Panic! Video Games, Kids and Moral Panic

Ap/HIST 3801

National Day for Truth and Reconciliation

- Sometimes still called "Orange Shirt Day"

- Recognition of the horrors and mistaken/misplaced, paternalistic and racist sentiment of the Residential School system in Canada.

- Today, we remember the survivors of this system, and those who are not with us today.

- How to recognize the day? I'm not the person to ask, in a sense, but I recommend doing that which historians do: look at the primary sources and reflect. Read the TRC report, free and available online at nctr.ca

News:

- The first assignment is due next week. A Turnitin submission page will appear on the course website soon.

Content Warning: Discussions of Violence
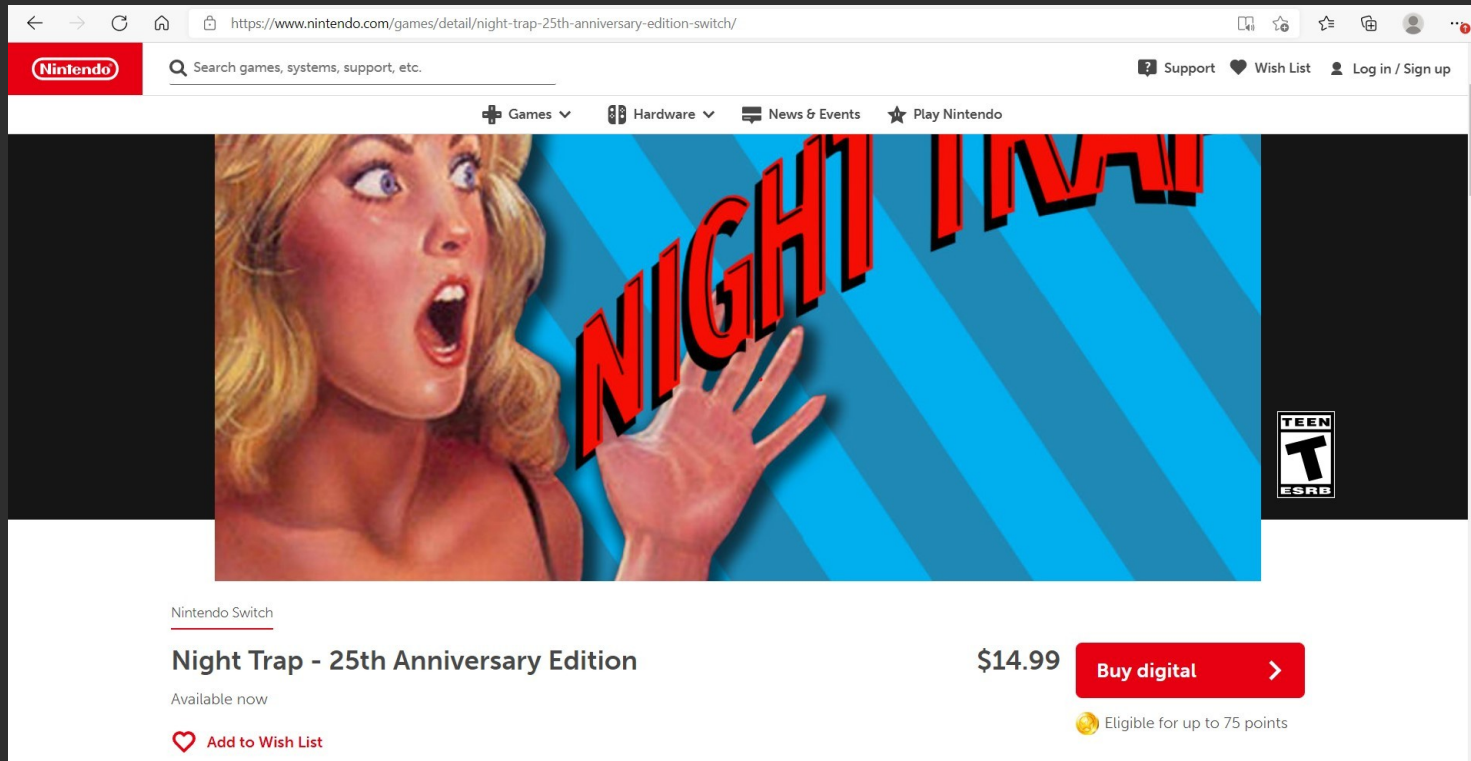
You've been lied to! Stay tuned. . .

