

# Analysing the history of game controversies

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss some of the controversies that have surrounded digital games. Within media studies, such controversies are often referred to as moral panics or media panics. They are understood as cyclical events that arise when new media or media phenomena are introduced into society. The paper's point of departure is the controversy that erupted after the launch of *Death Race* in 1976, which initiated the first world-spanning debate concerning digital games and violence. Similar debates followed the launch of games like *Doom* and *Mortal Kombat*. More recent controversies about game violence have erupted specifically in the wake of school shootings. My analysis shows that, while these debates certainly share similarities, they also undergo important transformations over time. Via a historical perspective, I will demonstrate the importance of these changes to our understanding of the status of digital games in society.

## Keywords

moral panic, media panic, game violence, media regulation, media history

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of media panic is often invoked when public controversies arise around digital games or other media. A media panic is a heated public debate that is most often ignited when a new medium enters society. Concern is usually expressed on behalf of children or youth, and the medium is described as seductive, psychologically harmful, or immoral (Drotner 1999). While media panics tend to revolve around new media, slightly older media, like newspapers and television, are where these concerns are expressed. These debates are usually emotionally charged and polarized, with the negative pole receiving the most attention by far.

The aim of this paper is to discuss some of the controversies that have surrounded digital games and in turn shaped the public view of them. Most such controversies are initiated by the launch of specific titles, such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar 1997). While these controversies are capable of sparking broader debates, many are of a regional character and subside fairly quickly. My analysis will focus on those debates that have proven capable of influencing public opinion about games over the course of several decades of game history. While it is difficult to measure either the magnitude or the specific impact of such debates, there can be little doubt as to their prominence and impact, both in society and in the academic literature. I will also pay special attention to debates that have influenced game regulation in US and Europe.

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My main focus will be on debates from the 1970s and 1990s—rather different stages in the development of digital games as a medium. In the 1970s, digital games were introduced into society; in the 1990s digital games are in abundance, with a wide variety in genres. Games from these discrete decades also differ with regard to gameplay, visual qualities, and means of distribution. Nevertheless, their violent content underpinned related public debates during both decades. Lastly, I will compare the debates from the 1970s and 1990s to more recent debates in order to trace similarities and shifts using a longer historical perspective. In particular, this discussion will encompass debates about school massacres and terror attacks where the perpetrator is accused of being inspired by digital games.

My analysis will engage with the concepts of moral panic and, more specifically, media panic. Media panics are generally described as cyclical, arising whenever potentially controversial new media or media phenomena are introduced into society. The resulting debates are believed to follow a certain set of characteristics, but when we follow a particular medium over time, such as the digital game, we see that their focus in fact shifts and they pass through different phases. Via a historical perspective, I will demonstrate the importance of these changes to our understanding of the status of digital games in society.

## **MEDIA PANIC AND MORAL PANIC**

Media panic is normally understood as a subcategory of the more extensive concept of moral panic, which was coined by the sociologist Stanley Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). Cohen defines moral panic as the general fear expressed within a population about an issue or subgroup that appears to threaten the larger social order. In an oft-quoted passage, Cohen explains that a moral panic arises when

[a] condition, episode, person or group emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes visible. (Cohen 1972, 9)

Since Cohen's seminal work was published, the concept of moral panic has provided a framework for a huge number of empirical studies on topics ranging from "single mothers to working mothers, from guns to Ecstasy, and from pornography on the Internet to the dangers of state censorship" (Miller and Kitzinger 1998, 221). Where media are concerned, moral panics often revolve around the risks of exposing children and youth to undesirable content, such as foul language, pornography, or violence (Drotner 1999, Carlsson 2006). The most common topic fueling these kinds of media controversies is media violence, also when digital games are concerned (Ferguson 2008, Feilitzen 2010, Kutner and Olson 2008). More recently, worries about "online games addiction" have also figured prominently in public debates (Griffiths 2005, Griffiths and Meredith 2009, Karlsen 2013). To some degree, this angle has now supplanted public concern about children's exposure to violent games, and about "Internet addiction," which was a more prominent fear around the turn of the century (Young 1998).

The concept of moral panic, on the other hand, is also sometimes criticized for being inadequately operationalized; according to Pearce and Charman (2011), one of the areas

in which it lacks explanatory power is the theorizing about cause. The existence of moral panic in society tends to be attributed to an unspecified “social anxiety,” which frames moral panic as the consequence of some hypothetically universal (and cyclical) feature of social life. This attribution, it has been suggested, “[i]s founded on an untested a priori assumption that social actors experience a collectively shared insecurity”—an explanation that is itself somewhat circular (Pearce and Charman 2011).

