

AJ Ryan

## Why Video Games will not cause Children to Perform "Fatalities"

Fatalities is a term used in Acclaim's 1992 arcade fighting game, *Mortal Kombat* to describe violent ways players could kill their opponents by inputting special button combinations. For example, players could rip out their opponent's head off with the spine still attached. I do not believe children will begin performing Fatalities on each other or that video games will cause children to be violent. Now, Fatalities were instrumental in the world of video games and would change the United States' view on video games. To understand video game violence you first must understand the impact of Fatalities.

On December 9th, 1993, Congress held a hearing against Sega pertaining to violent video games ("C-Span"). Sega had released a port of *Mortal Kombat* to their home console, the Sega Genesis, in September 1993. The Genesis version of *Mortal Kombat* carried Sega's rating of MA-13 and featured all the violence of the arcade game. It's worth noting Nintendo's version of *Mortal Kombat*, released at the same time for their Super Nintendo, had no rating and heavily censored the violence in the game. Senator Joseph Lieberman considered the Genesis version of *Mortal Kombat* to be too violent and wanted the game to be taken out of retail stores. He also brought up another game when discussing video game violence.

Enter *Night Trap*. This game was released originally in September 1992 for the Sega CD and featured Full Motion Video. In this game, you are tasked from protecting a group of girls in a house from being attacked by vampires, so you have to go to various rooms throughout the game to kill the vampires before they capture the girls. This game

was brought up in the hearing because in one scene featuring one of the girls in a restroom, if the player does not rescue her in time, multiple vampires grab the girl and attach a blood-sucking device to her neck before taking her off-screen. Keep in mind this scene was video footage so it was intense, especially back when it released as there was nothing else like it. Bill White, Vice President of Sega of America, defended *Night Trap* saying it was rated MA-17 and picking out the most violent scene from the game was equivalent to picking out the most violent scene in a movie like *Gone with the Wind*. White also stated in the hearing that research linking children to video game violence was minimal and inconclusive. He agreed that Sega's rating system should be enforced at retailers to keep children buying MA games, like *Night Trap*.

Senior Vice President of Nintendo of America, Howard Lincoln, stated games like *Night Trap* would never come to Nintendo systems. Lincoln then provided evidence that *Night Trap* was not rated when it was released back in 1992 and that children could have easily purchased the game with no rating. Lincoln stated Nintendo is interested in adopting a rating system for their games and that a universal rating system for all consoles may be the best solution.

Also at the hearing was Senator Byron Dorgan and University of Miami Professor Eugene Provenzo, both falsely stated the goal of *Night Trap* was for the player to kill the girls. Provenzo also brings up a survey of unknown credibility he conducted, where he interviewed children on bad guys in video games, how the top answer was ninjas, and how ninjas being bad guys are racist towards the Asian population. I'm not entirely clear why Provenzo brought this up. Ninjas were a popular enemy back in the day but two

popular games I can think of from that time, *Revenge of Shinobi* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*; both feature the player as a good ninja fighting bad ninjas and were both developed in Japan. Provenzo never interviewed children on who the good guys in video games are, so without knowing that or how he conducted his interview, I personally do not feel his interview any credibility or place at the hearing.

Throughout this hearing, it was clear that banning certain video games was not the intention. Lieberman even stated he hated censorship but these games should not be sold to children. I do agree with Lincoln that it was unacceptable for *Night Trap* to initially be released without a rating. As Lincoln brought up, any child could purchase the game without knowing the content within the game. Even if Sega's rating system did not exist (which was Bill's defense when presented with *Night Trap*'s original box) a simple warning should have been present on the box. With the game being rated MA-17, I do not think there was any compelling argument as to why the game, meant for adults, cannot be sold. Most of the people wanting to ban *Night Trap* at the hearing thought you were playing on evil side and did not understand that your role in the game was to save the girls.

Due to pressure, however, Sega pulled *Night Trap* from store shelves to make changes to the game after the congressional hearing ("Burgess"). Sega was also was pressured to alter *Mortal Kombat* but because that game is owned by Acclaim, Sega could not alter the game. On March 4th, 1994, another congressional hearing was held on getting legislation pertaining to violent video games ("C-Span"). This hearing, unlike the last hearing, was productive and decisions made here were landmark for video games. First an agreement was made that there's no research that video games may

cause people to be violent but it is worth researching. The next decision was that a universal rating system needs to be implemented in the United States for all video games. And the final decision was that retailers need to be clear about game ratings (at the last hearing a Toys R Us paper advertisement covered up *Mortal Kombat's* rating) and mature games should not be sold to minors. The rating system would eventually become the Entertainment Software Rating Board more commonly known as the ESRB.

