60.

<sup>192</sup> Fox, J. A. and M. J. DeLateur. 2013. "Mass Shootings in America: Moving Beyond Newtown." *Homicide Studies* 18.1, 129.

<sup>193</sup> It should be noted that this historical trend may have shifted significantly after 2018. Generally, this is a question of what is included in the data (for example, does gang violence that occurs on school property after hours count as a school shooting?). Government data tends to define school shootings more tightly with an emphasis on pre-meditated shootings (see <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a01/violent-deaths-and-shootings>) and follows a

Even from early research, however, there never seemed to be much of a link between media that shooters consumed and the crimes they commit. One of the most important early reports, called the *Safe School Initiative*, was carried out in the wake of Columbine and from the 37 cases, they found no useful link between school shooters and a particular interest in violent media.<sup>194</sup> While 57% had some interest in violent media, it was split between movies, books and video games, with video games being the smallest, with only 12% being particularly interested in violent video games. Interestingly, these cases all took place between 1974 and 2000, almost precisely the same time that video games and video game panics rose to cultural prominence. Any so-called ‘media effects’ from this, however, evidently does not play out in this data. While school shooters do not demonstrate any discernible pattern as a group in regard to the media they consume, there is a larger pattern of becoming obsessed with their own creations and achievements, with 37% having a particular interest in violent media they create. A common counterpoint to the violent media argument with school shooters is Adam Lanza, the perpetrator of the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and his obsession with the video game *Dance Dance Revolution*. No one reported on this obsession with *DDR* because it obviously did not fit the common narrative of panic.<sup>195</sup> However, it is generally reflective of a trend among school shooters and obsession with something, particularly an obsession focused toward something they view as having ownership over. For Eric Harris, who was much more prolific

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similar pattern from the pre-2010 data (see above note). More inclusive data, like that compiled by David Riedman in the *K-12 School Shooting Database* finds that from 2018 on (the year of the Parkland shooting) gun violence on school grounds have increased significantly. Importantly, this database does not purport to be historical and began collecting data in 2018.

<sup>194</sup> Vossekuil et al. 2004. *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, 22.

<sup>195</sup> Toppo, 2015. 192.

than Klebold, this sense of ownership is reflected in his creative output through his WADs, writings and home videos.

One of the throughlines in all of his WADs is Harris' ownership over them. In most of his *Doom* WADs text files, Harris is emphatic that they are not to be copied or used as a starting point for others. His note in the UAC Labs text file states "You may NOT change a damn thing with this WAD, if you do, i [sic] will blow you up. And it will be cool."<sup>196</sup> In the context of a teenage boy not wanting others to use what he created, a statement like this is not likely too concerning, but in light of all of the other ways Harris displayed an intense and obsessive ownership over his creations, a pattern can begin to emerge. For instance, his advertisement of REALDOOM in the text files of all of his extant WADs, which was only available by emailing him directly, demonstrates this propensity toward a sense of obsessive ownership for his own creations. This sense of ownership is related to his sense of superiority over others in almost every domain of his life; he would often refer to others as weaklings, robots or the failures of natural selection, while he saw himself, or wanted to see himself, as the pinnacle of humanity and even godlike in status.<sup>197</sup> His *Doom* levels were a part of this with him noting in a journal that: "I don't want to brag about my own sh\*t [sic], but these levels come from the Herrgott [German: Lord God] of DOOM himself ... Each level has 4 symbols in it, locate all of them and you are Godlike."<sup>198</sup>

Harris certainly used *Doom* to envision his plans, and while some of his writings do mention *Doom*, often in quite disturbing ways, there are much deeper ideological and worldview conceptions that are maintained throughout. For as much as his love of violent video games is present in his writings, they also betray underlying philosophies that seem to be taken wholesale

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<sup>196</sup> Harris, E. 1996. "UACLABS.txt." Digital File.

<sup>197</sup> Langman, Peter. *Themes in the Writings of Eric Harris ver. 1.8*. Digital: Langman Psychological Associates, 3.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 5.

from both Hitler and Nietzsche.<sup>199</sup> As seen in the above quote, he would often make use of short phrases in German, like *ich bin Gott* (I am God), or referring to himself as *Herrgott*. This was a personal choice and was likely a reference to these influences. Whenever *Doom* is mentioned, it is important to note that he was using *Doom* in this context. As Langman notes, the decision to commit murder is not something that is often done lightly. Video games, peers or even ideologies alone do not compel someone to act, but they can certainly help provide justifications after the decision has been made.<sup>200</sup>

Harris spent a long time envisioning his plans playing out “like the LA riots, the oklahoma bombing, WWII, vietnam, duke and doom all mixed together [sic]”<sup>201</sup> in a document laying out the plan potentially a year before the shooting.<sup>202</sup> Violent historical events that inspired him are placed right next to the violent first-person-shooters *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Doom*. Like *Doom*, *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) was a violent, gory game with a Mature rating, but interestingly never experienced much of the controversy of other FPS games.<sup>203</sup> The player takes the role of the archetypal and satirical ‘80s action hero Duke Nukem and fights with mutated Pig Cops and other types of aliens on the streets of a near future Los Angeles. Unlike *Doom*, *Duke Nukem 3D* features locations inspired by real places like movie theaters, bookstores and even strip-clubs. Together, the games represent two of the most popular and influential FPS games of the ‘90s, and two pieces of media that inspired Harris and Klebold. Since *Duke Nukem* is only mentioned once, it is difficult to ascertain how much it may have been on his mind, but the

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<sup>199</sup> Langman, Peter. 2014. *Influences on the Ideology of Eric Harris ver. 1.2*. Digital: Langman Psychological Associates, 1.

<sup>200</sup> Langman, P. 2015. *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 178.

<sup>201</sup> Harris frequently leaves proper nouns uncapitalized, uses improper spelling and does not italicize titles.

<sup>202</sup> Harris, Eric. 1998. “NBK.doc” Police print-out and scan of the original digital file. <http://www.acolumbinesite.com/eric/writing/vaccines.html>.

<sup>203</sup> Barton, Matt. April 22, 2011. “Matt Chat 99: Duke Nukem with Scott Miller. Youtube Video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\\_i3-aoHnww](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_i3-aoHnww).

cynical satire and chaotic violence similar to *Doom* undoubtedly influenced the vision of the school shooter.

Along with this vision, Harris also sees these FPSs as ideal worlds in which the weak are punished for their inherent weakness and the strong survive, a view perhaps influenced by his interest in Nietzsche. In this ideal world of his we would “put everyone in doom I and see who can get past atleast level 1 [sic].”<sup>204</sup> The events of *Doom* become a test, and like the plot of the game, only the strongest of the strong survive. This is not just a world in which anyone weak is not worthy to live, but also one in which Harris is the mastermind as he continues: “Actually, then put them into MY worlds. Like Thrasher, Whiskey, UAC Labs und TIER [sic].”<sup>205</sup> These WADs are even more difficult than the base game, of which only UAC Labs still exists and is known for its modified, gorier death animations and hordes of powerful enemies.<sup>206</sup> He also mentions his “ULTIMATE DOOM test” in his journals as his ideal way to get rid of the people Harris sees as weak and useless.<sup>207</sup> One of the things to note here is that Harris does not see *Doom* as being realistic, instead, he wishes the real world was more like his idealized, brutal and unforgiving *Doom* world.

Finally, the most disturbing mention of *Doom* in his journals comes down to his own personal mindset as he prepares for the shooting, what he had been calling ‘NBK’ after the movie *Natural Born Killers*. This is the culmination of Harris’ obsession with *Doom* and what leads to what the anti-video game author Dave Grossman refers to as ‘killing’ or ‘murder

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<sup>204</sup> Harris, Eric. 1998. “NBK.doc.”

<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> Midnight. May 5, 2022. “UAC Labs - The Controversial DOOM Mod Made By A Killer From Columbine.” Youtube Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPXJXZakuPk>.

<sup>207</sup> Harris, Eric. 1998. “Journal 04/12/98” p.26,006. Transcription of police report documents in *Eric Harris’s Journal ver. 1.4* (2024) ed. Peter Langman. Public Domain. [https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/harris\\_journal.pdf](https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/harris_journal.pdf).

simulators.<sup>208</sup> The term ‘murder simulator’ would become a common epithet for these violent video games. Harris used the world of *Doom* to modify how he saw those who he was about to murder and wrote in his journal from October 23, 1998:

I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy or any of that, so I will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster from Doom like FH [Former Human] or FS [Former Sergeant] or demons, so it’s either me or them. I have to turn off my feelings.

Grossman wrote of Harris and Klebold and notes that they use these murder simulators like *Doom* or *Duke Nukem*, in order to train for the shooting.<sup>209</sup> This is true, but not in the way that Grossman understands it. Rather than being a literal training ground for Harris and Klebold, *Doom* acted more like an idealized model of the world in which Harris could actually be the dominant, godlike Übermensch he envisioned himself to be. It can be noted that there is a distinctive, and deliberate lack of narrative detail in *Doom*, and that allowed Harris to project his own ideals onto the game, and filtered through his own worldview, essentially take out of the game what he put into it - his own delusions and ideologies.

That does not mean that the game did not influence him, it most certainly did. However, it did not teach him anything that he did not already know, or had not already decided for himself, but it may have encouraged certain lines of reasoning for Harris. This is important. *Doom* was immensely popular and still is. It was heralded as being among the most visually realistic of games when it was released, and of course, that realism is seen as being dangerous for exact reasons that were demonstrated with Columbine. It only becomes more dangerous when

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<sup>208</sup> Grossman, Dave and Gloria Degaetano. 1999. *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence*. New York: Crown Publishers. 66-67.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid. 77.

things like mods come onto the scene and anyone can make a highly accurate and detailed model of the real world, like Harris was reported to have done. Mix this with the idea of the ‘murder simulator,’ something that can be used to teach the actual mechanics of using weapons, and games come across as being an incredible threat.