David Gauntlett has described the cyclical nature of moral panics with reference to its stakeholders: a new media phenomenon raises concern in the general populace, and this concern is exploited by politicians to gain political goodwill, which leads to research funding (and a research bias) that support the concerns, which generates further concern in society (Gauntlett 1995). This whole sequence is underpinned by a certain media logic whereby fear and worry attract more attention and are more profitable than their opposites. Gauntlett, then, views moral panic as an ongoing process rather than the more eruptive one referred to by Cohen.

Others have attempted to specify what constitutes a moral panic, most significantly Goode and Ben-Yehuda, who supply the following five characteristics: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. According to these researchers, there must be a heightened level of *concern* over the behavior of a certain group of people and its anticipated consequences for the rest of the society. Second, there must be increasing *hostility* toward the group engaging in the behavior in question. Third, there must be substantial or widespread *consensus* in the society as a whole, or in designated segments of the society, that the threat is real. Fourth, the public concern is *disproportional*, or in excess of “what is appropriate if [the] concern were directly proportional to [the] objective harm.” Fifth, the debates should be *volatile*, both erupting and subsiding fairly suddenly. Goode and Ben-Yehuda also note that moral panics can remain dormant or latent for long periods of time, then reappear, sometimes to become routinized or institutionalized through movements, organizations, legislation, or enforcement practices (in Critcher 2006, 55).

Goode and Ben-Yehuda regard disproportionality as the most important criterion of a proper moral panic. This criterion is correspondingly difficult to measure, because different stakeholders have different views of what might be regarded as a fair share of attention. Youths, politicians, and game developers may, for instance, have different assessments regarding the effect of game violence, what level of attention the issue deserves, and what type of measures are justified in response. One’s view of what constitutes an appropriate amount of attention toward a topic like game violence may very well hinge on one’s ideological, moral, or political inclination as well. Even within the research community, there is no consensus about the effect of violent media content on society. If we look at the research on media violence, we see that after fifty years and more than five thousand studies (Feilitzen 2009), no one has established a clear connection between media violence and violence in the general population. While most media scholars who conduct research on this issue regard the link as small, even negligible, there is still an active group of psychologists who think that media violence has a significant impact upon the general level of violence in society (Anderson 2003, 2010).

In an earlier essay, Goode and Ben-Yehuda further distinguish between a moral *crusade* and a moral *panic*: in the former, campaigners are “genuinely concerned about the real issue; in a moral panic the issue is symbolic of a wider sense of threat” (in Critcher 2006,

18). Again, it is difficult to determine conceptually or measure empirically whether someone regards an issue like media violence or pornography as “real” or simply as a symptom of larger moral battles.

