

Public Policy and Violent Video Games

CIS 590 Project

Kewen Meng, Hannah Pruse and Yiding Wang

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Since the advent of video games, there has been a controversy surrounding this form of media and game content. Violence and gore are very prevalent in many of the most popular titles and, indeed, they are often a selling point for developers. Games are thought to be more influential and emotionally compelling than films, as the player interacts dynamically with the virtual world and essentially “becomes” the character to guide their actions, rather than just watching actors on a screen. Again echoing the sentiment expressed in “Digital Nation,” this technology is moving so fast that we do not know the longterm effects that it will have on us and our minds, especially the developing minds of children.

Recent increases in gun-related violence initiated by young people has caused quite a stir and has lead people to suspect that there are some connections between such acts of violence and video game play. Varieties of studies of this have shown correlations between violent game play and hostile behaviors, violent responses, and even reduced school performance [6, 11, 5]. At present, the causal relationship between violent video games and aggressive behaviors is still to be proven and further established due to the lack of supporting experiments and theory analysis [9, 10, 4, 13]. However, it is not hard to see the influences these video games can have on the current and future generations, such as causing degraded communication skills, morality, and health, and even altering players’ own personalities. Consequently, people can easily find these correlations, either directly or indirectly, between their hostile acts and these video games, regardless of proof of causation. As a result, many governmental policies have arisen in an attempt to restrict access of video games with mature content to underage individuals. Censorship is another measure taken to protect youth, and in some countries censorship is not a voluntary act.

Purchase restrictions and censorship are not a complete answer, however, as game developers feel their right to free speech is not being respected if their work is being altered or restricted in any way. Social norms of modern society, in which youth are gaining increased irreverence for law surrounding technology renders many laws useless. Norms further complicate the issue, as generally parents and guardians of children are not as savvy with technology and modern culture, and therefore are unaware of the negative content present in the games their children play. Lastly, enforcement of age limits on software is incredibly difficult. Therefore, public policy surrounding these games is an open issue that merits further investigation.

By definition as an ethical issue, there are positives and negatives to both sides of the argument. Censorship and restriction can greatly impact all stakeholders in different ways. Ethical analysis of the situation, using two workable theories, demonstrates the two sides of the debate. Using these theories as a base, we further explore each viewpoint with additional evidence and arguments.

This paper is organized as follows. In the “Kantianism against censorship” section, we apply Kantian theories to analyze the reasonability of video game censorship and restriction. By both first and second formulation of Kantian analysis, we prove that censoring and restricting video games are wrong. Such interference from the government will bring negative influence on creators of the video games which greatly damage their motivation and passion for innovation. In the “Utilitarianism for censorship” section we use utilitarianism analysis to show that the positive impacts of such censorship exceeds its negative ones, and the whole society would be able to benefit. In addition, based on our own analysis and the information from references, we propose some possible solutions to help solve the current issues. Furthermore, we summarize our ideas and discuss the future of the issue in the conclusion section.

Kantianism Against Censorship

As we have seen with several accounts of censorship attempts, such as protecting children online, Kantian analysis shows the censorship and restriction of video games to be wrong. We start by using the first formulation, the universal rule, to examine the act of censoring or restricting violent video games in any way. If every media company was subjected to censorship by the government, then media would not be unique and could not explore issues deemed “inappropriate” by some third party. Governments would have the say as to what is “unsuitable,” but this may not reflect the ideas brought forth by the governed citizens. Furthermore, this would not be respecting the individual rights of the citizens, who should be free to watch, read, or play whatever they wish. Similarly, if every media was subject to restrictions laid down by the government in power, a tyrannical governmental force could essentially remove any media from circulation or impose tight restrictions on its purchase. This would render the creation of intellectual property practically useless.

The second formulation of Kantian analysis inspects the extent to which an action uses people as a means to an end. By removing or altering pieces of a person or group’s intellectual property, governments are imposing their views on the public and not respecting the artistic freedom of the IP’s creators. Restricting the sales of games to any party is condescending, treating people of the restricted group as if they cannot know what is morally right or wrong. Thus in both manners of restriction, citizens and creators are being treated as means to an end. By both formulations, we see Kant would find such acts of video game censorship and restriction to be wrong. Since Kantian analysis is a workable theory, we know we have a solid and logical argument.

The ethical analysis provides the basis for the argument against censoring video games. There are several other arguments against this act, namely the suppression of free speech and individual rights, and the lack of studies providing actual proof that video games cause violence.

Freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression are highly valued in Western culture. The main argument against censorship of video games is the limitation of free speech that such an act imposes. By having elements of their game altered or sometimes even removed entirely, developers feel they are not being allowed artistic freedom and that their expression is being stifled. By not being able to produce what they desire, game developers also feel their audience and, by extension, their range of paying customers is being limited.

Several other countries have already implemented censorship of video games and other media. For example, in China, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), is responsible for censoring any materials like movies, speech, TV shows, and video games to filter media which may offend sensibilities of Chinese government or disobey the common cultural standards. SARFT will completely remove perceived sensitive moments in these media, which may damage the completeness of these artistic works and consequently make it hard to understand for the audiences. Developers of this content are being disrespected by having their creations altered.

There have been several recent examples of developers voicing their frustration of such censorship. Currently in Germany, due to sensitivities surrounding World War II, the German government is very protective of its people in regards to shielding them from media that could possibly encourage violent behavior. For the past several years, video games have been the major focus of this, causing the country to break away from the standard Pan European Game Information (PEGI) rating system [1] and enact their own, more strict system called Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) [2]. Under this rating system, any game considered to be realistically violent is essentially banned. The German government requires that every game sold in Germany must be submitted to the USK committee to obtain a rating and games seen to be too realistically violent will be denied a rating and therefore not able to be sold within the country’s borders. Games with a USK 18

rating, which can be equivalent to an ESRB Teen (T) or Mature (M) rating for violence, cannot be advertised or sold on a shelf in stores. They must be held behind the counter and only purchased with valid IDs proving the buyer's age. Making customers have to explicitly ask for games that are considered "inappropriate" is an attempt to alter social norms surrounding these games, making it taboo to even purchase them.

Crytek, a game company headquartered in Germany that specializes in violent shooter games, has had significant issues with the German government and is struggling to remain in operation. The president of Crytek, Cevat Yerli, is very much against censorship and feels it stifles the creation of art and is blinding the people to the future of entertainment. When asked about the German "ban" on violent games, he stated that "a ban on action games in Germany is concerning us because it is essentially like banning the German artists that create them. If the German creative community can't effectively participate in one of the most important cultural mediums of our future, we will be forced to relocate to other countries." [3]

Films, another media that has become increasingly violent and graphic since the transformation of the Motion Picture Production Code into the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), are not regulated in the USA in the same way that people are suggesting for games. Films are allowed to have wildly violent, gory, and explicit content. They are simply given a higher age rating. Parents are held responsible for making choices about what their children watch and for monitoring their viewing habits. This is how games are currently regulated. They are given a rating of age-appropriateness by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) and parents are responsible for ensuring their children only play games appropriate for their age group. Many feel it is unfair to have stricter limits and imposed censorship on games, when movies do not have such limits. They argue that parents need to shoulder the responsibility of raising their children properly.

In Western culture and ethics, the rights of the individual are often viewed as equally or sometimes even more important than the rights of the collective. The act of censoring is calling into question an individual's rights to view, read, watch, or play what they like. Similar to the recent gun law debates, in which people state that the Second Amendment protects an individual right to own property and that banning guns violates their rights, the anti-censorship side of the video game regulation debate argue that their rights and freedoms of expression as individuals are imposed upon if regulation is implemented. Censorship may be beneficial to the collective society as a whole, but many feel that it is not ethical to sacrifice their own freedoms for this profit.

A sentiment that is commonly echoed in anti-censorship and even anti-monitoring groups is intellectual freedom, which is the belief that humans have the right to explore and grow intellectually, regardless of the source of information. Julie Cohen emphasizes this right in her paper on intellectual property management [8]. A similar argument could be made for games, with players wishing to explore alternate identities or experience new situations using this media. Removing the ability to do so inhibits intellectual freedom as well.

Another similar argument, complementing the case for individual rights, is that the government should not be able to dictate what is morally "right" and "wrong" in regards to the media. Firstly, a government's conceptualization of right and wrong may not be similar to the opinions of the citizens. Even if most of the citizens agreed, the issue of individual rights surfaces again, and each person should be able to decide for his or herself what type of media is good for them to personally consume.