I completely agree with all the decisions made at the March 1994 hearing. A universal rating system with not only age-ratings but also descriptors on what content the game contains is great at keeping children from accessing explicit content. And pressuring retailers to not sell explicit games to minors is a good move. It was also nice to see everyone at the hearing admit that there's no linkage between video game violence and actual violence. Censoring video games, with a proper rating system in place, seemed to no longer concern anyone. Now that games were properly rated, video games could be made for specific age groups. The negativity towards violent video games seemed to subside, until 1999.

On April 1999, two students at Columbine went into their school and killed staff and students. This event is known as the Columbine Massacre. Among other reasons, the media speculated the shooters were influenced by a first-person shooter game called *DOOM*, released originally in 1993. Both shooters were involved in the modding community of the game. Modding a game means you take an existing game and you change various aspects of the game such as the graphics or levels to make the game different.

The media's focus on the link between *DOOM* and the shooters once again brought up the topic of video game violence. The same month as the shootings, CNN published an article interviewing members of the *DOOM* community ("Miami"). Members stated *DOOM* did not make them feel violent; one member said he has no desire to even touch a gun or build a bomb. Psychologist Margaret Crosbie-Burnett, from University of Miami, stated video games "give (players) an easy way... to hit back." She mentions that the violence is contained within the game. The article speculates the absence of parents in the shooter's lives were a key factor in their motivation.

Over five years after the shooting, in April 2004, Slate Magazine published an article concluding the shooters' motivation ("Cullen"). Psychologists concluded that one of the shooters was a psychopath and the other was manic depressive. They say stop asking what drove the shooters, the shooters simply had mental conditions. Blame cannot be placed on any form entertainment according to them. Its worth noting *DOOM* was not even mentioned in the article.

I bring this up because I still hear from people that *DOOM* is partially to blame for the Columbine Massacre. As seen in the Slate article, this simply isn't true. When people talk about video games causing violence, for some reason, Columbine seems to be one of their examples. After the initial shock of the event I could not find any experts linking *DOOM* to Columbine. Since *DOOM*, many violent first-person shooters have been released with greater detail and some can even be played in virtual reality. And no killings have been successfully linked to the killer playing video games despite them having better immersion. Even with that, somebody's still going to argue that video games turn children into murderers.

And so an interesting debate happened in 2006 between lawyer Jack Thomson, journalist Adam Sessler, and CEO of Game Daily Mark Friedler ("G4TV"). Their debate was on an unreleased game *Bully*, made by Rockstar Games who also made multiple *Grand Theft Auto* games. Thomson wanted *Bully* to be banned for depicting violent behavior in a school environment, and said the player can abuse teachers. It's worth noting Thomson has taken Rockstar Games to court in the past over the *Grand Theft Auto* games trying to link them to real world violence, but Thomson has never won a case due to lack of evidence. Sessler, game journalist for G4TV, said that Rockstar Games stated there will be no teacher abuse in the game and in addition, the game has a T rating. Thomson retaliated saying the game is too violent and should be banned because video games cause violence, but much like his *Grand Theft Auto* cases, could not produce any research to back up any of his claims. Sessler called him out on his lack of research and the debate was ended as things were heated.

Mark Friedler did not debate with the other men but did mention at the end of the day it's the parent's job to police what their children play. I completely agree with Friedler. If parents followed the ESRB rating system and took an active role in monitoring the games their children bought, there would be no debate on children playing violent games. And for the record, Jack Thomson has since been disbarred from being a lawyer after constantly wasting time trying to ban video games without any evidence. I bring this up because while Thomson has a bad track record debating video game violence, I thought he brought good discussion in this particular debate. Every game except *Bully* I have mentioned now carries an M rating, meaning the games are

intended for people age 17 or older. The question is then, how well do retailers enforce the sale of M rated games to minors?

The Federal Trade Commission conducted a study in 2013 on compliance among sellers of various forms of media ("FTC"). The FTC had children age 13-16 purchase M-rated video games from retailers. Only 13% were able to successfully purchase M-rated games. That's a lower percentage than any other form of media, for example, 30% could purchase R-rated movies. Almost half of the children could purchase explicit CDs.