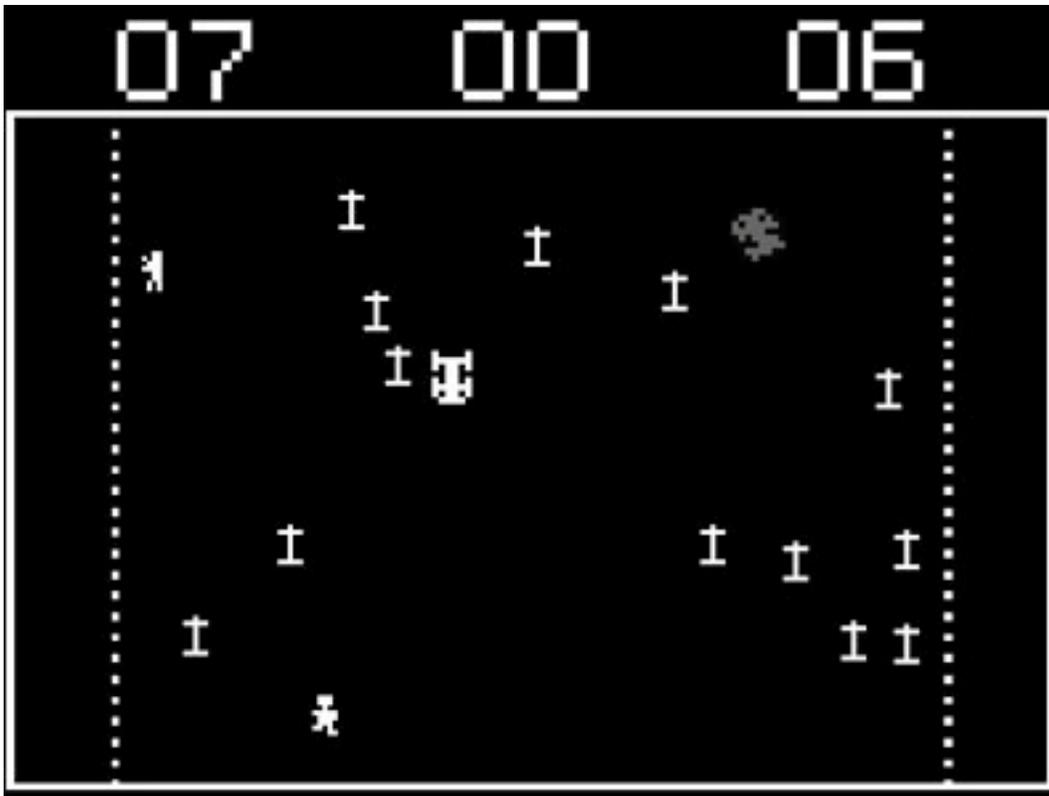
While the operationalization of the concept, then, can be empirically elusive, the conceptual perspective it offers can still be valuable on a cultural level. According to Drotner, the concept of moral panic demonstrates the way in which young people become symbols of larger social contradictions and power struggles among different groups in society. Moral panics and media panics are the embodiments of a certain cultural war, at the center of which are matters of taste and cultural values. “Good” or “bad” media content is often rearticulated as high versus low culture, and a set of familiar distinctions is part of the discourse: art as superior to entertainment, innovation to tradition, authenticity to imitation, and distance to involvement. Most important, argues Drotner, is the distinction between rationality and emotionality, whereby “rationality ranks as the most desirable state of mind and, consequently, emotionality is thought of as the opposition to rationality and hence as a possible threat to one’s personal well-being” (Drotner 1999, 606). This dichotomy creates a media hierarchy in which the preferable media type is associated with knowledge, like books, over the emotionally laden, escapist fiction found in movies, television shows, and digital games. The media content that children prefer, such as cartoons and digital games, is ranked low on the value hierarchy.

## **COMPUTER GAMES AND MEDIA PANICS**

In what follows, I will discuss controversies regarding digital games that have influenced the general notion of games in society, and in turn their regulation. I will begin by focusing on certain debates that have been described as moral and media panics. I will first highlight similarities among them, then differences.

The first noticeable debate concerning computer games appeared after the launch of *Death Race* (Exidy) in 1976. At this time, digital games were still a novelty; it had been but four years since the huge commercial success of *Pong* (Atari Inc. 1972) and the first boom in the arcade business. *Death Race* was inspired by the film *Death Race 2000* (1975), a dystopian film in which the U.S. government has been overthrown by the military in the wake of a financial crisis. The country is run by a charismatic president who keeps the masses placid by supporting ultra-violent sports events, the most popular of which is a cross-country road race where contestants run down and kill pedestrians for points. People in wheelchair are the most valuable prey, earning the contestants hundred points, elderly people seventy points, and adolescents only thirty. The plot of the film revolves around a group of objectors that enters the race intending to assassinate the president and pull off a coup. The reception of the film was mixed. Some described the film as gratuitous bloodshed, while others saw it as a satirical and violent vision of American society and a critique of its increasing media saturation.

Inspired by the movie, the game depicts a car race where players earn points by driving over so-called “gremlins.” Players see the black-and-white game from a bird’s-eye perspective, and cars and gremlins are stick figures moving on the screen. When a gremlin is hit, a cross appears that the player must then avoid. The object of the game is to earn as many points as possible before time runs out.