What is Moral Panic Theory?

- Outlined by Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers (1972).*

- Moral panics occur when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to social values and interests." (Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* 1.)

- Moral panics may be a "flash in the pan," a quick matter which fizzles out, or something which carries long-term repercussions.

Characteristics of Moral Panic

- Assume host society is inherently good.

- Reactionary and conservative; emerge as a response to something perceived as both new and threatening.

- Often framed as being in the interest of protecting children or youth.

- Can reveal tensions or divisions in society, sometimes in an attempt to correct them, sometimes as an attempt to make label these divisions as "part of the problem."

- Exaggeration and hyperbole are the meat and bread of moral panics.

A Sample Panic: The Mods and Rockers

- Two working class youth subcultures in England during the 1960's, each with distinctive styles of dress, musical preferences, etc.

- A significant part of both subcultures was identification around a preferred mode of personal transport: scooters for Mods, and motorcycles for Rockers. New era of youth access to motorized vehicles, and the perceived trouble this mobility brought.

- A series of brawls between the groups led to British media characterizing them as dangerous, roving gangs of disaffected youths. Stories began to report minor events, some even unrelated to Mods and Rockers, as signs that these groups were threatening the serenity of British society.
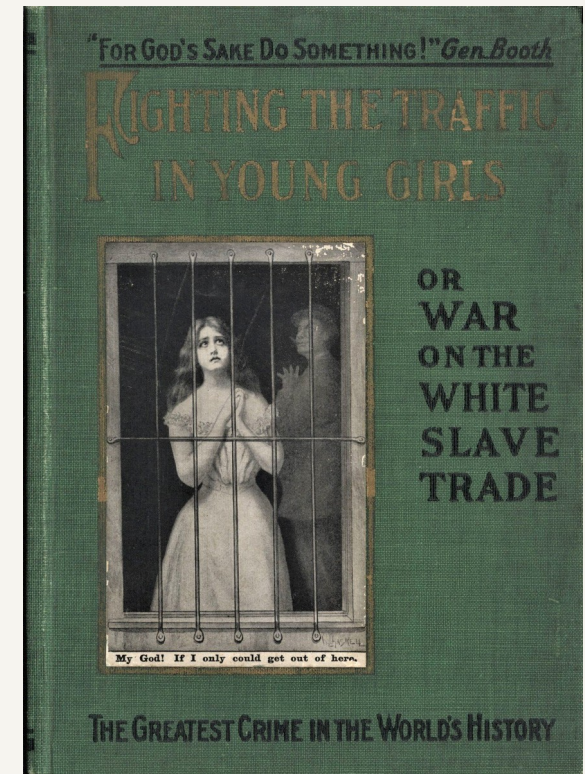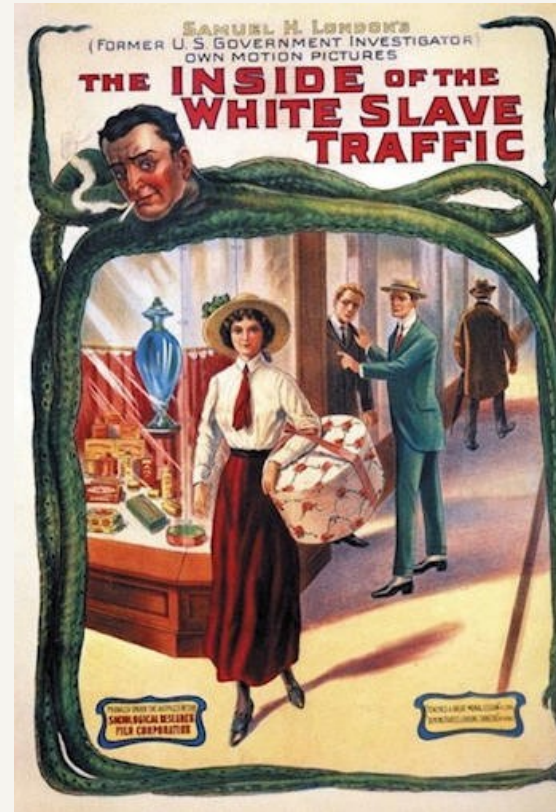
Mods (Left) and Rockers (Right)