The events inciting the move toward regulation and censorship have been the recent increase in gun-related violence and the studies following the incidents that have correlated such acts of violence with violent video game play. However, these studies have only been able to show correlations of the factors. Thus far, the causation of violent behavior has not been proven, causing many to

believe that there is another factor involved in these cases of violence behavior that has not been inspected thoroughly [9, 10]. Former FBI profiler, Mary Ellen O'Toole, states that violent video games are not the sole cause factor causing violent acts, and are just one risk to individuals who are already contemplating acting out violently[4]. Surprisingly, a recent study conducted by Markey *et al.* even challenges the correlations of violence and video game play [13]. In this study, the researchers examined how popular game trends compare to real-world crime rates. The results showed that there is no evidence that violent video games are positively correlated to real-world crime rates in the United States. Since causation has not yet been proven, and now even the correlations that incited the urge to regulate are being called into question, many feel it is unfair to censor or otherwise regulate media that has not been shown to be directly responsible for aggressive behavior.

Kantian analysis has shown the act of censoring or restricting video games to be ethically wrong. This result from a workable ethical theory, coupled with the infringement of individual rights and the lack of proof of causation provides a strong argument against the censorship or restriction of video games.

Utilitarianism For Censorship

As mentioned in the previous section, we have to admit that there is still a lack of supporting evidence such as theory analysis or persuasive experiments to prove and further establish the causal relationship between violent video games and aggressive behaviors of young generations. However, based on existing experiments and result analysis, there are powerful correlations between these violent games and aggressive and violent behavior. In other words, there are some very obvious impacts of these games which may damage communication skills, morality and even personality of children.

There have been several experiments examining the biological and psychological effects of violent video games [6, 10, 11, 5]. For example, in Gentile's study [11], the authors effectively chose varieties of participants at different ages, with different genders, and from different locations (schools, cities, etc.) for their experiments. After data collection and analysis, they did a survey on different individual participants, inquiring about their behaviors of both at school and in their daily life. Statistics of their media habits indicate that children in eighth and ninth grades on average play video games around 9 hours per week, and males play more than females. The study also showed that these adolescents usually prefer to spend more time watching a movie, listening to music, rather than reading or studying. Another interesting result is that only 1% of boys and 16% of girls prefer to have no violence in video games, which shows that violence is desired content for most children. The authors' survey also shows that 23% of children reported that they argue or have conflicts with their teachers almost weekly or almost daily. Similarly, 34% of them reported at least one a physical fight within past year. This demonstrates a correlation of aggressive behavior and violent video game play.

In a study by Anderson *et al.*, several studies on media violence and aggression are discussed[5]. For example, an experiment by Bjorkqvist is designed to display two kinds of films, violent and non-violent, in front of randomly chosen 5 to 6-year-old Finnish children in order to observe their further behaviors [7]. The result shows that those who only watched violent films reach a higher rate on physical assaults, as well as other type of aggression than those who watched the non-violent films. Another experiment from Josephson indicates that violent content in films, such as physical attacks in a hockey movie, influenced the 7 to 9-year-old boys who watched them to express more aggressive behavior when they played hockey than was expressed by boys who did not watch the

violent films [12].

Despite the current lack of proof of causation, the correlations between media violence and aggressive behaviors are clear. Violence in games does have a significant impact on youth and will cause some further influence on future generations, as shown in the above studies and in many more. These studies use well-respected experimental methods, including random sampling, a large number of participants, and a wide range of methods, which prove the objectivity, fairness and reliability of their results. Therefore, we can conclude that there really exists some correlations between media violence and aggression behaviors of youth even though the actually causal relationship is still expected to be proved.

In order to prove the necessity of censorship, utilitarianism analysis will be applied and discussed in the remaining part of this section. Our proposition is that censorship is necessary to be applied to constrain both designers and purchasers' behaviors. And now here is the question, is censorship ethical or not?

According to this issue, we consider the stakeholders first. Obviously, without censorship, violent video games may have both positive and negative influences on different social groups, individuals, and official organizations. For example, the negative impact would be that it may decrease the force of laws, disturb the social orders, hinder education, and so on. On the other hand, it can maximize the benefits for manufacturers and designers. Since it is not that easy to directly point out if censorship is ethical or not, here we will choose government, police, hospitals, education organizations, game developers, parents, youth and our whole society as stakeholders to do ethical analysis, and try to reach a conclusion on this problem.

Government has a strong responsibility of maintaining the harmony and safety of our society. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to control and predict the trends of people's attitudes, opinions, judgments and behaviors. For violent video games, censorship provides a way to control their impacts by regulating designers' behavior using some unified standards and principles. Since we have shown the relations between these violent games and aggressive behaviors of youth, censorship helps a lot in avoiding the potential and unpredictable risks and threats involving intentional attacks, physical assaults, and many other aggressive behaviors stimulated by these media violence. In this way, government can better govern the public, so that their regime can be consolidated, and the force of laws and regulations can be strengthened.