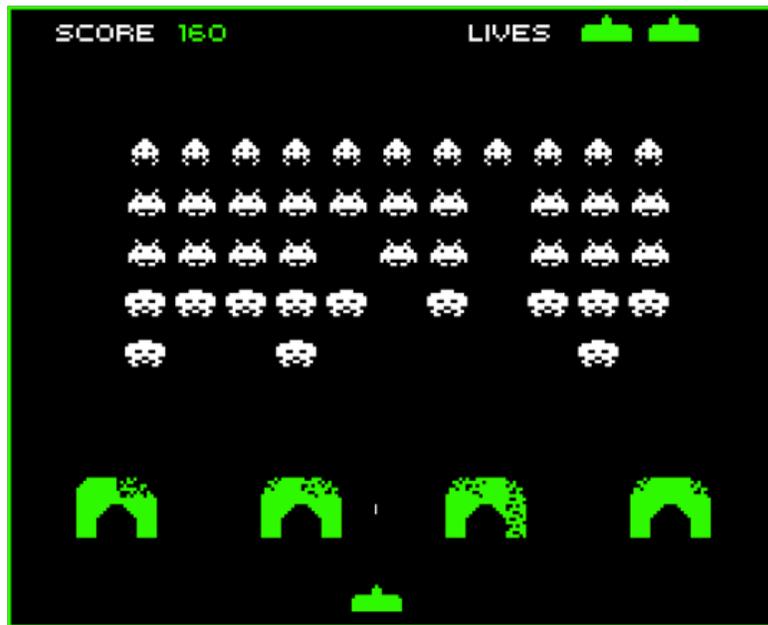


**Figure 1:** A screenshot from *Death Race*. The largest object near the middle of the game is a car, while we see fleeing pedestrians on the left hand of the screen. The crosses are run-over pedestrians, which the driver has to avoid. Source: [retrogamer.net](http://retrogamer.net), [bingmanzfield](http://bingmanzfield)

The public concern about *Death Race* revolved around its violent content and potential impact upon players. In the United States, the National Safety Council labeled the game “sick and morbid,” and the news program *60 Minutes* used the opportunity to discuss the psychological impact of video games more broadly (Donovan 2010). When we encounter the game’s crude graphics today, it can seem surprising, if not downright odd, that it ever stirred such a controversy. To fully appreciate this concern we need to take into account the novelty of the digital game in the 1970s. Both computers and digital games represented technology with which many people had little or no firsthand experience. The ability to maneuver objects on a screen was, for many, a baffling yet seductive experience.

According to researcher Carly Kocurek, we must also view the *Death Race* controversies in light of the source film’s narrative. While the game had no means of fleshing out a violent narrative that was in any way comparable, the film provided it with ample context, and the violence portrayed by both was, by some, found to be socially unacceptable. Other games—and movies—that were launched during the same period framed their violence in more acceptable forms, inviting players to engage in military conflicts. In the game *Tank* (Kee Games 1974), the objective was to shoot down opponents who were represented by a tank, again from a bird’s-eye perspective. Huge, equally uncontroversial commercial hits from the later 1970s include *Asteroids* (Atari Inc.

1979) and *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978).



**Figure 2:** In the early stages of developing *Space Invaders*, designer Tomohiro Nishikado wanted the player to shoot down humanoids. His employer, the Taito company, refused, probably as a result of the controversies that accompanied earlier games like *Death Race*.

In contrast to these other games, *Death Race* featured violence that appeared to be directed towards human beings in an everyday setting. Kocurek notes,

[M]ilitary games, in particular, would not have disrupted the accepted governmental monopoly on violence. War is commonly justified, or even glorified, as a defensive practice at the very least, as well as a means of preserving certain ideals or even proving national vigor. The vigilante justice of the Wild West is often romanticized as a critical step in the “civilizing” of the region. In summary, the violent fantasies of the other games listed here would have fit within accepted violent realities. (Kocurek 2012)

Violence can operate ludologically once it has been reduced to “a historical narrative draped in nostalgia,” Kocurek continues. The socially unacceptable violence of *Death Race* was exacerbated by the player’s active role in that violence, and in the controversy that followed, digital games were pointedly contrasted to the more passive medium of television. As behavioral psychologist Gerald Driessen stated, “In this game a player takes the first step to creating violence. The player is no longer just a spectator. He’s an actor in the process” (Blumenthal 1976, in Kocurek 2012). Some later research has appeared to support the idea that the consequences of this type of virtual violence are important, and that narratives where the perpetrator is not punished for his or her misdeeds have disproportionately negative effects on their viewers (Kutner and Olson 2008). Whether these claims can be substantiated or not is beyond the scope of this paper;

what is significant is that the narrative setting of the violence played a greater role for the following debate than the game's relatively underwhelming graphics.

