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**Checkpoint: A Deconstruction of the Video Game Violence Debate and Proposed Strategies  
for Creating Solutions**

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**Checkpoint: A Deconstruction of the Video Game Violence Debate and Proposed Strategies  
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**Report**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Checkpoint: A Deconstruction of the Video Game Violence Debate and Proposed Strategies for Creating Solutions**

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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In the months following the Sandy Hook elementary school tragedy, there has been increased attention and debate regarding violent video games and how they affect those who play them. While some lobby for increased regulation of their sale, others argue that video games are not the reason such tragedies continue to happen.

In this report, I approach the debate from social, personal and political dimensions to better identify the inconsistencies regarding how violent video games are presented to and received by the public. I also interview video game developers, critics, and researchers to uncover solutions and new strategies to increase video game education and perception about the use of violence in a video game.

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*Can a computer make you cry? Right now, no one knows. This is partly because many would consider the very idea frivolous. But it's also because whoever successfully answers this question must first have answered several others. Why do we cry? Why do we laugh, or love, or smile? What are the touchstones of our emotions?*

*Until now, the people who asked such questions tended not to be the same people who ran software companies. Instead, they were writers, filmmakers, painters, musicians. They were, in the traditional sense, artists.*

*We're about to change that tradition. The name of our company is Electronic Arts. We are a new association of electronic artists united by a common goal—to fulfill the enormous potential of the personal computer. In the short term, this means transcending its present use as a facilitator of unimaginative tasks and a medium for blasting aliens. In the long term, however, we can expect a great deal more.*

*These are wondrous machines we have created, and in them can be seen a bit of their makers. It is as if we had invested them with the image of our minds. And through them, we are learning more and more about ourselves. We learn, for instance, that we are more entertained by the involvement of our imaginations than by passive viewing and listening. We learn that we are better taught by experience than by memorization. And we learn that the traditional distinctions—the ones that are made between art and entertainment and education—don't always apply.*

*In short, we are finding that the computer can be more than just a processor of data. It is a communications medium: an interactive tool that can bring people's thoughts and feelings closer together, perhaps closer than ever before. And while fifty years from now, its creation may seem no more important than the advent of motion pictures or television, there is a chance it will mean something more. Something along the lines of a universal language of ideas and emotions. Something like a smile.*

*The first publication of Electronic Arts are now available. We suspect you'll be hearing a lot about them. Some of them are games like you've never seen before, that get*

*more out of your computer than other games have. Others are harder to categorize—and we like that.*

*We're providing a special environment for talented, independent software artists. It's a supportive environment, in which big ideas are given room to grow. And some of America's most respected software artists are beginning to take notice. We think our current work reflects this very special commitment. And though we are few in number today and apart from the mainstream of the mass software marketplace, we are confident that both time and vision are on our side. Join us. We see farther.*

**--2 page advertisement for Electronic Arts in Creative Computing Magazine, June 1983**

At the time of the printing of this advertisement, we stood at the edge of a digital horizon. Tinkerers and inventors with humble beginnings were unknowingly laying the groundwork for future technological empires. Musicians were indulging themselves in a bold genre of music that boomed through speakers and amplifiers, and nations grappled with strife and conflict in the Middle East. Our world was changing, and a new industry was about to come into fruition.

Electronic Artists—a breed unfamiliar to most of the world at the time—were like digital vagabonds fueled with passions of storytelling, yet lacking the proper medium. Their ideas needed something more than what film, television or traditional art could offer; something dynamic in function, yet still approachable in form. They yearned for interaction with their audience, a physical connection that could be made between art and viewer. To them, the rise of computers blessed them with the tools they had long waited for, yet had not existed. The monitor was their canvas, the keyboard their brush.

It wasn't long before companies such as Electronic Arts, Nintendo, and others would help pioneer an industry focused on creating video games. Driven to crafting interactive expressions of story and emotion, video game companies sought to utilize this relatively foreign device—the personal computer—and show the world a new side.