Although this chapter focused mainly on the history of Id Software, *Doom* and directly with Eric Harris, it is important to note that the themes of the dangers of realism were constantly in the background. *Doom* and Columbine, however, present a much more complex relationship between the two than in the other panics. On the one hand, the idea that Harris made a model of the school in *Doom* is almost completely unfounded. With that rumour goes the more simplistic ideas of realism. On the other hand, he did actually utilize *Doom* and its themes into his reasoning and motivations for the shooting. That is a bit harder to account for. What can be said, however, is that *Doom* was certainly not the catalyst, or the direct cause, for Harris’ plan. In many ways, this is more disturbing because it is impossible to pin-point a single thing that made him into a killer. He did not just snap after playing *Doom*, but instead incorporated his hobbies and interest into his own dark philosophy and worldview, and *Doom* was among those interests.

## CHAPTER 7: Laying the Blame

The details of the shooting do not need to be covered here, but it is enough to say that it was, and still is, a horrifying and tragic event. As far as video games are concerned, the details of Harris and Klebold's involvement in the video game *Doom* will be examined in depth in the following section. For now, however, the immediate context of the media and political reactions is what will be analyzed. After Lieberman's hearings and the institution of the ESRB there was a general distrust of video games and gamers (think back to the *X-Files* episode mentioned in Chapter 3) as a popular narrative rapidly emerged that at least some video games (those that were rated M-for Mature) were a threat to children's well-being. What makes the panic even more complicated, however, was that the media-effects 'common-sense' thinking was being applied to almost any form of popular culture all at once. Now, it was not just video games on trial, but books, movies, television and even toys; nothing was safe and, like the satanic panic, anyone could be affected. This led to many different things being blamed for school shootings alongside video games, like Stephen King's *Rage* (1977) or Scott Kalvert's film *The Basketball Diaries* (1995).<sup>210</sup> This, of course, is not new, but the targeting of multiple pieces of popular culture at once, in the news media and in court, became the standard leading up to and after Columbine.

The heading of the chapter, "Laying the Blame," is a reference to the title of an editorial by Roger Moore in *Dragon* 151 from November 1989, nearing the end of the height of TTRPG panic. In it Moore mentions a recent school shooting and a particular book that was found in the perpetrator's locker. This book was not a *D&D* manual or even a real grimoire, but a copy of Stephen King's *Rage* (1977). Moore, drawing from the then ongoing panic around TTRPGs, goes on to say that if one used the same standard of evidence that the anti-TTRPG people use,

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<sup>210</sup> The film is based on Jim Carroll's book of the same name: Carroll, Jim. 1978. *The Basketball Diaries*. Tombouctou Books.

one could easily craft arguments that both good grades and religious affiliation could be indicators of potential mass-shooters and provides examples for each rhetorical claim.<sup>211</sup> These types of arguments and selective and manipulative use of evidence were standard fare for those involved in TTRPGs in 1989, but were also becoming common with other forms of popular culture. *Rage* would be implicated in several more school-shootings from the late 1980s into the 1990s until Michael Carneal shot and killed three students and wounded six at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky. After finding out that Carneal had a copy of *Rage* in his locker and that there were other school-shooters that had read *Rage*, King decided to pull the book from publication in 1997.<sup>212</sup> King later wrote an essay entitled “Guns” in 2013 in response to the Sandy Hook shooting where he notes the politics and media reaction to school-shootings. His main point is that the news-media attention on school-shootings tend to shift focus away from complex issues like gun control and systemic issues, onto the seemingly simpler ‘common sense’ explanations. These ‘common sense’ explanations provide simple solutions, like increasing legislation around video games, television and movies.

The implications of this are important for the current topic. Firstly, the history of this time-period is complex, it is not just video games that are being blamed for these tragedies, but a wide array of media and popular culture. Everything was being questioned in the public sphere, nothing was seen as being safe, because children and teenagers were the ones who were predominantly consuming this new pop-culture. Many things were happening all at once, and it is sometimes difficult to understand how they happened in order. There is overlap between the instances of panic and stereotypes and associations that blur together, like the almost prophetic

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<sup>211</sup> Moore, Roger E. 1989. “Laying the Blame.” *Dragon Magazine* 151, 86. Also see: Moore, Roger E. 1988. “Equal Time.” *Dragon Magazine* 134, 55.

<sup>212</sup> King, Stephen. 2013. *Guns*. Digital: Kindle Singles. Ch. 2.

editorial about school-shootings and *Rage in Dragon* from 1989. This is especially true for the frenetic pace of hearings, legal cases and proposed legislation that all occurred in the immediate aftermath of Columbine with the tragedy acting as another catalyst for panic. This case of panic also has likely the largest influence on the current cultural understandings of violence and realism in video games. Labels like First-Person-Shooter (FPS) and *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA),<sup>213</sup> along with ultimate negative stereotypes being introduced and confirmed.

The second reason is that in the wake of terrible tragedies, explanations are sought after. What *made* Carneal, Harris and Klebold, along with many others, commit their horrible crimes? Carneal is still in prison serving a life sentence,<sup>214</sup> but Harris and Klebold, along with most other school shooters, ended their own lives or committed ‘blue-suicide’ at the hands of law enforcement before they could be arrested and held accountable for their actions. There can never be any opportunity to question them and there is no opportunity to hold them responsible for their actions. But there must be someone to be held responsible and so, in response to Columbine, video games, along with television, movies and music, would make a return to Congress with Joe Lieberman himself in an attempt to find those who could be held responsible.

### ***Video Game Hearings 2.0***

The wake of Columbine brought with it renewed efforts to legislate the video game industry, and this time it focused specifically on refining the rules around advertising violent video games to children. The beginnings of this were already seen in the 1993/4 *Mortal Kombat* hearings when ads like the *Mortal Monday* television commercial or the “So Real it Hurts”

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<sup>213</sup> Although not directly related to Columbine, one of the key lawyers and ‘experts’ Jack Thompson also sued the creators and distributors of GTA using the same methods he did for school-shooter cases.

<sup>214</sup> Ault, Trevor et al. September 26, 2022. “1997 Kentucky School Shooter Denied Parole.” *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/1997-kentucky-school-shooter-feels-responsible-columbine-shootings/story?id=90206941>.

posters and magazine ads. The ESRB, however, was not able to regulate products, including advertisements for those products, beyond the video games themselves. This led to a proliferation of secondary merchandise like action figures of *Mortal Kombat* characters that were sold in toy stores, and, of course, were directly marketed to children.<sup>215</sup> In the immediate aftermath of Columbine, while the US and North America as a whole, had its eyes open to the tragedy, several hearings, legal cases and proposed laws were activated in close succession to take advantage of that attention.

The first of these legal proceedings was an ‘exploratory’ congressional hearing that was ostensibly about the issue of advertisements directed toward children, but was structured almost as a direct response to Columbine with the implication that violent and realistic media had a large part to play in the massacre. This was a single day hearing called *Marketing Violence to Children* and was held on May 4th, 1999, just two weeks after Columbine.<sup>216</sup> Joe Lieberman made the keynote address for this hearing. Media scholar Henry Jenkins, known for his study of popular culture and the development of participatory culture,<sup>217</sup> was also present and gave an address. Jenkins recalls this hearing, and gives a full transcript of his address in an essay entitled “Professor Jenkins Goes to Washington.”<sup>218</sup> This hearing was not about marketing and advertising policy, it was about Columbine. Most of the participants, like Joe Lieberman, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput and David Grossman outright blame popular culture for the tragedy.

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<sup>215</sup> This example, among others from the toy industry, is noted by Joe Lieberman in the initial May 1999 *Marketing Violence to Children* hearing.

<sup>216</sup> C-SPAN. May 4, 1999. “Marketing Violence to Children.” *C-SPAN*. Video. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?123015-1/marketing-violence-children>.

<sup>217</sup> See Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>218</sup> Jenkins, Henry. 2006. “Professor Jenkins Goes to Washington,” in *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press. 194.

Jenkins, however, attempted to hold up a mirror to the hearing and noted the current environment of moral panic and the underlying fears at play. He pins these fears to three elements; the fear of adolescents, the fear of new technology (both of which constitute the stereotypes that had been developing for years) and the greater visibility of youth and pop-culture in the media environment.<sup>219</sup> He also pushed back against the ‘common-sense’ media effects paradigm that “empties media images of their meanings, strips them of their contexts and denies their consumers any agency over their use.”<sup>220</sup> This is a particularly important statement for the current conversation and gets to the heart of the issue. Much like in the other moral panics, there is little sense of agency put on the participants or players, they are the passive consumers and the video games, or television or music essentially just happens to them. These fears, mixed with the idea of the passive consumer, rather than the participant in Jenkins’ model, created an environment in which it was, now more than ever, the video games themselves and those who produced them that was the issue. In other words, children did not use the video games and other pop-culture media, but were used by it, just as they were used by satanist dungeon masters a decade before.

As an exploratory hearing stacked heavily in the anti-video game camp, it played out more like a media exposé than an actual hearing. The real hearing, once again called “Marketing Violence to Children” would come the following year on September 13, and September 27, 2000.<sup>221</sup> After the initial 1999 hearing, a Federal Trade Commission report was ordered to study

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid. 196.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. 195.

<sup>221</sup> C-SPAN. September 13, 2000. “Marketing Violence to Children Day 1.” Video <https://www.c-span.org/video/?159189-1/marketing-violence-children-day-1>;  
C-SPAN. September 27, 2000. “Marketing Violence to Children Day 2.” Video. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?159463-1/marketing-violence-children-day-2>.

how video games were advertised and if they were being actively advertised to children.<sup>222</sup> It seems that this report and the publicity of the hearing managed to actually change some practices in movie and game marketing, as a fourth follow-up report from 2004 notes.<sup>223</sup> One of the features to note, however, was that even according to the title, the advertising practices of media companies are mostly self-regulated in the US, and thus, even though the publicity of several hearings, reports and follow-up reports, actually did manage to encourage some change in standard advertising practices, they were never codified in the law. Joe Lieberman, however, did attempt to pass a bill, called the *Media Marketing Accountability Act of 2001*.<sup>224</sup> However, it never made it further than being introduced and referred to the Committee on Energy and Commerce on June 25, 2001 which did not pass it on any further. This was essentially an attempt to establish something similar to a regulatory board like the ESRB to game and movie advertisements, but ultimately failed to get off the ground.