Second, consider other official organizations and social groups, here we set police and hospital as examples. Censorship and regulation undoubtedly have positive influences on these groups and organizations. For example, regulation can help to constrain the age of purchasers of violent games by creating age ratings on each product. Also, censorship regulates the game designers' behaviors such that games with too much blood and violent content must be censored or they cannot come into the market. In this way, it reduces the possibilities of children accessing violent video games so that juvenile delinquency could be effectively decreased and controlled. Consequently, the number of victims, injuries, and harms are also decreasing. For both police departments and hospitals, their workload and stress can be relieved, as well as the pressure of keeping adequate supplies on hand.

Another set of stakeholders benefitting from censorship are education organizations, like schools, universities, colleges and some other social education organizations. When educating our children, educators not only aim to teach students new knowledge, but also tell them how to be a "good" person. "Good" has a wide range of meanings, here we emphasize on the ethics part. School managers need to monitor and regulate students' behaviors in order to avoid any unnecessary accidents. It is very common that students may have some disagreements or other conflicts with each other, their teachers, or even their parents, and sometimes it is hard to predict and further control their following actions. Luckily, censorship provides a way to keep our children away

from violence content hidden in games which may stimulate their aggressive behaviors. Thanks to censorship, it is easier for educators to monitor, and control students' behaviors, establish education strategies and design educating methods.

Now we consider the interests of game manufacturers. Censorship will undoubtedly shrink their benefits. For instance, it limits the range of customers for a certain product based on their age, which will decrease the total amount of sales. Another concern is that censorship may depress their motivations and passions of creating novel games. Creativity plays an important role in Read-Write culture which is the core of the improvement of human civilization, as Lawrence said in his TED talk. Too many constraints may pose obstacles to designers' creativity and imaginations which will damage this expected culture. In addition, as we know, democracy needs free speech, the public needs free speech, our society needs free speech. It is obvious that censorship undermines the freedom of speech which is also mentioned in the previous section.

Censorship is, however, an important tool for parents to protect their children from accessing media violence, and any other "unhealthy" content spreading through the internet. In this busy era, parents usually have less time for observing, monitoring and controlling the actions of their children because of their demanding job and stress. Another problem is that it is hard for parents to get involved in this issue since they have less awareness and knowledge of newer technologies and often do not understand the further impact of violent games on their children. Censorship will be a useful aid for busy parents to protect their children in this rapidly changing world.

Young players are one of the most important stakeholders considered in this ethical issue. As we know, the minds of children are still developing and as a result, they have a reduced ability to judge moral rights and wrongs, be self-disciplined, and understand the line between fantasy and reality. Curiosity, a sudden impulse, or pressure and stimuli from others often cause a child to engage in improper behaviors. It is very common that many adolescents may face difficulties of distinguishing the real world from virtual world and easily suffer from game addiction. This can easily cause issues. For example, a child may engage in aggressive behaviors with other children just because he played a game which reminded him of the similar actions. For our young generation, social norms is also a very critical concern especially in the internet. When playing online games, children can interact verbally or in text with other players, who are often much older. These interactions, especially in violent online games, usually contain foul language, aggressive reactions and other bad content which aims to insult, hurt, slander others. Since children often learn by mimicry, it is very common to hear children repeat rude and disrespectful language heard in games. Therefore, censorship can decrease the risks of bad behaviors, and protect children from violent content that may cause them to act out aggressively. It is undoubtedly good for their growth, and will increase their awareness of self-protection, and sense of responsibilities for maintaining peace, harmony and safety.

Lastly, censorship is an effective way to keep our society harmonious and safe because it reduces the negative influences on behavior so that the potential risks and threats of aggressive behaviors, like shootings and fights, can be reduced.

Based on the discussion above, censorship or regulation of violent games is ethical and beneficial since it brings more benefits than cost. However, currently a more comprehensive and effective solution is still needed since our regulations (code, social norms, laws and market) still have some loopholes which provide people a way to spread media violence. For instance, since the Internet is global and allows anyone to upload what they wish, developers can make games with bloody and passive content freely available to anyone with an Internet connection. Additionally, because of anonymity and the fact that everything is just bits, it is difficult to monitor and control the distribution of such games. Here the imperfection of our regulations are exposed which needs to be further discussed.