Hidden behind banal computations and equations was a new frontier for conveying emotions and morals. From an enigma of circuits and electricity, game designers would carve video games from seemingly nothing, and by playing them we are invited into brand new world.

Since then, Electronic Arts has grown from a simple video game studio into one of the largest video game publishers in the world, with revenues exceeding billions of dollars. The industry itself has surpassed the movie and music businesses, and companies dedicated to making video games have grown from a few dozen employees to thousands of developers spread across the world. Thirty years later, the philosophy of video games remains unchanged, but our perception of them is far from the same.

It is often said that art can imitate life, and in that vein these electronic artists strive to infuse their digital worlds with themes similar to our own. Yet in an increasingly violent world, it became difficult over the years to ignore the realities of guns, war and death. The violent edge in video games grew sharper over time and is now a primary element in many popular video games. As the tools used to create video games grew more powerful, the games too grew in scale and depth. In the past few years, some games have allowed us to simulate the landing on Normandy beach, enact and prevent presidential assassinations, and even help orchestrate a terrorist attack on an international airport.

It is no secret that our culture, as seen through our newspapers, popular TV shows, movies and games, is permeated with violence. Big-budget movies and television programs iconize protagonists as they punch, blast and shoot their way through gangsters, armies and the occasional otherworldly villain. Many of the best-selling video games are no different, and again they come under the spotlight as a significant cause of devastating tragedies such as Columbine, or most recently Sandy Hook.

Unlike other violent media, where the only form of participation is simply viewing it, video games are unique in that they place the violent actions in the hands of



the viewers. By interacting with violence through video games, some argue they are reenacting the violence; they become part of a violent simulation that could become reality.

It is why, in the wake of recent mass shootings, we find ourselves coming back to a discussion we've had many times before. Political figures and major organizational leaders hold the video game industry responsible, claiming that video games are becoming too graphic and far too violent, desensitizing our youth and implying that violent actions are, for the most part, acceptable in real life. By introducing regulations on violent video games and limiting their availability to our youth, governors and senators believe it will help prevent future tragedies. Video game industry leaders respond with arguments of freedom of expression; that to attack the First Amendment to protect the Second is an irrational solution and is reason enough to explain why such shameful and terrible events like Sandy Hook continue to happen. On one side, gun activist groups and lobbyists argue that video games and other violent media should have more oversight so as to prevent them from getting into the hands of children, while opponents believe the real solution lies in banning the sale of automatic assault weapons and high-volume magazines.

Even more disturbing than this cycle, though, is how little things have changed. As we explore and define our reality through parallels of graphic television programs, video games and films, we have forgotten a vital step in the endless cycle of human experience. Our ability to have discourse allows us to share our thoughts, ideas and opinions. It is how concepts are born and illuminated, old ones are challenged and scrutinized, and in time we shift our learning culture to adapt certain ideas and shun others. In the halls of schools and universities—such as those of Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook—we are taught this discourse as a cornerstone of higher learning, yet in the realm of violence in our media such discourse all but dissipates.

If we are to truly explore, isolate and express the truths about the effects of violence in video games, such discourse can be the solution sought after by

organizational leaders and political figures alike. It is time for the video game industry to be let into the classroom and sit at the table with the likes of famous literature, ancient philosophies and prolific leaders. The impact of video games on our culture—socially, politically, economically—can already be seen, and their reach will only expand in years to come. To best understand that influence, a new discourse must begin; one that seeks to give proper context and a deeper perception of violence in our video games, instead of excusing it.

The long-standing dilemma does not stem from a single source, but is spread across all parties involved. To solve all of these conflicts, a delicate balance of discussion and direction must be found and acted upon together with a unified goal of enlightening everyone while blaming no one. It is not the fault of video game companies for making violent games, nor is it the fault of lobbyists who protect the right to make them, nor the parents who purchase them for their children. Instead, we must identify the inconsistencies between all of these parties, and others, that have led to our misconceptions of violent video games in society. The moment when we collectively acknowledge these follies, we will have taken the greatest step toward solving this debate once and for all.