### ***Jack Thompson***

As a politician, not all of Lieberman's time and effort could go toward the video game debates, and thus his involvement seems to have fizzled out after 2001, but Jack Thompson, a lawyer, was already hard at work with his own strategy of attracting media attention and litigating against entertainment and game companies. Thompson continued the well-established approach of setting oneself up as an industry expert and attempting to change laws with the two-

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<sup>222</sup> Federal Trade Commission, 2000. *Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording & Electronic Game Industries*. [https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reports/marketing-violent-entertainment-children/vioreport\\_0.pdf](https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reports/marketing-violent-entertainment-children/vioreport_0.pdf).

<sup>223</sup> Federal Trade Commission, 2004. *Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Fourth Follow-up Review of Industry Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording & Electronic Game Industries*. <https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reports/marketing-violent-entertainment-children-fourth-follow-review-industry-practices-motion-picture/040708kidsviolencerpt.pdf>.

<sup>224</sup> US Congress. House. *Media Marketing Accountability Act of 2001: To prohibit the targeted marketing to minors of adult-rated media as an unfair or deceptive practice, and for other purposes*. H.R.2246. 107th Congress. Introduced June 20, 2001. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/2246/>.

pronged approach of strong news-media presence and using current events, often tragedies, to his own advantage. In this respect, he was cut from the same cloth as Pat Pulling and in the same way worked diligently to keep video games, and by extension his own name, in the public discussion and as controversial as possible for as long as possible. He became well known in gaming culture in the early 2000s thanks to his often hard-headed media antics and the use of his status as a lawyer to threaten litigation against game companies, gamers or anyone who opposed him. An in-depth history of Jack Thompson and his actions is not warranted here (a full account could take up a whole book),<sup>225</sup> but his career was colourful and defined by moral entrepreneurship and at times almost absurd levels of showmanship. Before his time with video games, he also had cases targeting radio shows and rap music,<sup>226</sup> and during the height of his notoriety in the early 2000s also attacked the *Howard Stern Show* in hopes of getting him off the air. Thompson was somewhat successful with Stern, getting him pulled from FM radio and onto the less regulated satellite radio platform.<sup>227</sup> Only the highlights of his career in video game litigation are relevant here to demonstrate the staying power of the panic and its eventual evolution into the current ‘video game debate.’

Thompson’s first foray into video game litigation was when he represented parents of the victims of Michael Carneal’s school shooting in Paducah, Kansas on December 1, 1997 with *James v. Meow Media Inc.*<sup>228</sup> His strategy was to claim that the production of violent (and

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<sup>225</sup> An overview of his career, starting with his ventures into censoring rap music in the 1980s is available on Wikipedia. Much of his exploits against video games are also available at [jackthompson.org](http://jackthompson.org), an archive site dedicated to documenting his written work concerning video games.

<sup>226</sup> Harrington, Richard. August 1, 1990. “The Crew: Courage or Crime?; Reactions From Both Sides of the Raging Rap Wars.” *The Washington Post*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20121006003923/https://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/72606729.html?FMT=ABS>. (Preview).

<sup>227</sup> Eggerton, John. September 2, 2005. “WBZX Pulls Stern Over Indecency Complaint.” *Broadcasting and Cable*. <https://www.nexttv.com/news/wbzx-pulls-stern-over-indecency-complaint-107749>.

<sup>228</sup> *James v. Meow Media Inc.*, 90 F. Supp. 2d 798 (W.D Ky. 2000). <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp2/90/798/2478891/>.

sexually explicit) media was negligence on the media companies' part since they caused Carneal to carry out a mass shooting. The prosecution argued that these pieces of media (which also included movies and websites) were to be understood as defective products and that this ultimately constituted a large-scale RICO case.<sup>229</sup> None of the claims carried any weight in court and the case was dismissed and an appeal was also dismissed in 2002. This case is essentially the archetype for Thompson's later video game cases, in which he goes after entire industries in an attempt to build as big a case as possible.

This is an important case because it functions similarly to Lieberman's second round of hearings. Firstly, Thompson took advantage of a tragedy in order to boost his own status as both a lawyer and expert witness on video games. It came hot on the heels of both Paducah and Columbine, and implicated so many different companies and organizations that it was more akin to a publicity stunt than an actual court case. Thompson's actions in this regard would come back to bite him multiple times as he used similar models in the future. It is also important because there is yet another connection to the earlier satanic panic. In the court's justification of upholding their opinion after the appeal, an earlier case is mentioned: *Watters v. TSR Inc.*<sup>230</sup> This case attempted to hold TSR, the publisher of *Dungeon & Dragons*, responsible for the suicide of Johnny Burnett.<sup>231</sup> The court ruled TSR had no liability in that case, and later took a similar stance with *James v. Meow Media Inc. et. al.*, noting that

We find that it is simply too far a leap from shooting characters on a video screen (an activity undertaken by millions) to shooting people in a classroom (an activity undertaken

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<sup>229</sup> *James v. Meow Media Inc.*, 300 F. 3d 683 (US Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit 2002).  
[https://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_case?case=2909369074319697416&q=300+F.3d+683&hl=en&as\\_sdt=2,5](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=2909369074319697416&q=300+F.3d+683&hl=en&as_sdt=2,5).

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.* 692-693.

<sup>231</sup> *Watters v. TSR Inc.* 904 F. 2d 378 (US Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit 1990).  
[https://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_case?case=10196421278862987651&q=300+F.3d+683&hl=en&as\\_sdt=2006](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=10196421278862987651&q=300+F.3d+683&hl=en&as_sdt=2006).

by a handful, at most) for Carneal's actions to have been reasonably foreseeable to the manufacturers of the media that Carneal played and viewed.<sup>232</sup>

The earlier case of *Watters v. TSR Inc.* was noted directly as contributing to this decision. The saga of Jack Thompson's (unsuccessful) litigation of video games and those who produce and market them was far from over, and yet, it would also be his eventual undoing.

Thompson constructed a similar case with *Strickland v. Sony*, which was a civil case connected to the conviction of Devin Moore, who killed two police officers and a police dispatcher in 2003. In his original trial, Moore's attorney attempted to build a defense that posited a link between a combination of PTSD and the video game *Grand Theft Auto* (which one is not mentioned) that caused Moore to essentially 'snap' and treat life like a game of GTA.<sup>233</sup> Like the many 'video games made me do it' cases before and after, the evidence was simply not there. As with Thompson's previous case, he attempted to implicate as many people and companies as possible including developers, publishers and even distributors like Walmart. In many ways, this case was like a copy/paste of *James v. Meow Media*, and once again Thompson played off the scandal of the crime and the high-profile companies like Sony and Walmart.

*Strickland v. Sony* ended up displaying Thompson's self-aggrandizing and often malicious behaviour much more clearly than before and would contribute to the beginning of his downfall. Thompson required a special license to practice in Alabama for the case, but this license was revoked after defense lawyers accused him of turning the courtroom "into a circus."<sup>234</sup> This was after he described Sony and Take-Two's publication of *Grand Theft Auto* as

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<sup>232</sup> *James v. Meow Media Inc.*, 693.

<sup>233</sup> Smith, Tony. August 11, 2005. "'Grand Theft Auto' Cop Killer Found Not Guilty: Gameplaying Did Not Affect Outcome." *The Register*. [https://www.theregister.com/2005/08/11/gta\\_not\\_guilty/](https://www.theregister.com/2005/08/11/gta_not_guilty/).

<sup>234</sup> Gibson, Ellie. November 21, 2005. "Thompson Faces Flack from Judge in GTA Lawsuit." *Game Industry.biz*. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/thompson-faces-flack-from-judge-in-gta-lawsuit>.

a second Pearl Harbor. He later doubled down on the comment and sentiment in an email interview with gamepolitics.com with the following:

As for the offensiveness of the Pearl Harbor comment, it's accurate and it's needed. The Japanese have a contempt for our culture which is patent. There (sic) dumping of garbage into our culture is a slow motion version of Pearl Harbor.<sup>235</sup>

In the years following this, Thompson made a name for himself by playing to both his 'expert' status on video games with several, often controversial, news appearances, and in the game community with even more outlandish antics.

Eventually, Thompson would be disbarred by the Florida Bar in 2008 for his frequent and recurring offensive comments and repeated misconduct within the court.<sup>236</sup> A detailed history of the full events is difficult to ascertain, but in the end, it seems to come down to Thompson's attempts to be a showman rather than a serious lawyer. In the Florida Bar's investigation into Thompson's actions, they note that he "abused the legal system by submitting numerous, frivolous and inappropriate filings" and he once again turned the "disciplinary proceedings into a press conference."<sup>237</sup> This is reflected in his large-scale cases that attempted to implicate dozens of companies at once while also taking advantage of tragedies and controversies in order to inflate his own credentials. He was at the heart of the moral panic, and it earned him spots on television and radio, like an instance in 2007 when he made the claim that the Virginia Tech shooter was obsessed with the video game *Counter-Strike*, when there was no evidence for that

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<sup>235</sup> Gamepolitics. November 2, 2005. "Jack Thompson Finds a New Target: Japan." *GamePolitics*. <https://gamepolitics.livejournal.com/122526.html?thread=4599454#t4599454>

<sup>236</sup> Roberts, Alana and Billy Shields. June 5, 2008. "Enhanced Disbarment Recommended due to Lawyer's Pattern of Conduct." *Daily Business Review* via Law.com <https://web.archive.org/web/20121128064737/http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1202421944039>.