Source: The Telegraph

Source: The BBC

The White Slavery Panic

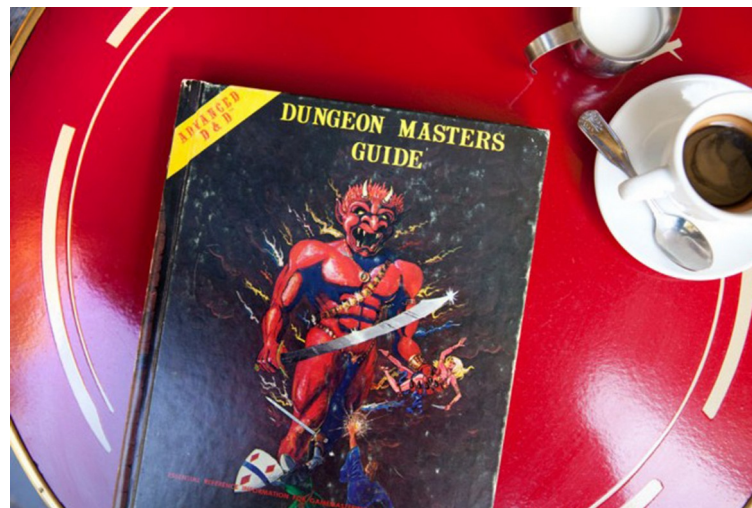*Images: Those Awful Reviews (Movie Poster) and Twitter (Archival Copy of White Slavery Book).*

Music Content Warnings

Images: Rolling Stone and Amazon (who sadly did have the best picture of the Purple Rain Album)

SNIDER

Tabletop Roleplaying

- Images: Chick.com (A collection of the infamous "Chick Tract" comics, including this panel), Wired (AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide), imbd.com (Poster).

Arcades: A Seedy Reputation

- Prior to the advent of videogames, arcades and other amusement centres gained a seedy reputation. Gambling, drinking and smoking were seen as synonymous with places where games were played.

- Meanings carry forward in time, and are altered as well. When arcades featuring video games first emerged, people remembered (falsely or otherwise) what the most recent/similar equivalent- shady gaming halls- looked like, and sometimes prejudice did prevail.

- We are entering the period of videogames with preconceived notions of what public gaming halls, and gaming generally, signified. In 1942, NYC banned pinball (a ban which remained until the mid 70's): we as historians ought to ask whether this mentality must have carried forth!

Image: New York Police Commissioner Smashes Pinball Machine (Getty Images, 1942).

Arcades Themselves

- Arcades did indeed feel the burn for a time. Accusations ranged from encouraging truancy among students to essentially hustling teens out of their money.

- Look to the New York Times for an example of what we're dealing with. An arcade opening in Connecticut led to this story: "opponents charged that he [the arcade owner] would mesmerize their youngsters, rob them of their lunch money, provide them with a center for illicit drug traffic and cause the downfall of youth baseball, music lessons and, yes, the very Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of the community."

- What helped change this perception in North America? Games moved to the home, some arcades rebranded as more family-friendly, etc. Note that in some places, like Japan, arcades have a rich history and have been seen in a different light.