### **Business is Business**

Although video games are capable of delivering a unique interactive experience, the business of making them is just as entrained to the hard truth seen in popular television shows and the highest-grossing movies: sex and violence make money. For games, however, it is the violence that sells.

In 2012, of all video games submitted and rated by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, only 9 percent were classified as an M-rated game. According to ESRB guidelines, M-rated games are reserved for mature audiences of 17 years or older and can contain themes of sexuality, significant violence or blood, and strong language—a rough equivalent of an average R-rated movie.

“If violence was all you needed to sell a game, I imagine you would see more games gleefully embrace the M or AO (Adults Only) rating, but clearly at 9 percent we’re not seeing that,” writes Patrick Miller, Editor of Game Developer Magazine, “Most developer studios try to avoid the M-rating in order to widen their potential market.” In the same year, 45 percent of games reviewed carried an E-rating, commonly known as ‘E for everyone.’

While almost always accounting for the smallest percentage of games published each year, M-rated games are also the most profitable. Of the top 10 highest-selling games of 2012, five of them bore the M-rating and four of them are classified as first-person shooters (a type of game that places the player directly in the body of the character he or she is playing). At the top of the list, “Call of Duty: Black Ops 2” grossed \$500 million in 24 hours, making it the biggest entertainment launch of all time. After 15 days, it surpassed \$1 billion—two days faster than James Cameron’s “Avatar”, and four days faster than Joss Whedon’s “Avengers”.

“Let’s compare this to the top movies of 2012,” Miller wrote, “You’ve got a movie about teenage vampires and werewolves killing each other and having sex, a movie about televised child arena death matches, and three movies about costumed super heroes beating people up.”

What Miller points out is often a primary counter argument the video game industry uses: that violence in our media has existed in other forms for much longer than video games have been around. When companies such as Electronic Arts and Activision were in their infancy, films were well into exploring the darker corners of society and violence. From as far back as 1971 when Stanley Kubrick’s film “A Clockwork Orange”, an adaptation of a novel bearing the same name, turned eyes and stomachs with disturbingly graphic scenes of blood, torture, and rape, it is difficult to argue that video games explore paths of violence that novels, films and television haven’t already tread.

In fact, the accusation that our violent media were the cause of such loss of life once had literature in the cross hairs. In the summer of 1977, now-famous author Stephen King published a novella titled “Rage” under the pseudonym Richard Bachman. The plot focused on a high school senior named Charlie Decker who fatally shoots two teachers and holds a classroom hostage for several hours. Between 1988 and 1996, there were three school shootings in which police investigators reported the shooter was either inspired by, or actually had, King’s book.

King had “Rage” taken out of print shortly after the 1996 shooting in Kentucky, but insists that *Rage* was not the sole cause for such tragedies. In an essay titled “Guns”, released electronically just weeks after the Sandy Hook shooting, King recounts his experience and explains that, while not the root of what caused the shootings, “Rage” could have played some part in inching the culprits toward enacting their brutal fantasies.

“It took more than one slim novel to cause these teenagers to do what they did,” King wrote, “My book did not break them or turn them into killers; they found something in my book that spoke to them because they were already broken. Yet I did see “Rage” as a possible accelerant which is why I pulled it from sale.”

King also went on to write that pulling the book from publication was the right action, despite the attention it was receiving. “I pulled it because in my judgment it might be hurting people, and that made it the responsible thing to do” wrote King.

Although many would consider King’s action to be proper, it is one seldom repeated in other industries. With billions of dollars at stake, it would be incredibly unlikely to see video game publisher Activision pull “Call of Duty: Black Ops 2” from the shelves if police were to find a copy of it amongst Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza’s belongings—and they did.

Video games have limitless potential in portraying vibrant worlds and draw upon our deepest emotions to weave complex tales rivaling some of our greatest literary works or cinematic masterpieces, yet at the end of the day the video game industry is a business.

In most cases, that means opting to create another hyper-realistic and graphic shooter than risking time and money on making a more nuanced or abstract game, further cementing the generally accepted idea that our culture is “obsessed” with violence.