<sup>237</sup> *The Florida Bar v. Thompson*, 994 So. 2d 306 (Fla. 2008). <https://casetext.com/case/the-florida-bar-v-thompson-3>.

claim.<sup>238</sup> In response to the same massacre, he also noted that video games were raising up a generation of ‘manchurian candidates’ with the implication that any kid could ‘snap’ and that the game industry itself was intentionally designing games for this purpose in the same vein as his Pearl Harbor comment.<sup>239</sup>

Along with his court and media appearances, he also wrote an open-letter and issued a challenge to the game development community in an open-letter he titled “A Modest Video Game Proposal.” This proposed that Thompson himself would make a \$10,000 donation to Paul Eibeler’s (the CEO of Take-Two) choice of charity if someone in the industry would make a game in which the player shoots up video game developers, CEOs of entertainment companies and arcades. The idea behind this proposal was that the game companies and designers were fully aware of the effects that games had on children, and by making themselves the target they would actually be putting their own lives in danger when someone inevitably snapped. While most of the letter details a potential plot for this video game in which the father of a child who was killed by a gamer then kills Take-This CEO Paula Eibel, he ends with this dare,

How about it, video game industry? I've got the check and you've got the tech. It's all a fantasy, right? No harm can come from such a game, right? Go ahead, video game moguls. Target yourselves as you target others. I dare you.<sup>240</sup>

Many small developers and modders ended up making something like what he described, although he came back and said that the challenge was only ever satirical.<sup>241</sup> There was also

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<sup>238</sup> rgbyhkr. April 18, 2007. “Jack Thompson Jumping to CounterStrike Conclusion.” Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nvbhrCI5Ew>.

<sup>239</sup> vprulz. April 17, 2007. “Jack Thompson Speaks Regarding Virginia Tech Shootings.” Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWJm5cZ3SNM>.

<sup>240</sup> Saunderson, Matt. October 10, 2005. “Attorney Proposes Violent Game.” *GameCube Advanced*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20051030003500/http://gc.advancedmn.com/article.php?artid=5883>.

<sup>241</sup> Kohler, Chris. November 1, 2005. “Jack Thompson Versus Gamers.” *Wired News*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20070313192524/http://www.wired.com/news/games/0%2C2101%2C69404%2C00.html>.

some additional fall-out from the proposal when video game websites used the absurdity of the letter to their advantage, including *Penny Arcade* making a donation to a video game charity in his name,<sup>242</sup> and Joystiq reissuing Jack's challenge with Joystiq staff as the targets for participants to win branded merchandise.<sup>243</sup>

After his disbarment, Thompson faded into relative obscurity, but his ideas certainly did not. He was not afraid to make use of stereotypes, over-the-top narratives and jump to conclusions. This, mixed with the atmosphere of common-sense media effects ideas that were already internalized in the culture as a whole, brought the fears and questions about video games to an all-time high. In many ways, Thompson is emblematic of the moral entrepreneurs that defined the panics of the past like Joe Lieberman or Pat Pulling. And somehow, by mixing the worst elements of Pat Pulling's 'expertism' and Lieberman's litigious and politics centric approach, he managed to bring the panic to a larger audience than ever and to put himself at the center of it all.

Thompson is an important figure, but it is also important to note that while he made himself the center of attention, he did not bring anything new to the table. The stereotypes, assumptions and underlying 'common-sense' understanding of popular culture and video games was already in the air, and if anything, Thompson is much more a product of these ideas than a producer of them. In many ways, it is easier to be sympathetic to the crusades of Pat Pulling, or the more reasoned approach of Lieberman than it is to Thompson. He comes across as being almost exclusively mercenary in his endeavors, knowing that he can take advantage of political

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<sup>242</sup> Gabriel, Jonathan. October 17, 2005. "Fax This." *Penny Arcade*. Blog post. <https://web.archive.org/web/20061205225400/http://www.penny-arcade.com/2005/10/17>.

<sup>243</sup> Miller, Ross. April 5, 2006. "Kill Joystiq, Win Swag [Update 4]." *Joystiq*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060410205304/http://www.joystiq.com/2006/04/05/kill-joystiq-win-swag/>.

and cultural ideals in the face of great tragedies. But he is anything but original in his strategies. Instead, he was able to take advantage of what was already there and what had come before.

The story of Jack Thompson is a good way to end this history as he brings together all of the major themes into one acrimonious and outsized personality. In the post-Columbine world, he came to symbolize the anti-video game position both as an 'expert' for those who did not play and understand video games, and also as a villain for those who did. He especially participated in and contributed to the development of gamer stereotypes. Most notably, he made use of the gamer as violent loner stereotype, while also, and contradictorily, using arguments from Media Effects to portray gamers as a group of Manchurian Candidates at the command of a cabal of perverse, anti-American video game developers. From his point of view, this was because games were fundamentally realistic and one of the most effective teaching tools available, partly because they could easily infiltrate the young mind. Finally, he brought all of these elements together and made himself the center of attention, becoming perhaps the most extreme example of a moral entrepreneur that has been studied.

## CONCLUSION

### *Back to the Beginning*

The final product of this thesis ended up being very different from what it was initially envisioned to be and as such the goals changed dramatically. The topic that was to be explored was that of ‘historical authenticity’ and how that concept might inform what and how people learn and take away from video games that are based in historical times and places. As such, it was meant to be a much deeper exploration of the academic theories around games and historical representation. Then development on *Bunce Island: Through the Mirror* began and questions of theory necessarily became questions that required practical implementation. While the thesis does not discuss the actual development of *Bunce Island* in any detail, the study of the history of video games in the public imagination turned out to be quite important in understanding how *Bunce Island* might be taken-in by others, especially those in the academic world and, perhaps most importantly, non-gamers. In the end, this study turned away from the more conceptual questions of historical representation and into an actual historical study of video games themselves and their place in North American culture. For non-gamers, this cultural history likely informs their understanding of what games are and how they work much more than the abstract and conceptual theories of game studies. This shift came about naturally in response to the context of developing a historical video game in an academic setting that is historically underrepresented in digital media like video games. There are a handful of games that model a historical Africa, although they are few and far between. The closest that mainstream games usually get to a historical Africa is generally Ancient Egypt, such as the Ptolemaic Egypt of *Assassin’s Creed Origins*. From a representational perspective, there is not much and certainly

nowhere near as the more well-studied historical worlds, like those of World War II games, for example. Thus, rather than establishing a more specific framework of a particular (and underrepresented) historical time and place, a much broader view was explored.

The ‘experience divide’ is important to understand why this approach was taken throughout the thesis. Much can be said about video games in their own context, but for many, especially those who are both older and are not gamers, that context is radically different. Rather than being defined by the familiar feelings of getting into the ‘zone’ with the flow states that games can provide, or the social capital gained from in-depth knowledge of the latest strategies, the context for video games is often one of trepidation, fear and half a century of negative press for those who have little experience with them. This should not be swept aside. It is important to understand the context that people bring to video games in order to understand what they might take away from them. In many ways, detailing that context, what the non-gamer might bring to video games, is what this thesis turned out to be. Rather than examining what is said about video games by those who are already greatly invested in them, the opposite direction of discourse was taken into account. It became clear that most of this discourse occurred in the news media, and centered around particular games that were seen as being transgressive in some way, were then sensationalized, picked up by moral entrepreneurs in an attempt to gain social status, and then subsequently forgotten about as new games took their place as the center of attention. In other words, moral panics. These panics came to define video games for many people, and subsequently defined those who played them in the form of the stereotypes that developed through them. These stereotypes and negative associations became the context of video games for those on the other side of the experience divide.

### *What is Real?*

Just as each example of panic is a point in the development of stereotypes, so too did the panics share a certain rhetorical thread in the concept of ‘realism.’ This was perhaps a little surprising, as especially when looking back at video games from the vantage point in the 2020s, none of these games seem particularly realistic. However, each game was for the time, on the frontiers of realism in the digital realm, and when it came to *Dungeons & Dragons*, it was understood by some to be actually real. This concern around realism might have also been fueled in-part by general fears about advancements in technology, and again, the growing divide between those who were experienced with it and those who were not; Henry Jenkins situated this divide generationally, with many of these fears and stereotypes being projected from older generations somewhat onto children, but especially onto teenagers.<sup>244</sup> Every passing year brought increasingly realistic graphics and this, because of the general atmosphere of media effects thinking, was also a major point in the public discourse around the game panics.

Understanding the stereotypes is a bit more straightforward as they have a clear path of development with each panic. Every panic, however, seems to have used the idea of realism for rhetorical effect, but what is actually meant by the term is rarely (or never) explicitly stated and more or less taken for granted by both the moral entrepreneurs pushing their agenda, and the audience’s ‘common-sense’ understanding of media effects. This is interesting to note, because while the stereotypes are very much in the background of the discourse and implicit, realism often takes center-stage and the concept is often referred to explicitly, but is never really defined. Thus, ‘realism’ might be the controls of *Death Race*, the content as in *D&D*, the visuals of *Mortal Kombat* or the simulation of *Doom*.

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<sup>244</sup> Jenkins, Henry. 2004. “Professor Jenkins Goes to Washington.” in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 196-197.

The rest of the conclusion will be focused on tying up these loose ends regarding how the panics treat this idea of realism in their different ways.

This following exploration of the potential dangers and capabilities of realism in video games is presented in light of the game panics. It is about understanding how the game panics constructed the concept of realism in their rhetoric about video games, and not about constructing a theory of video game realism in general. Especially in the 1990s and post-Columbine, video games became serious business in culture and politics, and, interestingly, Game Studies as a more formalized discipline also formed in this time, almost as if in response to all of the negative press concerning video games. As such, there are many different approaches to realism in the realm of game studies, and some of them are quite foundational - like the important concept of the spectrum between realistic and abstract representations of game elements. Historical game studies is also no stranger to ideas of realism, and Chapman's descriptive analysis of historical games even divides them into the two broad categories of conceptual historical games (usually strategy), and realist (usually first and third person action) historical games.<sup>245</sup> Similarly, producing realistic visuals is only becoming more accessible with technologies like photogrammetry and software like EPIC MetaHumans, which allow for both highly realistic graphics and can easily be iterated upon.<sup>246</sup> In any case, there is no lack of literature on realism in video games and this is perhaps especially true in terms of historical game studies. However, realism is rarely explored from the perspective of game panics and their rhetorical use of the idea of realism.