Several researchers have pointed out similarities between this debate and the controversies around the launch of two car race games more than twenty years later—that is, the first installments of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Carmageddon* (Stainless Games) in 1997 (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2000, Karlsen 2001). By this time, violent digital games were abundant, but whereas a war game like *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami 1998) relied on stealth rather than violence, *Carmageddon*'s principal objective was to mow down pedestrians. Extra points were awarded to particularly spectacular acts of destruction. This game was also inspired by *Death Race 2000*, but, according to an interview with the designers in [gamesdomain.co.uk](http://gamesdomain.co.uk), it was all in good fun: “All the killings et cetera are done in such a ‘Monty Python’ sense of humour, it’s impossible to take it seriously” (Karlsen 2001, 89). Still, some took it seriously, and when the second game in the series, *Carmageddon II: Carpoolypse Now* (1998) was released, it was censored in several countries and had to be redesigned to feature aliens (for the German market) or zombies and green gore instead of blood (for several other markets, including the UK). The game was banned outright in Brazil. Of course, if we look at the user manual of *Carmageddon II*, the humorous intent of the designers is evident, as is the unruly and potentially disturbing game objectives:

Rules? There are no rules, except that you have to complete each mission before you can progress to the next part of the game. The races between missions are an opportunity for you to do whatever you want, whatever really turns you on. (User manual, 4)

...

Hitting other cars and splatting pedestrians adds time to your timer and gives you credits. Doing so in imaginative and novel ways gives you extra bonuses. Try to think of new and humorous ways of pulping pedestrians—you'll more than likely be rewarded for it. (Ibid., 5)

...

During races you will never be forced to go in a particular direction or to conform to any rules. If you treat the entire race with utter disrespect and just try to be disruptive—that's fine, you'll even be rewarded for it! (Ibid., 6)

A potentially controversial use of violence was also key to the *Grand Theft Auto* series, in which, infamously, players could pay prostitutes for sex and later kill them to get the money back. Most of the games in this series spurred much debate—the British Police Federation, for example, described one of the games as “sick, deluded and beneath contempt” (Poole 2000, 219). Here again, game designers defended their use of violence as humorous and satirical, likely because they could not convincingly argue that the games staged any sort of heroic drama as such.

We find some of the same patterns in related cultural debates during the 1990s. In the United States, the democratic senator for Connecticut, Joseph Lieberman, led a campaign against the computer game industry that was propelled by the launch of *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* (Digital Pictures 1992). During a press conference, the senator showed

footage in which a martial arts fighter from *Mortal Kombat* rips the still-beating heart out of his opponent's chest. Such dramatic conclusions were known as "Fatalities" and were implemented because the designers found the ending of each fight to be somewhat anti-climatic. Designer John Tobias explains, "We wanted to put a big exclamation point at the end by letting the winner really rub his victory in the face of the loser. Once we saw the player reaction, the fact that they enjoyed it, we knew it was a good idea" (Donovan 2010, 227). The reception of this feature outside the gamer community was, unsurprisingly, less enthusiastic. As Lieberman noted, "We're not talking about *Pac-Man* or *Space Invaders* anymore," but "about video games that glorify violence and teach children to enjoy inflicting the most gruesome forms of cruelty imaginable" (Donovan 2010, 225). As with the race games described earlier, these games were seen to be destroying the moral fabric of society by encouraging unacceptably violent behavior.

Other contributions to the heightened concern about digital-game violence in this period include *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992) and the more prominent *Doom*, which were seminal for the development of the first-person shooter genre. In the United States, the debate shook the industry, which was eventually forced to take action. Despite catering to different player segments, the two largest console companies, Nintendo and Sega, joined forces and proposed an age-rating system for games. In the United States, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) was established in 1994 in the wake of the debate. In Europe, several national regulatory systems were established during the 1990s, and, after further negotiation, the European computer game industry established a transnational system known as Pan European Game Information (PEGI) in 2003. These measures addressed some of the concern associated with children having access to violent games and gave the game industry an image lift.

## **CYCLICAL OR EVOLVING DEBATES?**

Thus far, I have focused on similarities between the digital-game controversies of the 1970s and 1990s. Despite the visual differences between the games of these decades, the debates from both revolve around the norm-breaking nature of the violence being depicted. The player's implication in the fictional violence (as an active participant rather than a passive witness) also repeatedly underpins these arguments. But are these moral and media panics truly cyclical in nature? In what follows, I will point to indicators that the public image of digital games is changing, and I will describe some emerging trends that support this claim, according to three categories: (1) general knowledge of digital games, (2) the dissemination of the concept of moral panic, and (3) the perceived correlation between fictional and real violence.