### **To Perceive is to Know**

In the weeks following the Sandy Hook shooting, countless voices echoed across the airwaves about what needed to be done to try and reign in this growing epidemic of flooding our culture with graphic images and violence. Vice President Joe Biden orchestrated a meeting of video game executives, researchers and representatives with his task force to discuss what role video games play in real world violence, if any. Christopher Ferguson, a professor of psychology at Texas A&M who has done extensive research about the impact of violent video games on its players, attended the meeting to shed light on evidence found by research studies.

“Over the past 10 years, scientific data has become increasingly clear in pointing away from video games as the cause of real-world behavior,” Ferguson said in an interview after the meeting, “The conference showed me that the game industry doesn’t necessarily need to change anything they’re doing, but instead focus on how they are perceived by the public.”

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing the industry is how the public perception of video games has rarely been positive. As video games ascended the financial ladder and started becoming major money-making machines, the marketing and public awareness for them escalated. Many publishers exploited the explosive, adrenaline-pumping aspects of their biggest titles and crafted billboards and commercials to best exemplify their most entertaining attributes. Although those who play video games might understand the intention behind such campaigns, the opinions of the non-gaming community are quite different. Bombarded with images of clashing steel and soaring bullets, people that don’t play games see such advertisements as bloated attempts

to capitalize on disturbing themes and salacious actions far too graphic for their children or teenagers.

Worse yet, the industry itself are somewhat responsible for that. In the weeks leading up to the release of “Dead Space 2” in January 2011, a science-fiction survival-horror game, Electronic Arts released several advertisements that documented the reactions of several mothers as they watched videos of a portion of the graphic content in the game. Disgusted and horrified, the advertisements end with many of them asking who would play such a grotesque video game, followed by the campaign slogan “Your Mom Hates Dead Space 2.” Receiving critical praise, the game went on to sell more than 2 million copies within the first week of its release.

In October 2012, to help promote the level realism in “Medal of Honor: Warfighter”, Electronic Arts posted links on the official website that led to the websites of companies that manufacture the guns used in the game. In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, many vilified the publisher for maintaining the links on the video game’s website. Electronic Arts responded by saying it had effectively forgotten the links were on the website and promptly removed them.

When the same company—now a major video game publisher—that first penned the enigmatic prospect of a computer eliciting emotion from us is also partly responsible for why public opinion of video games has fallen to such depths in current years, there is little question that something needs to change. Perception is paramount to understanding an interactive medium as influential as video games are suggested to be.

To perceive a video game requires knowledge and interaction before judgment, much like discerning any type of art or medium. As a wine connoisseur must expose his or her palette to hundreds of wines over many years, proper perception of video games can come from equally large amounts of video games and thousands of hours of playtime.

“I believe us critics have a responsibility in making informed judgments, particularly regarding violence,” says Omar Gallaga, Technology and Arts Editor for the Austin American-Statesman. “I think game critics have an obligation to put games—especially violent ones—in the context of the world that they’re in.”

Experiencing video games is only half the battle, as video game critics must then interpret what they have played into a review. Too often, though, these reviews cater more toward assessing the visual and mechanical components that make up the final product, neglecting to comment on the more mature substances and whether or not they add anything to the final product, be it more entertainment, deeper narrative, and so on. Released last year, “The Walking Dead” video game series received high praise from many publications, and was the recipient of several awards for excellence in video game design and storytelling. It was also one of the most violent video games in recent years, depicting scenes of adults and teenagers being ripped apart by undead creatures. While firmly rooted in fiction, few could argue it was no less disturbing than what is seen in video games closer resembling reality.

“Every single choice you made had an impact, and some of the bigger decisions were gut-wrenching and had serious consequences,” Gallaga said of “The Walking Dead” gameplay, “It really raised the bar for video game narratives, but more importantly it showed how violence can serve the narrative and not simply be violent for violence-sake. It had to be that violent, it had to be that gruesome to make the points it wanted to make, and it succeeded.”