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<sup>245</sup> Chapman, Adam. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Video Games Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New York: Routledge, 60.

<sup>246</sup> Keefer et al. 2024. "Bunce Island: Through the Mirror - Epic Games' MetaHumans and the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade." *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents* 21.4, 463.

The study that comes closest to this perspective of understanding the cultural place of realism in games is Schott's *Violent Games: Rules, Realism, and Effect*. Schott takes a very in-depth and theoretically informed look at the problem of violence and its relationship to realism in video games. What differs about Schott's approach, however, is that Columbine is used as the point of departure for his study, the beginning, rather than the end. This makes a lot of sense if one is interested in a more formalized understanding of realism in relationship to game studies itself, indeed, as has been stated above, game studies in many ways was a response to the panics in general and Columbine in particular. Schott's beginning with Columbine, then, is apt. In many ways, what has been presented in this thesis might be viewed as the prequel of sorts to Schott's work, the historical context for the theoretical work, as they deal with very similar ideas. Thus, rather than presenting an in-depth theoretically informed framework about what realism might mean for games in the realm of game studies, the following section takes an in-depth look at what is meant in popular conceptions, particularly how it was used to make arguments about games amidst the game panics.

### ***Why is Realism Dangerous?***

The question of why video games were understood to be dangerous is deeply related to the problem of the stereotypes that developed alongside the panics. In simple terms, video games, due to the internalization of media effects thinking, were understood to cause children and teenagers to become the stereotypes that were so feared. Whether these children become the comparatively innocuous delinquent who spends his all his money at the arcade, the burgeoning occultist, or even the school shooter, it was their relationship with games that was to blame. And the more realistic the video game was, especially in terms of violence, the stronger the influence the game was seen to have had over the child or teenager's real-life behaviour. The games leaked

into real-life, and it was seemingly obvious that this occurred because the stereotypes were repeated, confirmed and visible. It is not so much that the games themselves are realistic, but that their realistic elements caused a short-circuit to occur between the game and the real world. The problematic teenagers who embodied the stereotypes only confirmed this. In other words, realistic games caused a collapse in the distinction between real-life and the games, which was confirmed by the increasingly visible gamer stereotypes that evolved alongside the increasingly realistic and innovative games. As the realism of games became more dangerous, so too did the gamer stereotypes.

Before examining the two examples of this conceptual breakdown from the panics, it is worth noting that the tenuous and problematic relationship that games might have with the real world is also noted in game studies. This seemingly fragile relationship between the actual world and the game world was present even in the early years of game studies. One of Caillois' big problems with Huizinga's work, for example, was that it left little room for gambling games.<sup>247</sup> These are games that, while taking place in a sort of constructed system, directly affect the real world. Huizinga's insistence in what would later be termed as the "magic circle" made it emphatically clear that games are set apart in both space and time, and while a certain amount of status might be conferred from the results of the game, games only properly function within this space set apart from normal life.<sup>248</sup> It might look like a game, but if the results affect real world conditions, it cannot be said to be played properly as a game, as the integrity of play and its non-productivity are no longer upheld. Games, for Huizinga, are not capable of real production, but are played for their own sake alone. When a game is played with some sort of extra-ludic gain in mind, it is no longer a game, but a distortion of the game. In any case, games have always had a

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<sup>247</sup> Caillois, Roger. 1958 (transl. 1961). *Man, Play and Games*, 5.

<sup>248</sup> Huizinga, Johan. 1949. *Homo Ludens*, 10.

strained and somewhat tenuous relationship with the real world and as games were seen to become more and more realistic, this line was made more and more blurry.

When it comes to the game panics, it seems as if the blurriness between the real world and the game world was both intentionally and unintentionally obscured even further. The three major elements of the panics played into this obscuring of this distinction. *First, stereotypes were already in place and represented the real-world dangers of the use of games, this was then confirmed with 'common-sense' media effects thinking, and amplified through the rhetoric of the moral entrepreneurs.* This triad functioned in a circular way with each element confirming the claims, fears or threats of the others. Realism, then, was immensely useful because it is such a slippery and vague concept, and yet one that can be easily demonstrated, especially with visually oriented media like games. By discussing the games through the lens of realism, it allowed the moral entrepreneurs to work backwards again, supposedly demonstrating how the games, which were increasingly realistic, were obviously contributing to real-world violence (media effects) in a visibly growing number of children and teenagers (stereotypes).

This is similar to the process that Cohen elaborates in his discussion of the development and confirmation of stereotypes, which is also circular. However, here, the specific subculture (gamers) continues between panics and the catalysts for these panics (games) develops alongside the stereotypes. As time goes on, the stereotypes get more extreme, and the threats and dangers associated with the games themselves also become more extreme. As moral entrepreneurs elaborated the dangerous relationship between games and the real world the consequences of these dangers also became increasingly extreme. The cycle continued back and forth with each panic and what began with delinquents wasting money at arcades in 1976 morphed into school-shooters using *Doom* for target practice in 1999. But the concept around which these elements

revolve is that of realism and its power to link the real world with the game and blur the lines between the two.

### *It's (Not) Just a Game!*

There is constant confusion regarding what is real and what is not. While the moral entrepreneurs make strong claims that it is the gamers that do not understand this distinction, it is often the moral entrepreneurs themselves that are confused. A good example of this is the magic of *Dungeon & Dragons*. Both the rules and the descriptions of the magic point to what is known as a 'Vancian' system of magic.<sup>249</sup> This is fantasy magic that is generally costly to learn in time, effort and money, and then is forgotten when it is used; this 'Vancian magic' is derived almost wholesale from the *Dying Earth* series of pulp fantasy novels and short stories by Jack Vance.<sup>250</sup> Thus, descriptions of characters needing to spend weeks in libraries learning expensive spells are common and these were easy to misquote and make it seem as if this was prescribed for the player themselves. Since the games used expensive, dense and difficult to decipher rule books, on a certain level, this does seem plausible if one is willing to believe in the satanic conspiracy. Similarly, a common criticism of TTRPGs, even into the early 2000s with Schneobelen's articles hosted on Chick.com, is the inclusion of supposedly real occult texts like the *Necronomicon*.<sup>251</sup> This fictional grimoire occurs as a motif spanning novels, short stories, television, movies and all sorts of games, both analog and digital, and thus created a web of interrelated media that all seemed to point to its reality.<sup>252</sup> However, it is the very clear invention of another pulp author,

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<sup>249</sup> Ulanopo. February 3, 2012. "A Brief History of Vancian Magic." *The Evil GM: A Dungeons & Dragons Blog*. <https://theevilgm.wordpress.com/2012/02/03/a-brief-history-of-vancian-magic/>.

<sup>250</sup> Gygax, Gary. 1976. "The *Dungeons & Dragons* Magic System." *The Strategic Review* 2.2, 3.

<sup>251</sup> Schneobelen, William. 2001. "Should a Christian Play Dungeons and Dragons?" *Chick Publications*. <https://www.chick.com/Information/article?id=Should-A-Christian-Play-Dungeons-and-Dragons>.

<sup>252</sup> Clore, Dan. 2001. "The Lurker on the Threshold of Interpretation: Hoax *Necronomicons* and Paratextual Noise." *Lovecraft Studies* 42/43.

H.P. Lovecraft, who is noted as always affirming that the book is fictional to anyone who asked.<sup>253</sup> To be fair to critics here, there were a surprising number of real-life hoaxes (although more tongue-in-cheek than anything serious) that claimed to be the actual text of the dreaded tome and were published with a smattering of translated ancient magical texts mixed with references to several other Cthulhu mythos elements and motifs.<sup>254</sup>

What is perhaps the most damning feature of these examples is that Gygax himself includes references to both the works of Vance and Lovecraft in the core rules of the game. These references are not immediately evident, being placed somewhat haphazardly between random encounter tables and equipment charts in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* under the heading of 'Appendix N.' However, any expert on the rules should reasonably have been aware of this section, especially since it is titled "Inspirational and Educational Reading."<sup>255</sup> Arguably, 'Appendix N' could also have been a veritable goldmine for the moral entrepreneurs with the prominent recommendations of violent and gory sword-and-sorcery and horror pulp fiction that directly informed the game. This, of course, would likely have been counter-intuitive for the rhetorical construction of *D&D* as being made from real world magic and simply superimposed over a game system designed to obfuscate its malicious origins and entice young minds. In this model of realism, the game rules are simply the delivery mechanism for real world content. It is the content, the so-called real occult spells and rituals, that are the problem and the rules are just

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<sup>253</sup> Many of his letters explicitly state that it is a work of fiction and points to other similar books and artifacts of other writers in his circle. See "Quotes Regarding the *Necronomicon* from Lovecraft's Letters." Website. [hplovecraft.com](https://www.hplovecraft.com/creation/necron/letters.aspx). <https://www.hplovecraft.com/creation/necron/letters.aspx>.

<sup>254</sup> Gonce, John W. III and Daniel Harms. 2003. *The Necronomicon Files: The Truth Behind the Legend*. Boston: Weiser Books, 214.

<sup>255</sup> Gygax, Gary. 1979. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*. TSR, 224; "Appendix N" and its contents became well known in TTRPG culture, so much so that the newest edition (5e) includes its own updated "Appendix N" in the form of "Appendix E." See Mearls, Mike and Jeremy Crawford et al. 2014. *Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook*. Fifth Edition. Wizards of the Coast, 312.

there to make the whole thing seem trivial to the player. This trivializing of the content by means of calling it ‘just a game’ is precisely why it is seen to be dangerous.