### **1. General Knowledge of Digital Games**

The public debate over violent content in games has been in decline for some time, so that, currently, digital games seem to spur less debate than the previous two decades. The launch of *Grand Theft Auto 5* in September 2013, for instance, was met with general praise for its technical and narrative qualities rather than revulsion at its violence as such. In *The Telegraph*, critic Rick Ravlin even noted a general tendency to redeem this kind of content:

The vast majority of reviews now read like first-year sociology essays, applauding Rockstar for "holding up a mirror to the world," and "parodying post-modern living," as if that is a great artistic achievement, rather than total nihilism. And in any case, the jokes are frosting on a delicious cake of mindless violence. (Ravlin 2013)

The proportion of the population acquainted with digital games has gradually increased, and many of those who have grown up with violent digital games are now in their forties or older. This might to some extent explain the milder reception of *Grand Theft Auto* in 2013 compared to 1997—as more and more people have survived this supposed scourge upon society (as Lieberman put it, one that teaches “children to enjoy inflicting the most gruesome forms of cruelty imaginable”), without the experience of being turned into rabid thugs when they put down their controllers.

The development of the first-person shooter genre and more realistic representation of violence represented a certain innovation of digital games in the 1990s, and equally huge advances have come about over the past twenty years as well. The difference between the graphics of the first *Doom* in 1993 and its later versions was, for example, the reason the ban on the first *Doom* game was lifted in Germany in 2011, after seventeen years (Brown 2011).



**Figure 3:** The first-person shooter game *Doom* ignited controversy regarding the new level of realism and violence in computer games. The first-person perspective was believed to be especially suggestive with the effect that the player might become desensitized to the violence he or she was perpetrating.

In comparison to the panic cycle described by Gauntlett, today there are people with knowledge of digital games throughout society, including researchers, journalists, and politicians. People in influential positions are often familiar with computer games; many grew up with them and some are even gamers themselves. When people with more nuanced and moderate views take part in a debate things tend not to spiral out of control. If we go back to the five criteria described by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, then, we find that

current debates often fall short of a moral panic. They may still be *volatile* and raise *concern*, but more nuanced and moderate voices will keep some of the *hostility* toward the medium in check and prevent the public from forming a hasty *consensus* about the threat. The existence of regulation systems like PEGI can also inhibit the most *disproportional* calls for censorship.

The establishment of regulation systems may also have been instrumental in removing some of the concern of children and youths being exposed to violence, as *groups*. After the turn of the century controversy now seems more often to focus on “deviant” people, like the perpetrators of school massacres. The Columbine school massacre in 1999 was the first such tragedy to be associated with computer games. The shootings were undertaken by two male students at the school, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who also committed suicide during the act. Related debates within the American media centered on topics such as school security, Goth culture, social outcasts, the gun culture in the United States—and violent digital games. The Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, in which Seung-Hui Cho killed thirty-two students and professors, also led to considerable debate about the impact of violent games (Fergusson 2008). Computer games were also debated widely in the wake of the terror attack in Norway on July 22, 2011, when the perpetrator killed seventy-seven people using a bomb in Oslo and handguns at the island of Utøya (Karlsen and Jørgensen 2014).

Another topic that has come to prominence in the public sphere since the turn of the century is game addiction. Mentioned only in passing in the 1980s and 1990s (Provenzo 1991, Griffiths 1995), it is now at the forefront, thanks to the huge growth in popularity of massively multiplayer online games. Much scholarly research now attends the issue as well (Karlsen 2013). When new genres of digital games gain popularity, about which the general public has little knowledge, concern at the societal level may simply shift to a new scapegoat, suppressing earlier concerns in the process.

## **2. The Dissemination of the Concept of Moral Panic**

Society has become more knowledgeable about digital games, but it has also become more familiar with the general tendencies of moral and media panics. Sociologist David A. Altheide has looked at the use of the concept of moral panic in the public since its arrival over forty years ago. He conducted a qualitative media analysis of some three hundred news reports from the UK and the United States and found that the occurrence of the term had increased from about two articles a year in the late 1980s to fifteen articles a year just a decade later. More significantly, he also found that the use of the concept had changed:

The use of MP [moral panic] in the news reflects a kind of “journalistic career” in moving, over time, from more concept-specific usage to much broader and “looser” usage that assumes audience familiarity with the term, and more recently to become its own trope and thematic for making critical points as it has become embedded more firmly in journalistic discourse. (Altheide 2009, 84)