While incorporating violence into video games can be utilized in ways that help drive a deeper narrative experience, it is not a necessary element. Released in March last year, “Journey” received high praise for crafting an abstract, yet emotionally stirring video game experience that, unbeknownst to the player, forms a collaborative bond between them and someone else playing the game at the same time. Visually unique and completely non-violent, “Journey” was commercially successful and was nominated for several awards, including Game of The Year for 2012.

In the vast spectrum between games like “Journey” and “The Walking Dead”, there are countless interpretations of violence and how it is portrayed in video games. As the video game industry continues to grow and craft more complex stories, it is vital that critics like Gallaga and others continue to scrutinize how violence is used in the framework of the game itself. In doing so, they will help others better perceive violent games, and in turn come make more informed judgments about them.

### **Rules and Regulations**

As technologies improved, so too did the ability for video game developers to render more realistic environments and characters. Digital avatars made up of a few dozen pixels were soon replaced with lifelike representations of men and women. Such a shift seemed innocuous until games such as “Mortal Kombat”, “Night Trap” and “Lethal Enforcers” started gaining popularity amongst video game arcade owners and fans in 1992. Suddenly, parents and adults were witnessing children playing astonishingly life-like characters fighting, shooting, stalking and, in some situations, killing their opponents in gruesome fashions.

Time magazine’s “Too Violent for Kids?” article in 1993 spotlighted “Mortal Kombat’s” incredibly graphic fatality mechanic as a possible example of video games becoming too violent for the public. On the Hill, U.S. Sens. Joseph Lieberman and Herb Kohl led congressional hearings to incite action and curb future video games from depicting such violent acts.

The hearings paid off, and the games industry had one year to create a rating system for its products, lest the federal government intervene and create one of its own. By July of 1994, The Interactive Digital Software Association submitted a proposal for a universal video game rating system, known as the Electronic Software Ratings Board. Its first target, “Mortal Kombat”, was not only the first game to ever be rated, but also the first to receive an M-rating. 19 years later, the ESRB is still the regulatory standard for all major computer and video games.



Using one of six classifications, games intending to be sold for retail must undergo the rating process before they can be released to the public, ensuring all video game companies and publishers abide by the same regulations. By giving consumers the simplest way of knowing what kind of content they can expect to see in a video game without having to do research, the hope was that such ratings would prevent violent games from getting into the hands of children and minors.

Such situations are not illegal, however. Although M-rated games are considered “inappropriate” for people under the age of 17, the ESRB does not have the legal authority to prevent retailers from selling them to minors. The responsibility, then, falls on the shoulders of store employees and managers who are implored to uphold the standards and ethical guidelines set both by the store and the ESRB. Many stores where video games are most commonly purchased—GameStop, Best Buy, and Wal-Mart—are part of the ESRB’s Rating Council, devoted to upholding the enforcements set forth by the ratings board and educating parents and store employees about the ratings system.

Despite the ESRB’s efforts to enlighten and inform the public regarding graphic video games, there are still many adults and parents who remain unaware of the rating system. In a poll released last February by Harris Interactive, out of 2,278 U.S. adults surveyed, 38 percent said they knew nothing about the ESRB rating system, and 33 percent reported they let their children play whatever type of video game they want.

“The findings underscore the lack of awareness Americans have about the video game rating system, as well as the confusion in the market,” Harris Poll president Mike de Vere said in a statement.

“I think the fact that the majority of Americans know about and effectively use the ESRB ratings system is pretty good news,” said Ben Kuchera, veteran video game journalist and editor of video game news website Penny Arcade Report.

More concerning still is the growing shift from brick-and-mortar shops to digital distribution. When the ESRB was founded, the global community had yet to discover the

power of the internet and physical retail was the norm. With the invention of digital downloading platforms like Origin and Steam, video game players with access to a credit card can download entire games with a few keystrokes, removing the need to go to a store and no employee is available to enforce the rating system.

“The Federal Trade Commission has found that games are actually better regulated than other forms of violent media,” Kuchera said, “The best place to regulate video games is the best place to regulate all forms of media consumption: in the home via parental involvement.”