This is more or less the same argument that is present in Grossman’s ‘murder simulator,’ but with a different emphasis. The satanic conspiracy evidently slid back into the shadows by the mid-1990s, so much so that even the overt demonic and occult imagery of *Doom* did not cause anything near the amount of backlash that references to necromancy and demons did just a few years before. Instead, the focus was on the mechanics of the games themselves. It was now the era of the FPS, and the dangerous realism of the games did not come from their depictions of pentagrams and Cacodemons, but the actual process of shooting them. It is important to note this distinction as it does seem to point to a somewhat more sophisticated understanding of games. Rather than simply understanding the rules as being a trivializing element amongst dangerous representations, the rules were understood as being dangerous in and of themselves. Harris, after all, did not play regular *Doom*, but a modified version allegedly in order to bring the game closer to real-life. This is a substantial shift in thinking about what games are and how they function and actually seems to be a foreshadowing of proceduralist thought in game studies that would become a dominant approach in the mid-2000s to early 2010s. Where proceduralism emphasizes a game’s capacity to provoke the player to think about the implications of the rules for themselves,<sup>256</sup> the internalized ‘media effects’ thinking and gamer stereotypes allowed the moral entrepreneurs to characterize the rules of the game much differently. Rather than inviting one to think about the game as a whole, it was again seen as something more like brainwashing, but with utterly horrific real-world implications. Thompson’s ‘Manchurian Candidate’ comment is the epitome of this way of understanding how realism through the rules of the game affects its

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<sup>256</sup> Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 29.

players. The content itself takes a back seat, but is not necessarily trivial. The trivializing element is not simply the rules, but the idea of games themselves as being trivial, mere child's play, as it were. In the moral entrepreneurs' formulation, it is actually a category error to call something like *Doom* a game, and thus, it is a murder simulator (a term which just so happens to also carry a great deal of rhetorical weight).

This gets at the question of why games were, and in some cases still are, seen to be so dangerous. It is not so much that realism in itself is necessarily dangerous, after all, things like textbooks, documentaries and other didactic media are often intuitively understood as being valuable and were actively used by the moral entrepreneurs to 'show how it really is.' Rather, the mixing of games, which had long been understood to be predominantly for children, and negative forms of realism like violence and magic led to the notion that by making these things into games it would remove their 'weight' and make them seem trivial to vulnerable children and teenagers. This is precisely what was experienced by the development team for *Bunce Island* when approaching older professors and non-gamers. While the idea of a tool, something to facilitate learning through realistic representations and digital reproductions was met with universal approval, making it into a game was much too dangerous. One does not make games of these histories. This is a valid criticism, and one that is perfectly reasonable to make. It is just as important to note, however, that this way of thinking was formed amid the game panics and was undoubtedly manipulated by distortions like stereotypes, media effects thinking and, most importantly, the moral entrepreneurs that made their careers off the fears they perpetuated.

This is not necessarily the case anymore, the very fact that this thesis can exist is testament to that, but it is important to understand that games actually are perhaps uniquely capable of trivializing their game elements. Games, even the most high-tech simulators, are

necessary simplifications and abstractions. In Chess, for instance, a medieval knight, as is well known, is only capable of moving in a hook pattern and bishops cannot see what is straight in front of them. This is an essential part of games, and one that can be very powerful. An important game that demonstrates this power is Brenda Romero's (Braithwaite) *Train* which begins as a game about managing passengers on a train, but when someone wins and reaches the end, it is revealed that the final destination is a Nazi concentration camp.<sup>257</sup> This can be viewed and understood from a few angles. On the one hand, it is, and perhaps rightfully so, a famous and award-winning game and a masterclass in leveraging the power of games for emotional resonance. On the other hand, it is highly manipulative and has the potential to be incredibly traumatizing for the uninformed player. A similar instance occurred with *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* and a DLC called *Freedom Cry* that has the player take on the role of a former enslaved man to rescue other enslaved people. For many, the opportunity to play as someone who looked like themselves in a game series that had only white protagonists up to that point was incredibly meaningful.<sup>258</sup> However, for others, making a game out of it was just as bad. From Wikipedia's description of the gameplay stating that "each freed slave serves as a resource for the player to accumulate in order to unlock upgrades," it is clear that the abstraction of former enslaved people into further resources can certainly be understood as problematic. In other words, it is the context in which the game is played, based on what the player brings to the game, that informs how the game is received and why. This is true for many elements of games, like

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<sup>257</sup> Monnens, David. 2010. "Tactility and Ambiguity: The Mechanics and Message Behind *Train*." *Desert Hat: Critical Game Theory and Antiwar Gaming*. <https://deserthat.wordpress.com/2010/03/08/tactility-and-ambiguity-the-mechanics-and-message-behind-train/>.

<sup>258</sup> Hammar, Emil Lundedal. 2017. "Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*." *Rethinking History* 21.3, 387-88.

how fun a game might be based on a player's past experiences, tastes and skills, as much as it is for the overall interpretation of cultural value of the game, or games, as a whole.

This is important in light of the Columbine panic through which the fears and dangers of video games seemingly became real in the most horrific way possible. While almost all of the media and press that covered the angle of 'video games made them do it' in an exceedingly misleading manner full of rumours, half-truths and moral entrepreneurship and false expertise, there is still a grain of truth to it. Harris especially, while not doing it in the way that the news media reported, did use *Doom* to think about and convince himself of his plan.

### ***Games are Powerful***

If one thing is clear from this study into the history of game panics, it is that games are understood to be immensely powerful. And immensely dangerous. Much of this danger comes from their relationship with the real world and how they are understood to model dangerous things like violence and magic which go beyond merely representing real objects like in film and television. In the end, it is clear that while there are occasionally complex and somewhat sophisticated ideas in these panics, they are inundated with false and manipulative rhetorics that are intended primarily to serve those that make the claims, the moral entrepreneurs. Leveraging the climate of internalized media effects thinking and the powerful images of stereotypes to invoke fear, these people made games dangerous artifacts and made monsters out of those who play them. Some of their ideas might actually be useful, but it tends to be so contaminated that it takes a lot to disentangle the useful ideas from the harmful and just plain wrong ones.

With this in mind, it makes sense that there would be some backlash and trepidation from those who are only familiar with video games through this long history of overwhelmingly negative associations in public discourse and news media. While the claims of moral

entrepreneurs, media effects thinking and the stereotypes can be explored and refuted, their influence is not as easy to break. The current study went to great lengths to explore the history of why video games are often understood to be both things that are trivial, and yet also things of fear and power. It is hopefully clear that these ideas, negative associations and stereotypes run deep. In many ways, one cannot blame those who have internalized these fears and misunderstandings, but those who formed them, the moral entrepreneurs, certainly hold much of the blame in this regard.

To end, it is useful to reflect on the initial question: are video games capable of teaching history, and if so, how? This question, unfortunately, did not get answered in full, although the history present herein stands as a good base to approach that question in the future. However, it should be pointed out that this question was spurred on not only by video games, but also by an attempt to develop one. This work in itself might be a small proof that video games are indeed capable of at least prompting one to consider history and the context of that history, if not directly teaching that history itself. This is where context is important. Games can be played in vastly different ways, in the same way that literature can be read in vastly different ways. For the most part, games are played for leisure, recreation and entertainment, but in the right context, much can be gained from them. In some sense, the naysayers are correct here as well. If Harris and Klebold did not play the games as a ‘murder-simulator,’ they did at least use the games to think about and inspire their massacre. Just as they were inspired by the philosophy of Nietzsche. It is difficult to say if one can learn ‘history’ from video games, a lot of it likely comes down to one’s own conception of what history is (which, of course, can vary greatly among historians and non-historians). But one can play video games with a context of learning and take away useful elements in that context. And when one is thinking in that way about history and games, the

limitations and potential of both become clearer. One of the potentials of video games, for example, is that they can provide realistic models of historical worlds both in their visual and procedural representations. This might also be understood as dangerous, as any representation will have limitations and errors, and one of those errors could easily be the trivialization of real and sensitive histories. But, in the context of historical inquiry, these limitations are only the beginning of new lines of study into potentially completely new areas of study (just as this somewhat roundabout study has been).

### *Areas of Further Research*

While this work covered a comparatively short time-frame, from 1976-1999, the timespan is particularly dense with other examples of panics and the current work is almost exclusively centered on the culture of North America. Many elements simply could not fit in a work of this length, but there are a few that are worth mentioning. First, the current work assumes that the stereotypes at play in the panics are predominantly directed at male gamers. For the most part, this is true - it is the male teenagers that often seem to present the highest threat and therefore they are most targeted. During this time, they were also the most targeted by game producers and developers (this is mostly still true for AAA development,<sup>259</sup> at least). However, because the vast majority of the discourse in this time centered these teenage males, stereotypes about female gamers are not quite as accessible and could certainly be explored in a similar way. A starting point might be the female protagonist of the Chick Tracts, although that perhaps plays more with the idea of witches than gamer stereotypes *per se*.

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<sup>259</sup> 'AAA' or 'Triple-A' games are games that are developed by large companies, with big budgets and a wide market appeal. Examples include the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Red Dead Redemption* series and *Grand Theft Auto* series.

Along these lines, the question of gender and sexuality is mostly skipped over in preference for a focus on the violent loner stereotypes. A similar concern for sexuality in video games is present in almost all of the panics, however, and is likely developed in parallel with the violent loner stereotype. For a study on these aspects of the gamer stereotype, a different starting point is likely in order. *Custer's Revenge* might replace *Death Race* as the first instance of panic concerning sexual content in games. Similarly, the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* "Hot Coffee" mod might also be a better end-point. The remaining panics all feature some sort of concern around sexuality, but it did not seem as strong as the concern around violence and realism, although this could also be the result of this thesis' focus more than the reflection of the actual history. It can also be noted that Henry Jenkins gained his reputation as a critic of the gamer stereotypes as a result of his edited volume with Justine Cassel called *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. In any case, it is important to note that these themes of gender and sexuality are very much present throughout the panics, stereotypes and rhetorics of the moral entrepreneurs alongside the more visible themes of violence.