The First Game Panic: Death Race

The *Death Race* game came out in 1976, following hot on the heels of the 1975 film *Death Race 2000*. Ironically, this is also the year pinball was unbanned in NYC.
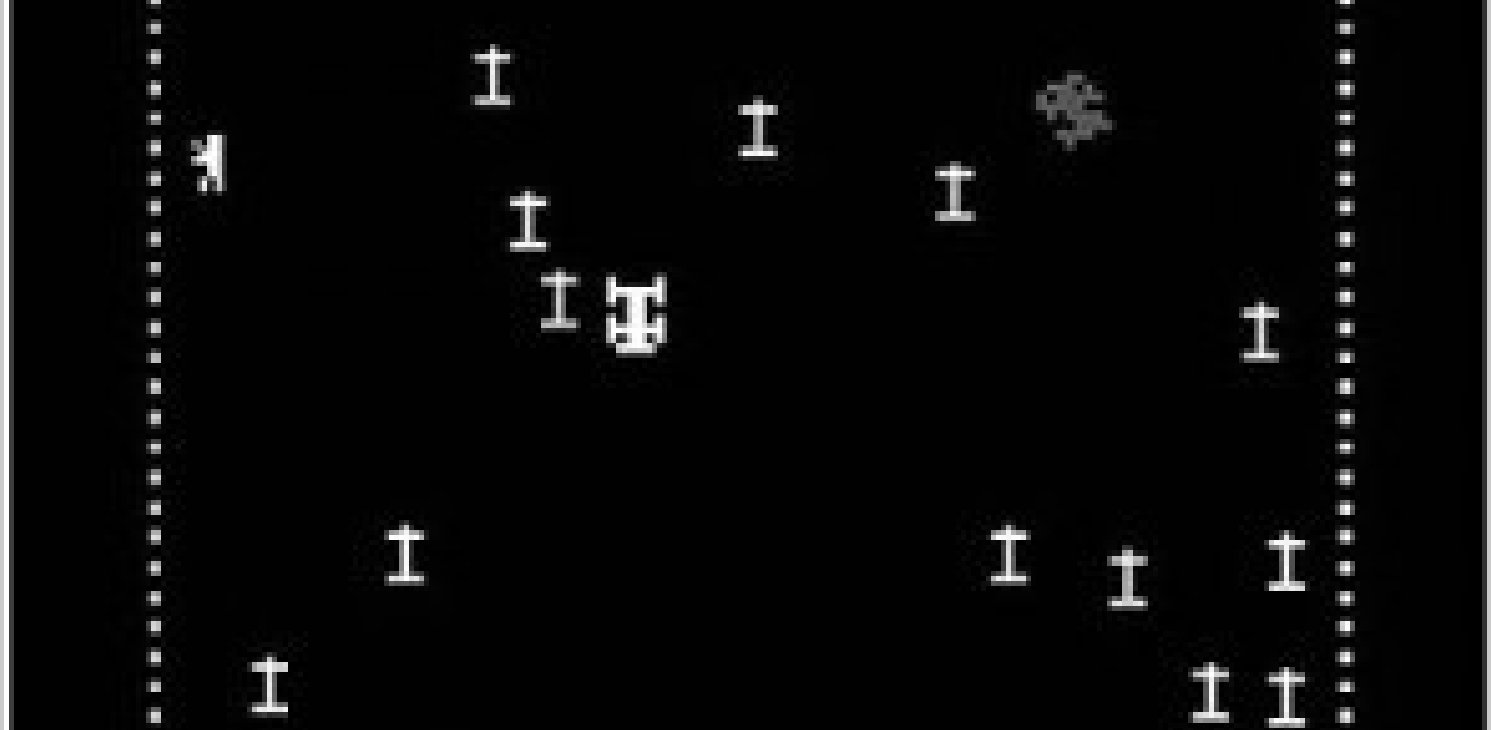
The film was violent, and gained notoriety for its portrayal of state-sanctioned vehicular homicide.

The game's publisher, Exidy, claimed that their adaptation was not about killing humans. Players gained points for running over "gremlins."
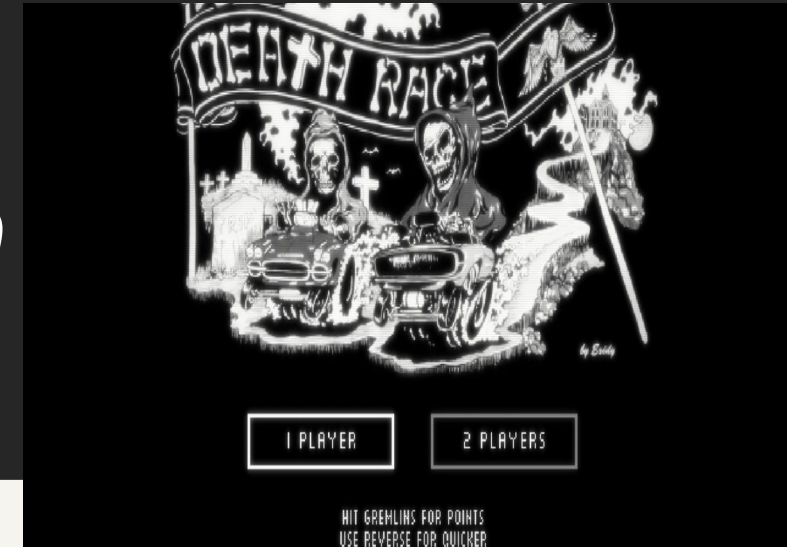
Death Race: Graphics and Cabinet

Sources: pixelatedarcade.com (for the cabinet) and museumofplay.org (for the gameplay capture).