According to Altheide, moral panic has, uncharacteristic of sociological concepts, been widely used by the mass media and become part of daily discourse. A similar maturation has characterized the concept of media panic, at least in Scandinavian debates. Here, as well, the concept first entered the public sphere by way of articles or op-eds written by academics, where the basic meaning of the concept was explained. More recently—for example, after the 7/22 terror attack in Norway—it has been used in a manner that

assumes audience familiarity with the term, as when those who are critical toward computer games are accused of spreading media panic. Drotner has found a certain “historical amnesia” to be typical of these debates in the past, when both journalists and the general public seemed to forget that this type of concern was not entirely new. In contrast, in the Norwegian debates following 7/22, the cyclical nature of media panics was mentioned, by journalists and non-academic contributors as well as by scholars. This demonstrates that the core understanding of the media panic has been disseminated into broader parts of the population and is reproduced in places other than the academic discourse (Karlsen and Jørgensen 2014).

The spread of concepts like moral panic and media panic can also be seen in light of a broader academic awareness about how people interpret and use media. The “qualitative turn” in media studies in the 1970s and 1980s represented a shift in methodology as well as in perspective. Whereas researchers earlier often focused on the effects of the media, they turned increasingly toward how people used media in their everyday lives. This new focus granted media users more agency in scholarly narratives and characterized them as competent and critical rather than vulnerable (Hall 1973). The result was a greater understanding within media studies that media users are not so easily seduced by media but often engage with its content in tandem with their overall worldviews or interests (Morley 1992, Livingstone 2002). Media content has also generally come to be seen as peripheral in terms of any palpable influence upon people’s attitude toward violence. One’s primary socialization through family, school, and friends is much more relevant to the development of norms, and exposure to violence in real life is regarded as more important for shaping people’s attitudes toward it than secondary sources like mediated violence.

This academic shift has now informed the public debate. While more reductive ideas about how media affects people may still make headlines, as a reminiscence of older research paradigms, academics from media studies, sociology, and game studies now often enter the debate to counter such claims and, in turn, dampen new eruptions of media panic.

### **3. The Perceived Correlation between Fictional and Real Violence**

If we look at crime statistics over the past few decades, concerns about media violence may come across as slightly more sympathetic. Several researchers have noted an increase in violence in the United States that started in the 1960s and peaked in the first half of the 1990s (Ferguson 2008, Kutner and Olson 2008, 60). Other countries experienced the same trend, albeit on a smaller scale (Pinker 2011, 147). Canada, for example, had less than a third of the annual homicides of the United States but followed the same overall trend between 1961 and 2009 (Pinker 2011, 140). This means that the huge controversies surrounding the launch of games like *Mortal Kombat*, *Doom*, and *Night Trap* took place at a time when the homicide rate in the United States and several other Western countries was at an all-time high.

What is remarkable, however, is what happened during the next twenty years. In 1994, the homicide rate, and the total number of juvenile arrests, in the United States began a seven-year *downward* trend. Between 1994 and 2001, arrests for murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assaults in that country fell 44 percent, producing the lowest juvenile arrest rate for violent crimes since 1983 (Kutner and Olson 2008, 60). The crime rate then stabilized for a few years, before starting to decrease again in 2004. By 2010, the rate of violent crimes was at its lowest point since the early 1960s (Pinker 2011, 140).

Nearly three-quarter of the increase in violent crime that began in the mid-1960s, in fact, can be ascribed to its growth within a relatively small part of the U.S. population—that is, black and other minority males. In the context of the present paper, we might note that there is no evidence that, as a group, black males were more exposed to computer games than other groups. But they certainly dealt with many other risk factors, such as poverty. Juvenile blacks also had a much higher rate of exposure to real-life violence than other groups did (Kutner and Olson 2008, 61).

Exactly what impact these statistics have had outside of the academic sphere is difficult to assess, but it seems likely that journalists and politicians, and probably greater swathes of society, have registered the overall decrease in violence, and when violence is sinking, the need to find explanations for its existence becomes less of an issue. The consequent indifference toward its potential causes can lead fewer people to be concerned about media violence and therefore less attention to the release of violent games like *Grand Theft Auto 5*.

If we engage a wider historical perspective, we may further note a remarkable decrease in societal violence over a period of several centuries. Intellectual historian Norbert Elias saw this as part of a civilizing process, observing that post-medieval European standards regarding violence, as well as norms regarding sexual behaviour, table manners, and forms of speech, were gradually transformed by increasing thresholds of shame and repugnance (Elias 1994 [1939]). Restraint became a profound virtue, first manifested in court etiquette and later in the general populace.