Another opportunity which unfortunately did not get developed here is the potential for contrasting the North American game culture with that of other areas of the world. Of particular interest might be the game culture of Germany, which is known in North American video gaming circles for the German government's censorship of violent images, especially around WWII games. However, from a cultural perspective, the board game culture of Germany that developed in the late 20th century and into the 21st could provide a fascinating contrast to the culture of North America. Due to the cultural trepidation around representing war in post-war Germany, the "Eurogame" was developed. This is a type of board game that tends to feature limited direct conflict between players and most often simulates management systems rather than

violent conflict. Some examples of this type of game include *Settlers of Catan* (1995), *Agricola* (2007) and *Carcassonne* (2000), and continue to increase in popularity with newer releases like *Azul* (2017) and *Wingspan* (2019) and their many variations. From a game studies perspective, it might be useful to contrast the limitations of game design in eurogames and the positive, family friendly culture associated with them, and the much more negative associations in the North American game culture. A good starting point for this would be the cultural analysis that Stewart Woods presents in *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games* (2012).

Aside from more detailed histories of each of the panics, a further historical inquiry into the relationship between the major moral entrepreneurs could be explored further. Lieberman, Grossman and Thompson seemed to have much more direct contact with each other than might be evident in the relatively compact histories presented here. These are also complex histories that comprise of media appearances, books, articles and lawsuits. The history of all of the legal battles and proposed laws gets very complicated, very quickly as many of these occurred simultaneously or in rapid succession. A more in-depth legal history, along with the three men's relationship with each other might prove to be valuable in understanding the extent to which the panics were controlled.

## *Postscript*

### *Moral Entrepreneurs and The Discerning Christian*

Part of the reason the thesis topic was so compelling for me is that I grew in the shadow of these panics. I grew up in a Christian home and even attended a Christian elementary school that my mom also taught at. Being interested in books, video games, board games and TTRPGs more than sports or music definitely made me an outlier at school and church. Thankfully, I was never banned from books like Harry Potter (though some of my friends were) and I was allowed to play most video games. I eventually started playing TTRPGs around seventh grade with my best friend. His dad had been playing them since the '80s and also happened to send his kids to my private Christian school. It was never a problem for my parents, for which I am grateful. I had a handful of friends that were not allowed to read (non-Christian) fantasy books or play TTRPGs. So, even from a pretty young age, though I was not personally affected by the panics, which had taken place about 10-25 years before, I was still very much aware of them and their history.

This affected, and still does affect, my approach to Christian media. I caught on pretty quickly that there were a lot of 'alternative,' and explicitly Christian, forms of media - books, movies, music that were 'safe' because they had the Christian label. As a teacher, my mom had a lot of those types of books. These were, in my estimation, written for 'Discerning Christian' parents as a way to trick their kids and teens into not reading real books. Or at least that was my interpretation at the time (and *mostly* still is). I missed out on some good things because of this - I still have a hard time stomaching *The Chronicles of Narnia* even though I have great respect for C.S. Lewis, for example. What this experience did teach me, however, was how to be actually

discerning about the type of media I consume, especially if it comes from something with a ‘Christian’ label.

Practically speaking, I am not really concerned about the content of the panics. New things and technology outside of one’s realm of experience will always be scary to some extent (this is true outside Christian circles as well). Most people I’ve had experience with are open to discussion about video games, TTRPGs or other topics. It doesn’t take much to convince someone that these things are not so dangerous when they can talk to a real person about them. I am more concerned about the “Us versus Them” culture that seems to be so dominant in certain strains of modern Evangelicalism. The idea that anything, and anybody, that is not explicitly Christian must be excluded. This can very easily lead to the rejection of anything outside the established cultural bounds, while also illegitimately elevating people who are part of, or take advantage of, the in-group. This seems to be a big reason why moral entrepreneurs are so common in Evangelical circles. “It’s safe as long as it’s Christian” becomes “It’s safe as long as Pulling/Thompson/Grossman says it’s safe.” The group becomes closed and reflects not the image of Christ, but the image of whoever is deemed the expert.

I am not wholly distrusting of Christian media, but I am certainly aware when something is made ‘for Christians.’ It’s easy to be a ‘Discerning Christian’ and never have to spend a minute actually thinking about if something is valuable or not. Focus on the Family has you covered; they can even tell you exactly how many swear-words are in a movie. I don’t mean to single out Focus on the Family, their audio show *Adventures in Odyssey* is lots of fun, and there are many much more problematic Christian organizations that are more than happy to provide the ‘Discerning Christian’ with clear lines for what and who is or is not Christian. Moral entrepreneurs are the embodiment (‘incarnation’ if I want to be provocative) of this approach to

the world. They are willing to instrumentalize their status as members of a Christian (or any) community and take advantage of the fears of that community, while also (literally or metaphorically) demonizing those who are not or do not perfectly conform. This only acts to drive those who are ‘out’ further from those who are ‘in.’ Approaching the world with fear and judgement is the opposite of how I believe a Christian should act. Unfortunately, moral entrepreneurs along with their panics and stereotypes, work to create a more fearful and judgemental community – all the while casting themselves as the saviour their own dark world needs.

There is much more that can, and probably should, be said on this, but this is not the place. Thankfully, even though many, especially Evangelical, Christian communities are still very susceptible to panics and moral entrepreneurs, there is also an increasing awareness of this from within the communities themselves and attempts are being made to reckon with both past and present panics. A good example of this is the *Christianity Today* podcast “The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.”<sup>260</sup> This is an ongoing podcast that began in January 2025 that examines the history of the Satanic Panic in depth and, so far, is very well-done. Hopefully in the future, there can be more high-quality media like this that tackles serious issues without simply hiding behind the ‘Christian’ label.

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<sup>260</sup> Cosper, Mike. 2025. “The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” *Christianity Today Podcasts*. Podcast. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/devil-and-the-deep-blue-sea/>.

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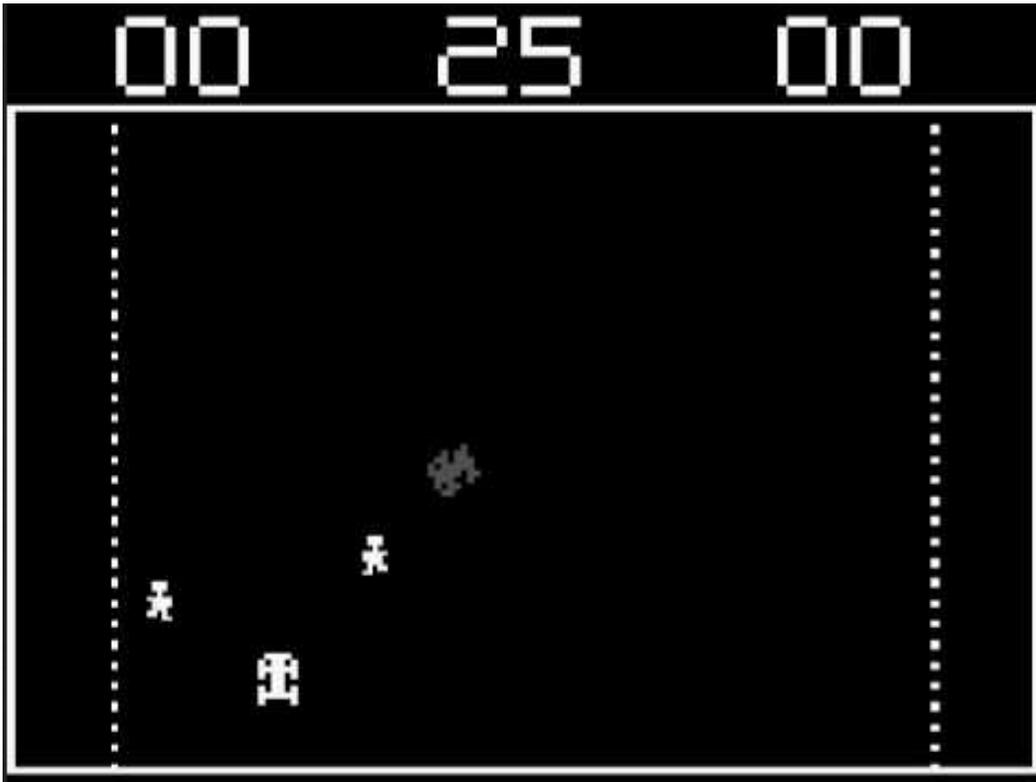
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APPENDIX: FIGURES



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of *Death Race* showing the car and gremlin sprites. (Screenshot captured from arcade cabinet ROM for *Gaming History Database*: <https://www.arcade-history.com/?n=death-race&page=detail&id=3386>.)