Video games are better policed than any other form of media as seen by this study. Video games are not reaching many children at retailers so unless an adult buys them an M-rated game, there's a good chance children will not be exposed to explicit content until they are of age. There's a better chance they will first be exposed to explicit movies or music. Although, for the children that do have access to violent video games, do they have any effect on their behavior?

What studies have been done on child exposure to violent video games? One study titled *this is your brain on violent video games* from 2011 sought to see how violent games affected the brain ("Engelhardt"). The conclusion reached was that a minor increase in aggression was found in the brain when exposed to violent video games. This is the only research I could find that stated violent video games have an effect on the brain. The level of aggression is nowhere near the amount that would make a child have violent behavior. I can see a child being more moody during or right after playing a violent video game but certainly not acting out in a violent manner.

Another study conducted in 2013 examined violent video games' affect on vulnerable children, such as depressed children or children with ADD ("Ferguson"). Researchers wanted to know whether or not violent games caused negative behavior in children. Researchers hypothesized that children with elevated mental symptoms would be affected by video game violence. The results did not support this hypothesis and the researchers concluded that no academic research has successfully linked violent video games to violence among children. If vulnerable children were not fazed by video game violence, we can assume that the normal population would also not exhibit any violent behavior after playing a violent video game.

So what do we make of this research? Neither proves that video games will cause children to be violent. The link between video games and violence has yet to be backed by research. Increase in aggression is the only current link to violent video games and violent behavior. Conversely, research is starting to come out saying that video games promote creativity in children.

In 2012, research was conducted using *Minecraft*, a PC game where players can interact with a world made of blocks, and was used in a classroom for an assignment ("Schifter"). Mr. Reeves' students film scenarios dealing with conflict, either using a camcorder or within the game *Minecraft*. Four out of twenty students (or one group) used the camcorder while the other students used the game *Minecraft*, all graded on the same rubric. Only one student has played *Minecraft* prior to this assignment.

Results were pleasing. The children loved using *Minecraft* to make their movie and Mr. Reeves loved their motivation for the project. The camcorder group was not as motivated. One student was out sick with strep throat but still helped out making their



movie in *Minecraft* because he was so into the project. Mr. Reeves was surprised at how much the students could do within the game *Minecraft*. Mr. Reeves said he'd love to use *Minecraft* for future assignments and overall he was pleased with the results. Obviously this is an extremely small sample size and we do not know the students so this does not have a definitive conclusion.

I definitely agree games like *Minecraft* can be used to promote children's creativity. Games are starting to double as tools for learning. Unlike games of the past that made the fact you were learning apparent, such as *Mario is Missing* which constantly quizzed the player on historical trivia, games now can teach in immersive ways. Using *Minecraft* as an environment to create a film in is one of many examples of implementing that game into the classroom. You could also, for example, have players build a replica of a famous city within the game.

For many years, proving video games make children violent always seems to be on someone's agenda. And since 1993 when controversy began in the United States, no research seems to have come out and say yes, video games make children violent. It can be said violent video games make children more aggressive, but currently there's no proof that violent video games do anything more than that. Like the Columbine shooters, people that carry out a violent massacre do it because they're mentally ill. No piece of media out there will turn a normal person into a serial killer.

I discussed the ESRB, the video game rating system because I believe it is a powerful tool for anyone. While no research says video games will influence children to be violent, they can become more aggressive for a period of time. For the same reasons children are not allowed to watch R-Rated films such as exposing them to

frightening scenes, children should not play M-Rated games without their parent's consent. Nothing in a video game will turn your child violent but your child may very well have nightmares for a week if they see something especially disturbing.

Parenting is the key. Like Mark Friedler and CNN stated, parental involvement is key in all of this. If adults paid attention to game ratings like movie ratings, blame wouldn't be placed on games because children would not be exposed to explicit content. Some people consider games to only be for children and cannot wrap their brain around the fact that games can also be intended for adults. Video games are varied like movies or music, and some games are not intended for children like how some games would are not intended for adults.

Research only states playing violent, children will have increased aggression. That is all. In violent events in the past, video games were not linked to the act of violence but rather mental conditions. Video games will not make children violent. There has been nothing in the news about children performing fatalities on each other and I do not foresee anytime in the future children doing so. Not in this realm!