### **Marking the Variables, Finding the Root**

In the days and weeks following the Newtown shooting, the gun violence debate reached an unprecedented height. As the nation reeled from the horror of two school shootings occurring just weeks apart, the nation demanded answers and those responsible.

For the games industry, it is only a matter of time—sometimes only a few hours—before the most popular or violent games are cast into the spotlight. Citing realistic graphics coupled with a sense of empowerment as players take charge of an arsenal of weapons meant to kill the enemy, parents and political figures alike akin video games to over-the-counter training simulators. In the aftermath of the Columbine shooting in 1999, it was discovered that shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were fans of “Doom” and “Wolfenstein 3D”, two popular shooting games by iD Software. Rumors even circulated that Harris designed levels for “Doom” resembling the layout of Columbine High School, though they were later found untrue. Adam Lanza, the gunman of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, was found to have thousands of dollars’ worth of video games in his home. What is not reported, however, are any selections of graphic literature, television, or movies Lanza also possessed.

In the aftermath of tragedies such as these, a line in the sand is inevitably drawn. Supporters of gun ownership lash out against violent movies and video games as the

subtle devils indulging youth in grim fantasies of blood and death; senators and governors cry out for new legislation against video games to prevent them from landing in the wrong hands. Just days after the Sandy Hook tragedy, Sen. Jay Rockefeller introduced a bill titled the Violent Content Research Act of 2013, which would direct the Federal Trade Commission, Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Health and Human Services to call on the National Academy of Sciences to conduct the largest and most comprehensive study of violent video games and programming and their effects on children in history.

Research studies into the effects of video games on youth are nothing new to the academic community. Inquiries by psychologists and the science elite into media effects go back as far as the 1970s, though video games did not become a focal point until the last decade. A meta-analytic review of studies published in 2001 by Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman reference several previous video game studies, all of them suggesting violent video games increase aggressive behavior and cognition, as well as decrease prosocial behaviors. Christopher John Ferguson's review in 2007, however, not only concludes that violent video games do not lead to increased aggressive behavior, but that they increase visuospatial cognition—the process of quickly directing attention accurately and anticipating consequences through rapid eye movements.

As one study publishes evidence that video games instill negative effects on those who play them, another inevitably publishes something to the contrary. While the scientific community continues to debate the various effects of playing violent video games, there seems to be one thing the academic community agrees upon—good or bad, video games do have an effect.

“I think the industry is failing us when it isn't honest about the fact that kids will get their hands on these violent games,” said Dr. Aaron Delwiche, associate professor at Trinity University and video game researcher of eleven years, “They aren't honest about the fact that games have both educational effects and potentially negative effects.”

A common formula amongst most video game studies is to measure the subjects' biological responses while interacting with various games and violence levels. One experiment tasked children between 8-12 to play a pen-and-paper style game, a nonviolent video game, and a violent one. As most people might expect, heart rates increased significantly while playing the violent game. Physiological arousal also spiked as well, with girls showing a more pronounced spike than boys. Where studies like these go awry, Delwiche believes, is when scientists try to fit such data to correlations with broad implications.

“Effects research is very difficult to do. Most of the time it’s a laboratory design,” Delwiche said, “A lot of the data that gets published has faulty corollary analysis, or they argue correlations with broad social trends, but at that level you could correlate anything.”

“Qualitative studies are far more useful,” Delwiche continued, “They can show us how differently people will react to a particular type of video game over a longer period of time.”

The qualitative studies Delwiche refers to are rooted more in the ethnographic territory, in which researchers work with a smaller pool of subjects but observe them over a much longer period of time. Rather than attempting to quantify the results, studies rely heavily on subject interviews, exploratory dialogue and observations instead of numbers and variables.

“It would be interesting to see a longitudinal study that looks at the relationship between parenting styles in regards to video games to observe more long term changes in the child’s behavior,” explained Delwiche, “To observe children whose parents are totally disengaged in his or her gaming habits versus children whose parents are engaged. How does that look down the road?”