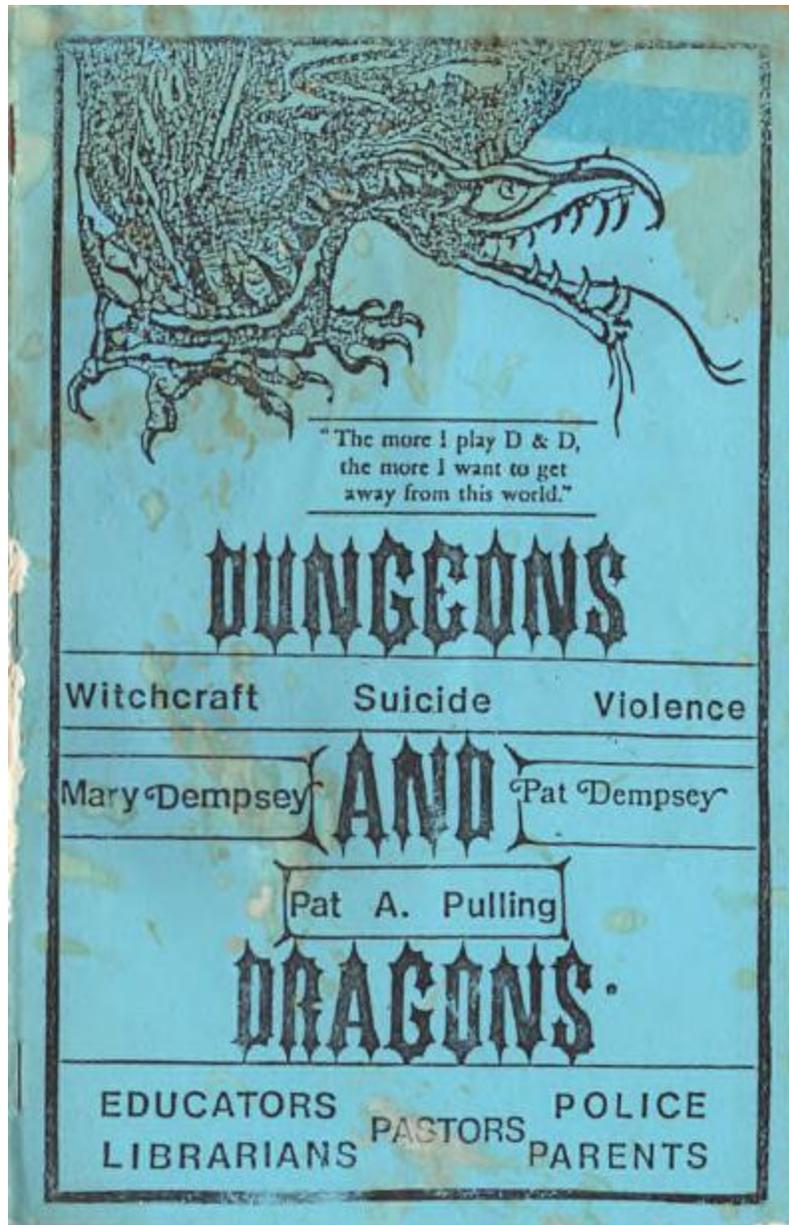
**Figure 2:** Photograph of a *Death Race* arcade cabinet with steering wheels, forward and reverse gear shift and gas pedals. (Photograph by Piotr Konieczny, Musée Mécanique 221, August 2009, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mus%C3%A9e\\_M%C3%A9c](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mus%C3%A9e_M%C3%A9c).)



**Figure 3:** *Dark Dungeons* Chick Tract cover. (Jack Chick. 1984. *Dark Dungeons*. <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=0046>.)



**Figure 4:** *Dark Dungeons* Chick Tract page 4, Debbie's Dungeon Master tells her she is now capable of learning real spells after her character advances to level 8. (Jack Chick. 1984. *Dark Dungeons*. <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=0046>.)



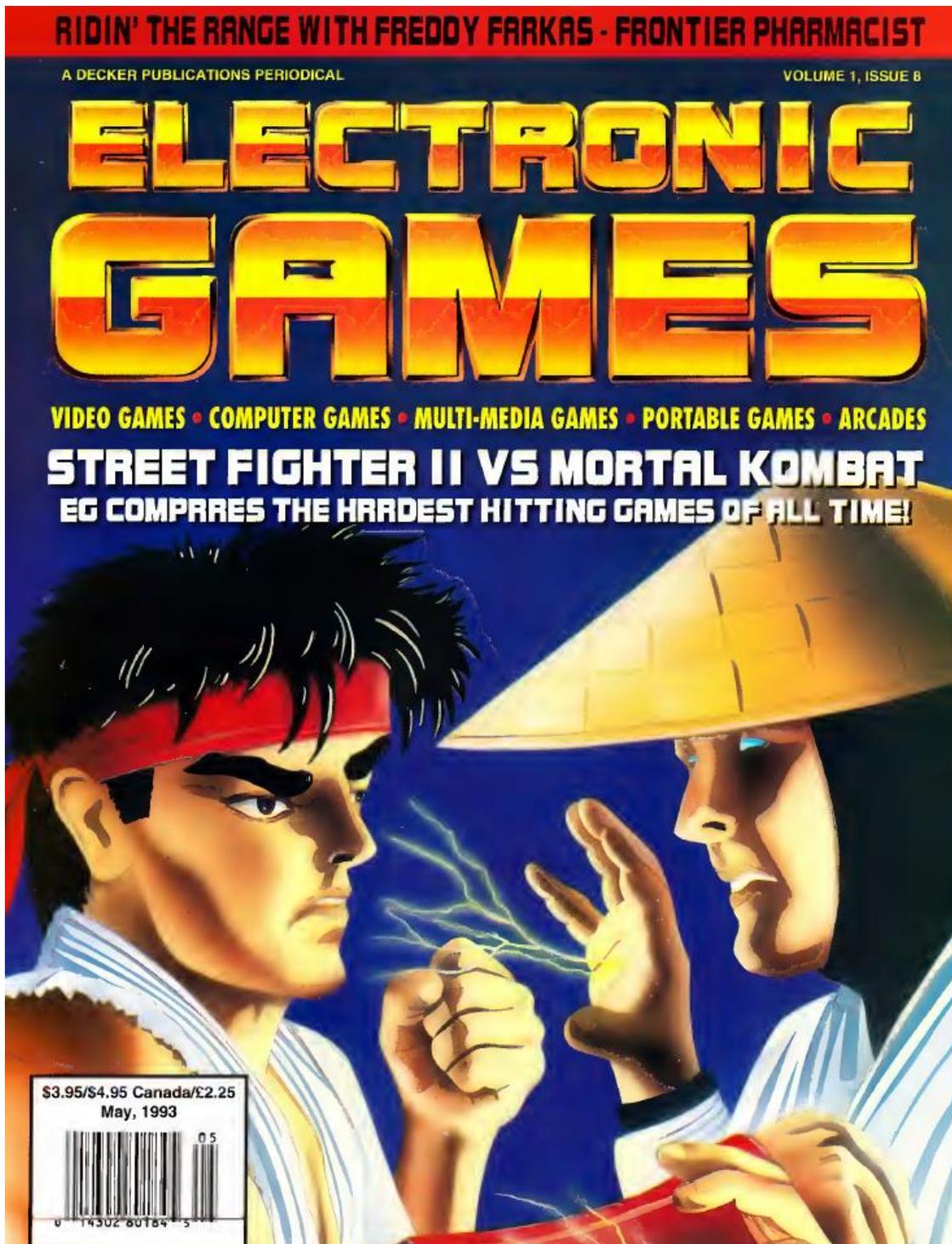
**Figure 5:** Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons pamphlet cover. (Digitized by W.J. Walton. *Dungeons and Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide, Violence* cover. <http://www.theescapist.com/BADDbook.htm>.)



**Figure 6:** Screenshot from *Mortal Kombat* displaying digitized character sprites. (Captured by MurphyBlack (username), Mortal\_Kombat.png, June 9, 2007, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mortal\\_Kombat.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mortal_Kombat.png).)



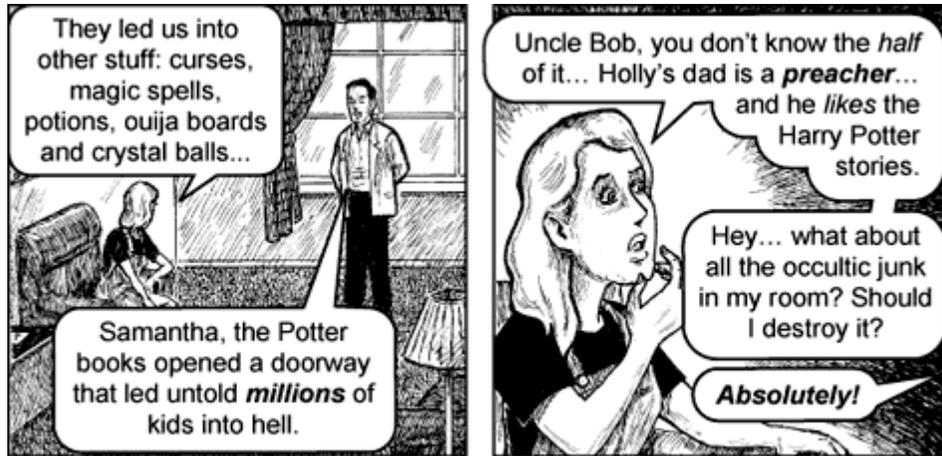
**Figure 7:** Screenshot from *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior*. (Original author unknown, Street Fighter II (arcade) screenshot.png, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Street\\_Fighter\\_II\\_\(arcade\)\\_screenshot.png#filehistory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Street_Fighter_II_(arcade)_screenshot.png#filehistory).)



**Figure 8:** Front cover of the May 1993 issue *Electronic Games*. *Street Fighter II* character Ryu opposing *Mortal Kombat* character Raiden. (Decker Publications, *Electronic Games* 8.1, May 1993, <https://archive.org/details/Electronic-Games-1993-05/mode/1up>).



**Figure 9:** Poster for the arcade cabinet version of *Mortal Kombat* demonstrating both Midway's advertising to children and the phrase "So real it hurts!" (Midway, 1992. *Mortal Kombat Poster*. [https://www.mediamatic.net/en/page/15160/mortal-kombat-midway-1992.](https://www.mediamatic.net/en/page/15160/mortal-kombat-midway-1992))



\*See *Good Ole Rotten Apples* by Judy Frankamp, chapters 9-10 available from Chick Publications.

**Figure 10:** *The Nervous Witch* Chick Tract page 20. After Uncle Bob discovers Samantha and her friend Holly's attempt to cast a spell, he explains the dangers of the *Harry Potter* books. (Jack Chick. 2001. *The Nervous Witch*. <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=5012>.)