## Works Cited

**Burgess, John. "Sega to Withdraw Graphic Videogame -- Move Follows Criticism by Lawmakers." *The Seattle Times* 11 Jan. 1994: n. pag. *The Seattle Times*. Web. 16 July 2014.**  
**<<http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19940111&slug=1889109>>.**

John Burgess of the Washington Post wrote about SEGA of America's decision in 1994 to pull *Night Trap* from stores for revision. *Night Trap* was one of the primary games Senator Joseph Lieberman criticized for being violent, in particular, having a live action scene of hooded men grabbing a woman and then sucking her blood. Sega pulled *Night Trap* to simplify efforts in getting a universal rating system. Sega actually had their own rating system in place prior to pulling *Night Trap* but hoped a Universal rating system could be made. Sega began making changes to *Night Trap* after the game was criticized by Lawmakers. Sega was asked to alter violence in *Mortal Kombat* but as the game is owned by Acclaim Entertainment, they could not edit the game.

**C-SPAN. "Video Game Violence." C-SPAN. N.P., 9 Dec. 1993. Web. 16 July 2014.**  
**<<http://www.c-span.org/video/?52848-1/video-game-violence>>.**

This video is a recording of the December 9, 1993 hearing of Congress vs. SEGA. Joseph Lieberman shows violent scenes from *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*. Senator Byron Dorgan falsely states the goal of *Night Trap* is to trap and kill women, when the game actually has the player trying to save them. Lieberman goes on to state he does not want to take these games off the market as it would censor freedoms. Eugene Provenzo, a University of Miami professor, states games are also racist going by his interviews with children, saying Ninjas are evil. Provenzo then says a SWAT commander in *Night Trap* is fascist. Dorgan expresses he is against censorship but personally does not like how the goal of *Night Trap* is to drill a hole in a women's neck, again, despite that not being the goal of the game. Howard Lincoln of Nintendo of America says *Night Trap* will never come to a Nintendo console and it has no place in society. Bill White of Sega of America tells Congress *Night Trap* was rated MA-17 and the game was not intended for children. Bill White states picking out violent scenes in *Night Trap* is akin to picking out violent scenes in *Gone with the Wind*. Bill White says research needs to be done to verify violent games make people violent. White says their rating system needs to be enforced. Lincoln then provides evidence that *Night Trap* didn't ship with a rating and went on to state his interest in a universal rating system. Ads from Toys R Us cover up SEGA's ratings. At the end, an agreement that a rating system is needed was reached.

**C-Span. "Video Game Violence." C-SPAN. N.P., 4 Mar. 1994. Web. 16 July 2014.**  
**<<http://www.c-span.org/video/?52848-1/video-game-violence>>.**

This is the full hearing on the March 4, 1994 concerning violent video game legislation. This hearing basically had all parties agree on there's no research that video games cause violence but regardless, an enforced rating system for all video games needs to be implemented in the United States and more research needs to be done. The conclusion was basically, if video games had a rating system like movies, then violent video games would not be of controversy as children would not have access to them. Monitoring the advertising of violent games was also discussed; making sure these violent games would not be advertised to children. This is the birth of what would eventually become the ESRB.

**Cullen, Dave. "At last we know why the Columbine killers did it..." *Slate Magazine*. The Slate Group, 20 Apr. 2004. Web. 16 July 2014.**  
**<[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/assessment/2004/04/the\\_depressive\\_and\\_the\\_psychopath.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/assessment/2004/04/the_depressive_and_the_psychopath.html)>.**

This article details the conclusion that was reached on the Columbine Shooter's motives. Psychologists state quit asking what drove the shooters; both shooters had different mental conditions. Both boys were described as depressive's psychopaths. The article states how the media focused on the hatred of the boys rather than their mentality. Blame cannot be placed on any form of entertainment; the boys were psychopaths regardless of what they consumed. In the article, *DOOM* is not even mentioned. This article was published 5 years after the shooting so by then, *DOOM* was no longer being blamed for Columbine, as detailed by the conclusion that the boys are depressives and psychopaths.

**Engelhardt, Christopher, Bruce Bartholow, Geoffrey Kerr, and Brad Bushman.**  
***This is your brain on violent video games: Neural desensitization to violence predicts increased aggression following violent video game exposure.***  
**Amsterdam: Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 2011. Print.**

On March 21, 2011, four researchers conducted research on desensitization to violence leading to an increase in aggression. Participants played a violent or non-violent video game, viewed violent and nonviolent photos while their brain was being monitored, and gave an opponent unpleasant noise blasts. Participants with little exposure to video game violence who played a violent game showed physiological desensitization and this response mediated the effect on aggressive behavior. The data gathered provided the first evidence linking violence desensitization to increased aggression, and shows a partially there's a link between violent game exposure and aggression. No other conclusion other than increased aggression was found.

