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Research Paper
        Setting the Bar: The Influence of Mortal Kombat on Modern Gaming Media

Abstract: *Mortal Kombat,* released in 1992 had a major effect on gaming media. Preceding its release, games were marketed to children and teens. After its release, gaming became more controversial, with many debating as well as researching the potential effects of playing video games. Gaming also changed to become more marketed to adults rather than kids with the release of games like *Doom, Halo,* and *Call of Duty* in the late 90's and early 2000's.

Who are games for? In the 1980's, people would have unanimously said "for kids". Given the same question in 2019, however, one might hear a variety of answers. While some might still say "for kids", many others would say "for adults", and still others would say "for everyone". What could have happened in 30 years to cause such a change in answer? The release of Midway's controversial game: *Mortal Kombat*, one of my favorite games and game franchises to date, marked the start of a change from marketing to children and teens to include marketing to adults. But how can one game cause such a shift in who is playing games?

In the years following the release of Atari's *Pong,* companies such as Nintendo and Sega released numerous games such as *Pac Man (1980), Frogger (1981), Dig Dug (1982), Qbert (1982), Super Mario Bros (1983), Tetris (1984), The Legend of Zelda (1986),* etc. But the fighting game genre goes as far back as 1976 with Sega's game: *Heavyweight Champ*, which reportedly "bombed" (Stuart). Though a decade later, games such as Palace Software's *Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior* and the more popular *Street Fighter II* by Capcom (both released in 1987) gained widespread acclaim for their unique approach to fighting game mechanics. Specifically, *Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior* included decapitations and scantily clad characters. *Street*

Fighter II included challenging combos and fantasy abilities such as the iconic "Shoruken" and "Hadouken" (Stuart, Capcom).

Mortal Kombat made its debut in 1992 in arcades and some home consoles. Its basic concept was a tournament-style, one-on-one fighting game (Hosch). It also included aspects of both of its popular predecessors. *Mortal Kombat* had its share of widely quoted special moves such as the famous line from Scorpion's spear throw: "Get over here!" or Liu Kang's iconic "flying bicycle kick" (Midway). It also had its share of scantily clad fighters like "Kitana" and "Jade". However, what *Mortal Kombat* became known for its finishers. These finishers, dubbed "fatalities", were brutal moves that simulated gore exceedingly well for its time (see pictured left, AUS Gamers, Midway).

Up to this point, games had largely been marketed to children through arcades and home entertainment systems. Kid-friendly games had dominated the game market for so long that a game including significantly more adult themes caused concern for many people- parents and game designers alike. It was even more a concern for them that *Mortal Kombat* became so popular in arcades *because* of its "over the top" violence.

"It was the beginning of video games' coming of age… At one point in time, games were just meant for children, and nobody

really took them seriously. But it was with the launch of Mortal

Kombat that people who controlled the media began to look at it

differently" (Gregory Fischbach, Crossley)

Thus, due to popularity of games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* (1993)*,* the Video Game Ratings Act of 1994 was passed and the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) was created soon thereafter (Kohler). Part of the new job of the ESRB was to create a rating system that all future games would adapt. The initial ratings that they created were later expanded to include games rated "for everyone" and others "for everyone 10+". Because of this new development in the game industry, a new discussion opened on whether video games affect the minds of children, or more specifically, whether they can cause real world violence.

Even though this discussion opened almost 25 years ago now, there is little known about long term effects (if any) of playing games. For example, one study was conducted using an MRI scan with test subjects who either had or had not played video games. The results showed that there was no discernable difference in brain activity between groups during the experiment (Bodkin).

Another study was conducted in which people would be asked to give hot sauce to a person they believed to not like the substance after playing a violent game. The results showed that subjects who played violent games beforehand gave more hot sauce to the participant than the subjects who did not play games beforehand. So perhaps they cause a short-term effect on the player.

The findings conflict each other. Even if there is something to games causing short-term aggression, is it fair to say that video games alone are the source of childhood aggression and

violence? Proponents of anti-game ideology tend to point to mass shootings as their justification against the sale of violent media, but Psychologist Craig A. Anderson from Iowa State University stated:

> "None of these extreme acts, like a school shooting, occurs because of only one risk factor; there are many factors, including feeling socially isolated, being bullied, and so on, but if you look at the literature, I think it's clear that violent media is one factor; it's not the largest factor, but it's also not the smallest." (Craig Anderson, Carey)

"Violent media", as Anderson describes it, has also been around for thousands of years. In fact, going back even so far as Homer's *Iliad* in which warfare and violence were glorified and described in explicit detail (Gill).

So, is a rating system all that *Mortal Kombat* contributes to the gaming industry? No. It served as a foundation. Before *Mortal Kombat,* there was no clear indication of what sort of content ought or ought not to be in games. Today, games are no longer mostly sold for children and game developers can explore bigger and better concepts than "family friendly". For parents, with more and more games being given the rating of "M" or "for mature (17+) audiences only", it is their responsibility to decide what their child is or is not allowed to interact with. The rating system is in place for parents to better understand what games are about without necessarily needing to be gamers themselves. Developers, when it becomes clear what the limit is, are given a good reference point for what sort of content can appear in their games. For example, *Doom* was released a year after *Mortal Kombat* and arguably strove to have the same shock value. The fact that a game centered on gore was released so soon after *Mortal Kombat* almost signifies that companies were

waiting for someone to make the bold first move of releasing a game with such adult themes. It was not long after *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* released that adult series that are still popular today like: *Grand Theft Auto* (1997), *Halo* (2001) and *Call of Duty* (2003) were released. Some of these franchises, likewise, were met with controversy for being "over the top" in one way or another, with *Call of Duty* having a mission banned globally and *Grand Theft Auto* constantly being targeted by the media. Nothing truly innovates without some pushback.

My main purpose in writing an essay on this particular topic is so that I can highlight the fact that one of my favorite franchises was instrumental in shaping the way games are made and what content can be released. Mortal Kombat demonstrates what is truly possible in the realm of development and innovation, and that there is room for the standard to rise again and again, revealing new opportunities each time. You simply need the boldness to raise it yourself.

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