Video games are not without a transformative behavior, either. Like walking the halls of a commemorative museum, or surviving a tragic event, the medium carries a

definite power to transform our thoughts, expressions and habits in a moment—a power unbound by parameters like age or maturity.

“I have worked on a bunch of different games spanning the gamut between highly realistic and highly symbolic, and I never really thought that much of it until I had children” said Jason Hughes, a veteran of video game development for more than 20 years. Having worked on several games, Hughes was no stranger to virtual violence. It was not until becoming a father, however, that he witnessed first-hand the immediate effect games can often have.

Recalling one event in particular some years ago, Hughes spoke about how playing a game while his children watched actually had an impact. “I had a 2 year old son and a newborn daughter, I was playing games for research and my kids would watch me play a lot of the time,” Hughes said, “I was playing a game where you have guns and you’re running around shooting bad guys, and sometimes you were the bad guy. And that’s when I noticed a change in my son’s behavior.”

Hughes son, too young to play a game by himself, still felt the effects, “I actually noted how he went from a little kid running around and having fun to ‘I’m shooting the bad mans!’”

“He didn’t interact with the game himself; he watched me do it for hours, and he saw the pattern created directly through watching a video game,” Hughes continued, “I only played that game for 3 or 4 days, but he had that behavior for months. I watched that change happen, and it was at that moment I realized ‘I can’t play these in front of my kids anymore.’”

It was not only Hughes’ son, but Hughes himself who also changed. Over time, he began to look beyond the screen and the dancing images and saw how video games were not hobbies of entertainment anymore; they could bear messages and teach morals. With the intent of enacting change in mind, games could be developed that touch upon deeper ideals or make the player ask questions.

“I think anybody who has a conscience is going to question what legacy they leave, and video game developers should consider the act of creation and what they create,” Hughes said, “I realized I wanted to make games my kids could play. I wanted to make games I would feel confident putting in the hands of other parents, as much as putting it in the hands of their children because that was most likely where it was going.”

### **A Smarter Future**

Did video games such as “Doom” and “Wolfenstein 3D” convince Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to murder 13 people at Columbine? Did countless hours of “Call of Duty” give Adam Lanza the anger and resolve to devastate Sandy Hook?

In the wake of such horrible tragedies, it is natural to ask such questions. We search desperately for answers that may help prevent a future shooting from ever happening, and as we continue the difficult and endless journey of grief and recovery, we delve underneath short-term inquiries and come to the one question that may answer everything:

Do violent video games make you a more violent person?

For years we have pondered, debated, researched and scrutinized this one question in hopes of finding a definitive truth, a Rosetta stone for violent video games. And to this day, we are still on that quest. We have been on that quest since Electronic Arts produced its advertisement 30 years ago, when we were just beginning to peer into the digital horizon. Even back then, those at Electronic Arts were unknowingly asking themselves this question as they explored new ways for video games to reach out and impact the player. As technology improved, the doorways to new worlds flew open and turned simple ideas into complex narratives, rich with detail and deeply emotional. What many did not expect, however, was how much greater these new generations of video games affect us.

Where do we start looking for the answers we so desperately seek? How should developers, fans and families even begin such a discussion? The solution begins first at

the developer level. As video games continue to expand and allow us to mirror reality and convey deeper emotional impacts, those who design video games must re-examine how they use violence and violent themes to tell their stories. It is vital that whatever violence is put into the video game is only used to help drive the narrative of the game, and is not simply meaningless depictions of blood and death.

The industry itself also must change how such games are then presented to the public through marketing methods. Emphasizing the level of violence in a game only purports the continued opinion that the video game industry is not as mature or enlightened as other media. Rather than highlighting graphic scenes of blood or trying to prove how close to reality a game is, marketing campaigns should be designed to emphasize details of the game that may be brand new to playing video games. Such campaigns could also focus on explaining the central plot of the video game, much like a trailer to a movie. If the purpose of marketing is to make your product as attractive to as many potential customers as possible, explanation and context are the keys to convincing more of your audience to purchase it. For video games, this is even more important as they continue to diversify and grow in complexity.