Possible Solutions

Based on our analysis, we found it very important for us to find solution to the issue of violent video games which protects the young generation from violent content but also encourages the game designers to create new work. The current policy in the USA focuses on a rating system and sale restriction. These two methods work jointly. The rating system categorizes games into different types of age-appropriateness according to the game's content. Distributors will be able to sell the product based on their rating. With the sale restriction, government regulates the selling behaviors of distributors so that they will not sell products to inappropriate users. Unfortunately, this is not a complete solution because age limits are ignored, and there is little or no enforcement of the sale restriction law. Therefore, new solutions need to be created. From our analysis we see that any regulation must make a balance between the interests of users and developers, so we have brainstormed several proposed solutions that aim to strike this balance.

Law is the direct and powerful way of regulation. However, current laws enforcing censorship do not fully respect the creative work of game developers, as it forces modification of the game content and makes it inconsistent by breaking the story into several independent parts. For the developers, this modification deviates their original design of games and frustrates their motivation to develop new games. When the online game "World of Warcraft" was introduced into China, the game was modified tremendously due to violent content. For instance, in this game, the color of blood was changed into green, which is even opposite to common sense. To balance the both sides of users and developers, a law could require game manufacturers to develop different versions for younger users, in which gore and violence are reduced. Another version of the game intended for adults could keep the integrity of the content intact and satisfy the creativity of the developers.

Another possible solution is to build a better rating system that rates a game not only considering its content but also thoroughly considering other factors related to the use and distribution of the game.

Government is able to play a critical role in leading the market into a good situation that all the software or game distributors could consciously restrict their selling behaviors. The government could set up incentive mechanisms to the merchants who stick on the rating system and only sell video game to the appropriate buyers. The incentive mechanism may include reputation improvement, tax breaks, or a monetary reward. Since the merchants would benefit from their self-discipline, they would most likely actively participate in popularizing the sales restriction.

Still, any restriction on sales is not the perfect solution, as a game could be sold legally, but given to an underage person to play. One way to possibly solve this would be to also require the developers to create a mechanism in the code to track the use of the game to ensure that a game containing violent content was used by a gamer of the proper age. In addition, it may be possible for the developers to add user authentication module to the game. When gamer is going to play the game, he or she will be required to authenticate identity which has to match purchase history of game. In this way, it keeps the integrity of game content and restricts underage users from playing violent games.

In addition to the efforts of developers to regulate users' behavior in architecture(code) part, it is necessary to improve parents' awareness about the correlation between the inappropriate video games and violent behaviors of children. Our government should enhance the visibility of such issues, and our community could also offer some workshops to parents to show them the importance of preventing children from experiencing games that contain violent material. When people realize the potential influence of games on children, more and more people will likely become more proactive in parenting and protecting children from violent games.

In conclusion, balancing the interests of developers and users can be a complicated mission.

Since each proposed solution has its weakness, combining them together would achieve to a better performance.

Conclusion

In our paper, we did ethical analysis on the question “Is censorship ethical to be applied for regulation of violent online games?” using Kantian and utilitarianism theories for both opposing and supporting censorship, respectively. Since more and more experiments and data show correlations between aggressive behaviors of children and media violence, especially violent online games, it is necessary for everyone to be aware of what is happening now. According to our analysis, Kantian theories prove that censorship is unethical because it violates both 1st and 2nd formulations. It also undermines the freedom of speech which would stifle the creation and imagination of designers. However, from another point of view, utilitarianism indicates the necessity of censorship since the benefits and positive impacts for all of the stakeholders far outweigh the costs or negative impacts. Based on the existing solutions, we presented some possible solutions for this ethical issue, in law, market, social norms and code parts, aiming to find a compromise when considering the interests of stakeholders.

In future work, there should still be a focus on the improvement of solutions since internet and digital media technologies are changing very fast so that it keeps creating policy vacuums for regulations. Our proposed solutions are based on our analysis and theory, and may face some difficulties during implementation. It is necessary to consider the feasibility and effectiveness of them according to the actual situation of our society. Despite that ethical issues involving in the digital media technologies and internet are always open topics, they are coming to be highly emphasized and must be considered comprehensively. In conclusion, no matter how our world will be changed by technologies, it requires everyone to have this consciousness of self-protection, objectivity, and reality.

References

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This study examined real-world data of serious violent crimes and data about violent video games, such as game sales, and searches for game guides or videos. The results showed a decrease in violent crime in response to violent video games.