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The Scapegoat in the Plain

Video games have been around for a long, long time. The origination of video games was in 1958(Tretkoff), with the development of pong. Since then video games have a made a huge cultural impact on the world. The market for video games is massive and all encompassing. You can buy video games in Japan all the way around the world to Europe and from there the United States. Video Games are now an integral part of the society that developed in our information age.

While video games were going strong in the nineties, the United States had a landmark event occur in 1999. Columbine was the one of the most notorious school shootings. Since Columbine there has been no shortage of school shootings. In the early 2000’s there was an outcry over people trying to discern a reason for the school shootings. Politicians used video games as a “straw man” to poke at for the reasoning behind the shooting. Eventually the pressure died down after much political upheaval. Recently, at a meeting about the Parkland school shooting, President Trump said that “The video games, the movies, the Internet Stuff is so violent” (“Remarks by President Trump”). His remark raised the topic of video game violence once again. The cycle of video game blaming has been repeated ad nauseum at this point. Video games, for the umpteenth time, do not make people commit violence. Guns are the primary factor in school shootings and gun violence.

People blaming video games for violence isn’t new. The reason that Columbine was blamed on video games is because both Kids played DOOM. A first-person game where you are a man that shoots a bunch of demons in a futuristic/post-apocalyptic setting.



An Image of Doom

It is not a realistic shooting game. And even it was, the game is not at fault for the act of people playing them. It is the people themselves and their mindset that make them susceptible to violent actions.

One of the oldest examples of video game blaming is about a game called “Death Race”. In Death Race the game “puts players behind the wheel trying to run down humanoid figures on a television screen” (Blumenthal). The article came out in 1976, and there are a lot of similar criticisms that we see today. People accusing Death Race of being “insidious, morbid, gross and sick,sick,sick”(Blumenthal) and wondering if it will have adverse effects, in this case, on people driving recklessly to endanger people. There hasn’t been a rash increase in automobile related injuries since 1976, so it seems that the accusation was unwarranted.

Opposition to violent video games will cite one type of study. The type of study that says that there is a noticeable increase in violent thoughts after playing violent video games. The conclusion was in a study done in 2001, post Columbine, notes that “exposure to violent video games increases physiological arousal and aggression-related thoughts and feelings” (Anderson et Al. 354). There is no mention of if there is an increase in violent behavior.

The violent tendencies from video games are very common. There is an easy explanation for this, it is a word called frustration. Most video games are competitive. And people that are competitive take losses badly, they are not professional athletes who take losses as part of the job. They get angry, they get frustrated. The kids curse, rant and say every name under the sun at their opposition. And this doesn’t have to be versing another player, it can be against the game itself. As a gamer, I’ve experienced this on many occasions.

There is a phrase in statistics that applies to the argument of those saying video games cause violence. It is called, “correlation does not imply causation”. To put in in layman’s terms, it means that just because two things occur at the same time, it doesn’t mean that they are connected. In this instance, the Columbine shooters are said to have both played the game DOOM. Since they are playing DOOM then it must be why they are shooters. You can apply this logic to anything. If both kids’ smoke, then it must be why they like to shoot guns. The smoke from the barrel appeals to them. It is nonsensical.

One of the largest school shootings ever happened in 1966. Well before video games had a wide spread appeal at arcades and was a very small market. The article notes, “An architectural honor student carried an arsenal of weapons to the top of the 27-story tower on the University of Texas campus today and shot 12 persons to death” (UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL). These violent acts are not new and it is not video games that are the cause.

Video games were eventually brought before the supreme court. In the case, The State of California argued that it was illegal to sell games that have a specific degree of violence to children without parental supervision. The issue came down to that game stores do NOT have to follow the age requirement written on the side of games when selling to customers. The California State Government sued the main video game lobby, the ESMA, to force the age requirement to go to law. The case focuses on the first amendment. Justice Scalia mentioned, “Certainly the books we give children to read—or read to them when they are younger—contain no shortage of gore” (Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association 8). Scalia later reiterates, “California claims that video games present special problems because they are “interactive,” in that the player participates in the violent action on screen and determines its outcome. The latter feature is nothing new: Since at least the publication of The Adventures of You: Sugarcane Island in 1969…” (Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association 10). Brown’s lawsuit was overturned in a decision 7-2, very unusual for a supreme court case. But in the face of the nation, videogames were not anymore detrimental a media than books or create your own adventures.

It is up the parents of children to decide how these kids should be exposed to the media. It isn’t up to the government, it is the parent’s responsibility to decide how much of a violent media their kids should be exposed to. The supreme court case simply shows that parents shouldn’t depend on the government to raise their children and there are even age ratings on the side of video games that say, for example, “Teen, violence, drugs, adult themes” etc. Instead of worry just about violent tendencies, they should try to limit their exposure to screen because of the damage it does to a person’s sleep cycle(Schmerler). Obviously, this is a case by case issue. You can’t stop your kid spending the night at a friend’s house from playing with his friend’s stuff. It comes down the parents trusting their children.

The real meat of the issue comes when you try to dissect what is the reason for school shootings. Video games are sold all over the world. The United States appears to be the only country with the issue of shooting violence so wide spread. Much of the world doesn’t give citizen readily available access to guns. CNN spells it out succinctly, “The US has one of the highest rates of death by firearm in the developed world, according to World Health Organization data” (Fox). The article also notes that since the Australia banned guns in the late nineties, “Australia hasn't had a mass shooting since” (Fox). It is much easier to kill people with guns than it would be with a knife.

The gun lobby in America is massive. The American people love guns. The more devout of them participate in a group called the NRA, where the participants donate to them as a nonprofit. The NRA is the gun lobby of the United States. In the United States government, “more than half of congressional incumbents have gotten money and organizational help from the group, with many members having long-standing financial relationships with the NRA that date back years” (Kessler). When most of congress is in the NRA’s pocket, it is difficult to get an opposing majority. NRA is also in contention with the gun manufacturers. They receive donations from “Smith & Wesson, Beretta USA, SIGARMS, and Sturm, Ruger & Co. that also manufacture so-called assault weapons” (Weissmann). In this capitalist society, money will always be the deciding factor above all. And the gun lobby has a lot of money.

In conclusion, video games have been under scrutiny for several decades. They are the scapegoat for a country that refuses to believe that their precious guns are why acts of violence are so much worse than what they should be. Guns provide a way for people to efficiently kill each other. In the case of Australia, getting rid of guns completely stopped the school shooting in the country to this day. After all these years, video games are still distributed and it is up the parents to delegate how to consume this form of media. Like Justice Scalia said, being an interactive media is not new. It is not an excuse for video games to be any worse or better than any other violent media. It is the low hanging fruit to go for video games because they are so prevalent in everyday life and can be violent. People jump to assumptions and end up correlating them because of their own experiences with it as opposed to the children playing them. It is up to the parents to determine what media their child should consume. Video games are not going anywhere. No matter what irresponsible people and their accusations say.

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