On the other end of the spectrum, the public must also change certain aspects of their behavior and perspective toward video games. Firstly, there must be an increased awareness regarding violent video games by further proliferating knowledge of the ESRB rating system and its purpose. Parents and adults not interested in video games cannot turn a blind eye to them, nor can they remain unfamiliar with those that their children may play. As children are quick to ask questions, so should parents be when it comes to purchasing a violent video game.

Lastly, if we are to delve into the scientific realm and commission new research to be done on children and the effects violent games and media have on them, a restructuring of such research is critical to better understanding this issue. With numerous quantitative studies already published and reviewed, future studies should be designed with more qualitative goals in mind. Rather than searching for data points and measured

responses that reveal a numerical answer, researchers should use existing ethnographic research methods to design a similar study focusing on video games. More specifically, such studies should place the focus on the subject and his or her interactions with violent video games over a significant length of time.

There is no better time than now to perhaps publish a new advertisement—One that does not demand a call to action, but encourages us to band together in this journey for the truth. Instead of pointing to new research and statistical data, we use them to aid in our journey of interaction and reflection within these digital worlds we continue to create. Violence in video games will not change in the years to come, but our perspective on it can.

Adapted from the original advertisement by Electronic Arts, what follows is an extension of open hands between clashing camps as an invitation to collaborate and mature our perspectives together. As video game companies must grapple with how they choose to depict and utilize violence in their video games, the discerning public must also move past the usual assumptions made about the video game industry. A far cry from a casual fad or passing trend, it has become a digital canvas through which artists can unfold deep stories and inspire real emotions from those who choose to participate. If the ultimate goal is the prevention of another Columbine, or Virginia Tech, or Sandy Hook, we will reach it much faster together than apart:

*Can a video game make you violent? Right now, no one is certain. This is partly because many people haven't considered the possibility until recent years. But it's also because whoever successfully answers this question must first have answered several others. Why does violence exist at all? Why do we fear it, yet also yearn for it? What causes us to be violent?*

*Until now, the people who asked such questions tended not to be the same people who lead this nation. Instead, they were scientists, researchers, teachers, scholars. They were, in a sense, the academic elite.*



*We must change this tradition. In the past several years, video games have become a cultural staple, like movies, music, or television. They can inform, educate, or simply entertain, yet we don't talk about them like our favorite film or book. We need to start doing that. In the short term, this means transcending our present consensus of them as a facilitator of stress relief and a medium for blazing bullets and gushing blood. In the long term, however, we must demand a great deal more.*

*These are fascinating worlds we have created, and in them can be seen a bit of our own. It is as if we have invested in them a digital mirror, and through them we are learning more and more about ourselves. We learn, for instance, that we are inspired by and terrified of our fragility. We learn that our imaginations can impact our actions far more than we thought possible. And we learn that the traditional distinctions—the ones that are made between our world and a virtual world—are not so easily visible to everyone.*

*In short, we are finding that video games are more than just a series of flashing images and button presses. They are digital journeys into our selves: interactive tools that can express our inner hopes and fears better, perhaps better than ever before. While many of them do not have as great an effect on people as others, there will always be a few that do. Some will force us to make difficult choices. Some will make us think about our world differently.*

*Video games like these are already available, and they will continue to be made for many years to come. You may have already heard about them from your friends, your parents, or your children. Some of them will show you things you have never seen before, that may change how you think about the world. Others may be harder to define or explain—but no less important.*

*However these games make you think or feel, the most vital thing to do is to speak up and speak out. Video games provide a special environment for storytellers and artists can make big ideas come to life. It is an expressive environment, in which we want to*

*know how these games are affecting us. In the wake of great devastation and tragedy, finding these answers are never more important. Together, rather than apart, we can use these games to propel us closer to the truths we seek, not only from the games we play, but those that lie within. Our darkest moments are also the greatest opportunities to grow and learn, but we must not be silent or passive. Play them, watch them, talk about them with others, and together we will find the answers.*

## VITA

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