Other historical factors were important to this transformation as well—most significantly, the growth of nation-states and an increase in trade among them. As Steven Pinker bluntly observes, as the world becomes ever more intertwined by trade, foreigners are worth more alive than dead (Pinker 2011). In Europe, between the late Middle Ages and the twentieth century, a patchwork of feudal territories gradually transformed into larger kingdoms with centralized authority. As nation-states started to form, leaders sought to discourage internal conflict, because it burdened the resources the state needed to produce goods for trading and also keep invading forces at bay. Law enforcement gradually came to supplant concepts like honor and vengeance, which tended toward violent results.

The rise and fall of the duel might demonstrate this transformation. Formal dueling emerged during the Renaissance as a measure to “curtail assassinations, vendettas and street brawls among aristocrats and their retinues” (Pinker 2011, 27). When a nobleman felt his honor was attacked, he could challenge the attacker to a duel. (Earlier, similar conflicts commonly involved two opposing clans.) Dueling restricted the violence to the duelists, and honor could be restored with (relatively) little bloodshed. Within a couple of centuries, interestingly, even this measure was seen as barbaric, and by 1850, dueling had been more or less discarded in the English-speaking part of the world. The rest of Europe followed suit in the following few decades (ibid., 28).

Though the rising nation-states gradually gained some kind of control over social violence, governmental violence remained a threat. Judicially supervised torture to extract confessions had been introduced (or reintroduced) during the thirteenth century in most European countries; the Catholic Inquisition and the revival of Roman law played key roles in this shift (Hunt 2007). Over the course of centuries, however, torture was gradually replaced by more humane penal systems (Foucault 1977). Imprisonment started to replace specific types of torture and mutilation for minor crimes in countries like

England and the Netherlands already during the sixteenth century, though most countries practiced some form of juridical torture into the seventeenth century. Early in the eighteenth century, England abandoned this practice, and Scotland followed suit some decades later, as did Prussia in 1754, Sweden in 1772, Austria in 1776, and then most of the rest of Europe in rapid succession (Hunt 2007, 76). By the middle of the nineteenth century, judicially supervised torture had been abolished.

Similar trajectories can be drawn for a host of other types of violence, albeit at different times and different paces—think of the abolishment of slavery, the move away from capital punishment, and the general ascendance of acknowledgment of both human and animal rights. Capital punishment was the norm in most Western countries until the middle of the previous century, when it came under considerable social pressure and were eventually abolished in several countries (Pinker 2011, 181).

In conclusion, Pinker estimates that the chances of an average person being killed violently in late Middle Ages was somewhere between ten and fifty times higher than it is today. Contrary to popular belief, then, we live in peaceful times. In this context, Kocurek's observation about how the controversies surrounding *Death Race* could be seen as a disruption of the general acceptance in society of governmental monopoly on violence, is not a new form of sensitivity but the continuation of a process that started centuries ago.

Media scholars often attribute media panics to technological changes, where, for example, the telegraph, railroad, and printing press in turn made news—and panics—travel faster. Cheaper printing technology and distribution allowed serialized novels with their allegedly dubious content to be made easily available in the middle of the nineteenth century (Drotner 1999). More recently, cartoons, movies, radio and television, the Internet and digital games have introduced new media habits (and attendant concerns) into society in turn. Nevertheless, as previously discussed, violence is in retreat in society. From this perspective, recurring media panics do not reflect an increasingly violent society but a society that is increasingly interested in *containing* its violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

As I have shown in this paper, concern about violence in digital games has been a recurring topic for several decades. This is particularly the case for violence that appears to disrupt norms or otherwise advocate for a disruption of the government's monopoly on violence. But there are also signs of change, as general concern has gradually shifted from children and youth as groups, to particularly “vulnerable” individuals. Concern about violence has also given way to issues associated with newer genres like MMORPGs and worries about online game addiction.

More importantly, the public has now become more familiar with the workings of moral and media panics, allowing for more levelheaded responses and more enlightened historical perspective. As many game scholars know first-hand, it can be uncomfortable to take part in heated public debates, but it is nevertheless vital that game scholars contribute their knowledge and nuanced views as needed. Digital games, like all other media, have problematic sides and, first of all, it is important that we address real issues like bullying and gender stereotypes. We will, as a field, benefit from being more present in the public. But to be part of the public debate, and to represent the voice of reason, we must also be prepared to address concerns we do not necessarily share, like the spectre of media violence and other matters we tend to dismiss as media panics.

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