**FTC. "FTC Undercover Shopper Survey on Entertainment Ratings Enforcement Finds Compliance Highest Among Video Game Sellers and Movie Theaters."**

***Federal Trade Commission*. N.P., 25 Mar. 2013. Web. 16 July 2014.**

**<<http://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2013/03/ftc-undercover-shopper-survey-entertainment-ratings-enforcement>>.**

This article is about a study conducted by the FTC where kids 13-16 tried to purchase M-rated video games in 2012. Only 13% were able to successfully purchase M-rated games, while 47% could purchase Parental Advisory Label CSs, 30% could purchase R-rated DVDs, and 24% could purchase R-Rated movie tickets. The FTC is calling upon the entertainment industry to be more vigilant in restricting the marketing of mature-rated products to children, clearly and prominently disclosing rating information, and restricting children's access to mature-rated products.

**Ferguson, Christopher, and Cheryl Olson. *Video Game Violence Use among "Vulnerable" Populations: The Impact of Violent Games on Delinquency and Bullying Among Children with Clinically Elevated Depression or Attention Deficit Symptoms*. New York: Springer, 2013. Print.**

On April 18, 2013, researchers published research that examined the issue of children's exposure to violent video games. Do violent games cause negative behavior in children? The researchers examined the behavior of 377 children displaying elevated attention deficit or depressive symptoms. Results from the study did not support the hypothesis that children with elevated mental symptoms constitute a vulnerable population for video game violence effects. Overall, no study has successfully proven that video games make children violent. Despite speculation, no academic research has successfully linked violent video games to violence among children.

**G4TV. "Jack Thompson vs. Adam Sessler." *G4tv*. N.P., 10 Aug. 2006. Web. 16 July 2014. <<http://www.g4tv.com/attackoftheshow/blog/post/629272/jack-thompson-vs-adam-sessler/>>.**

This is a short 3-way debate between former Lawyer Jack Thomson, Game Daily CEO Mark Friedler, and Game Journalist Adam Sessler on an unreleased video game *Bully*. Jack states the game is violent and should be banned, despite the game not being released. Adam calls Jack out saying *Bully* has a T rating, teachers are confirmed not be abused in the game, and overall Jack is judging a game without seeing it. Mark states parenting is the primary key to ensuring kids do not engage in violent video games. Jack was correct in saying sales of mature games were not monitored in the United States, even saying he had his 10-year old son buy a Grand Theft Auto game. Jack cannot provide any evidence that video games cause violence much less they

should be banned and Adam calls him out on it. The debate ended quickly presumably because it was getting heated.

**Miami CNN. "No easy explanation for Columbine killings." CNN. N.P., 28 Apr. 1999. Web. 16 July 2014. <<http://archive.today/xJxjM>>.**

This is an archived page from CNN about explanations for the Columbine killings. *DOOM*, a 90s video game and one of the first FPS video games, was a game the shooters loved to play. This led the media to believe the games caused the killings. CNN's article interviews many members of *DOOM*'s online community, with members overall agreeing *DOOM* does not make them violent. One member stated he has no desire to ever touch a real gun or even attempt to build a bomb. Margaret Crosbie-Burnett, a University of Miami psychologist, said violent entertainment "gives (players) an easy way... to hit back" but in-game only. The article ends that parent involvement is key above all, and that experts say that will positively affect children.

**Schifter, Catherine, and Maria Cipollone. *Minecraft as a teaching tool: One case study*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 2012. Print.**

This research paper explores *Minecraft* being used in an English classroom for an assignment. The assignment was for the students to film a scenario dealing with conflict, either within the game *Minecraft* or with camcorders. 4 out of 20 students, or one of the five groups, chose to use video cameras, while the other 4 groups did the assignment within *Minecraft*. Mr. Reeves, the teacher, was pleased with the results. He found the game was a great vehicle for demonstrating concepts to children. One student was so motivated with the assignment he collaborated with his group from his home when he was sick with Strep throat. Overall, *Minecraft* was a success in Mr. Reeves' classroom but due to the sample size and unknown origins of the students, no solid conclusions can be made from the study outside of his class preferred *Minecraft* over a camcorder for their assignment.