Death Race: Contin...

- Newspapers mused that *Death Race* trained children to accept the "sport" of "hit and run" vehicular homicide. The *National Safety Council* agreed, and was particularly concerned with the interactive element of violent gaming, which distinguished it from other violent media.

- What came of this concern? This time, very little. The game was not in circulation for very long, the graphics and gameplay were relatively simple; the alchemical formula for a more lasting moral panic regarding violence in video games was not yet complete.

The Rise of Consoles (the Late 1970's)

- Home video game consoles brought the fun of the arcade into the living room. Gamers could purchase consoles and games and enjoy them to their heart's content, not needing to shovel quarters into a machine.

- Home consoles offer modularity; one could buy whatever game in whatever genre they so chose. Developers released an impressive array of games on consoles like the *Atari 2600*, which launched in 1977 in North America.

- By the late 80's, games were becoming increasingly more complex, both graphically and in terms of gameplay mechanics.

A View of Progress: Space Invaders (1980) and Street Fighter (1992)

Source: Video still from Youtube channel "NML32"

Source: SNES A Day blog

Panic at the Senate: the 1993/94 Congressional Hearings on violence and videogames

- Championed by Senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl, these hearings concerned violence in videogames. Spokespeople for the industry, primarily from Sega and Nintendo, were brought in for the occasion.

- Sega and Nintendo approached the matter differently. The former argued that it made games for adults, as well as children, and should not be forced to cease doing so. The latter lambasted Sega for its decision to publish games like *Night Trap*, and put forth an image of being the "family friendly" alternative.

- In the end, the industry was threatened with regulation if it did not take measures to keep violent games out of the hands of children. The gaming industry's solution was to form the ESRB, which is well known to most modern gamers.

The (In)Famous Three

The infamous "shower attack" scene from *Night Trap*. Vampires use a "drill" to suck blood. Source: *Tired Old Hack* blog.

A "Fatality" from *Mortal Kombat,* in which one fighter tears the head and attached spinal cord from another. Source: Wikipedia

A scene from *Lethal Enforcers* (the arcade version, which featured improved graphics over the *Genesis* equivalent). Source: International Arcade Museum

The Electronic Software Rating Board (ESRB)

- Primary video game rating system in North America, founded in 1994.

- Besides a few changes (removing the KA "Kids to Adults" rating in 1998, and the EC "Early Childhood" rating in 2018), has survived to the present day.

- Retailers in North America will typically refuse to carry an unrated game, or a game assigned an AO "Adults Only" rating.

- A self-regulatory system based on informing purchasers. Fits into the "buyer beware" mentality of the free-market, circumventing government regulation.

Modern ESRB ratings. Source: Verizon

Columbine, Doom and Panic Renewed

- On April 20th, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold enacted a plan to conduct a massacre at their high school in Columbine, Colorado.

- While their improvised explosives failed to detonate, the two seniors nonetheless used illegally-acquired firearms to kill thirteen people and wound another twenty-one. They then took their own lives.

- Columbine shocked the public and sparked a series of social discourses. Video game violence was once again in the spotlight, as it was revealed that the two young men were especially fond of *Doom*, a first-person shooter.

Image: Harris and Klebold in the midst of their rampage. Source: GQ

Doom: Violent, Visceral and Very Popular

The "Columbine Effect" in Academia

- Post-Columbine, there was a veritable explosion of studies on video games and violence.

- Earlier studies in particular found relationships between "aggressive behavior" and playing violent videogames among male youth. Women were usually not included in the study, and the emphasis seemed to be on young, white men.

- Ferguson and Markey argue that these studies were flawed, and did not convincingly demonstrate a link between gaming and real-life violence. The broad professional consensus today is that gaming is not a predictor of violence.

Conclusion

- The concept of a moral panic is useful when considering how various groups have reacted to video games. Moral panic theory is useful for understanding what drives such incidences of panic and getting a basic idea of how these panics function.

- Panics around gaming are old, and have grown up with the industry. As games have become more complex and "lifelike," criticism has grown. Yet, the "save the children" angle of panics has declined in value, as gamers have become an increasingly diverse group.

- Not all concerns about depictions of violence, sex, gender, race, class, etc. in gaming are panics.

- Nintendo lied, and *Night Trap* can be purchased on the Nintendo Switch.