

Public Policy and Violent Video Games

CIS 590 Project

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Since the advent of video games, there has been a controversy surrounding the games and their 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 than films, as the player essentially becomes the character and guides their actions. Again echoing the sentiment expressed in “Digital Nation,” this technology is moving so fast that we do not know its longterm effects that is has 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 [1, 2, 3]. 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 [4]. 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, 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.

As mentioned in Chakraborty’s recent article, public policy refers to both governmental policy and non-government policy [5]. Our project will examine the policies surrounding regulation of violent video games, including censorship and purchase restrictions. We will discuss all four aspects of regulation, law, architecture, market, and social norms, as each complicates the issue in a unique way.

Arguments Against Censorship

As we have seen with several accounts of censorship, Kantian analysis shows censorship 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 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.

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. Thus, citizens and creators both 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.

Muffling free speech is a large issue with censorship, and one that has come to the forefront as a result of attempts at restricting violent video games. 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 [6] and enact their own, more strict system called Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) [7]. The German government requires that every game sold in Germany must be submitted to the USK to obtain a rating and games seen to be too realistically violent will be denied a rating at all. Games with a USK 18 rating 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, making it taboo to even purchase them.

The president of Cryteck, Cevat Yerli, stated how Germany’s move stifled the creation of art: “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.”

Arguments For Censorship

Possible Solutions

Conclusion

References

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