

Interactive Entertainment and Social Responsibility

Jason Shankel
jpshankel@gmail.com

Abstract

As America confronts the challenge of reducing gun violence, it is incumbent upon media professionals to engage constructively with the social reform process. In this speech, given by game developer Jason Shankel at the 2013 Spring Computer Science Colloquium at Sonoma State University on 31 January 2013, the contribution of violent video games to real world violence is discussed as well as the elements of social responsibility to the threat of moral panic.

The Medium and the Message

Central to the question of the relationship between violent video games and real world violence is the question of social responsibility. What is social responsibility? Social responsibility is the responsibility each of us bear to understand the relationship between our industry and society. It is the responsibility to effectively counter the misconceptions that create bad public policy. It is the responsibility to respect the legitimate concerns of our customers and the people whose lives are affected by the products we produce. It is the recognition our own social motives for engaging in a particular trade. I am not a lawyer or a public policy expert. I am a game developer. My business is video games. I am here to share with you what I have learned in 20 years in the business about the relationship between the game industry and society.

Video game production is a media industry. And as with any other media industry, whether it's journalism, film, music, television or social networking, our understanding begins with Marshall McLuhan. In his seminal 1964 book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan wrote:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium-- that is, of any extension of ourselves -- result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.^[1]

What McLuhan means is that any medium, whether it's film, theater, painting or just a hammer in your hand, contributes as much to the social impact of the art or craft it enables as the content of the messages expressed within that medium. The manner in which we receive a message, in other words, influences the impact of the message as much as the content of the message itself. This concept forms the basis of social responsibility in media. The very technology we use influences the way our work is interpreted by the public.

Cinema, for example, didn't just give us a new way to tell old, familiar stories. It created a whole, brand new language of storytelling, one that manipulates time and perspective in ways not possible in other media, and thus cinema allowed for whole new kinds of stories to emerge.

There is perhaps no greater example of the medium equating the message to a modern audience than DW Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. *Birth of a Nation* is a brilliant, groundbreaking film, one that advanced the technology of filmed storytelling as much as Shakespeare's plays advanced theatrical drama. It is also an irredeemably racist piece of hate-filled propaganda, the content of whose message should be wholly rejected by any decent human being.^[2]

Another such example is Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, another brilliant and groundbreaking film whose underlying message is a whitewash of one of (if not the most) monstrous regimes ever to pollute the human body politic.^[3]

Are there other more pleasant examples than these pieces of racist, genocidal propaganda? Of course there are. In fact, every film, book, television show, video game and website in existence equally demonstrates McLuhan's principle. But examples like *Birth of a Nation* and *Triumph of the Will* bring McLuhan's point into sharp relief. As decent people, we cannot be persuaded by the content of these films, so the only message in the work we are receptive to are those that come from the medium itself.

The Science of Video Game Violence

So what is the message that is coming from the video game medium? Last month, *Kotaku* published an article by Tina Amini summarizing 25 studies on violence in video games conducted over the last 30 years. While results have varied, the general consensus drawn from the studies is that playing violent video games is positively associated with increases in aggression.^[4]

To be sure, some of the studies questioned this consensus. Some of the studies isolated competitiveness from violence and found that subjects who played violent cooperative games had lower levels of aggression than those who played non-violent competitive games.^[5] Others criticized common methodological errors in aggression studies.^[6] And of course there are questions as to whether measurements of physiological response to viewed violence are correlated to psychological acceptance of violence. It's not surprising that someone who watches several hours of violent horror films would have muted physiological reactions to viewing real violence, but it's not clear that muted reaction is associated with moral acceptance of violence or to an increased likelihood to act out violently.^[7]

This is the state of the science, and it is ambiguous. In terms of broad social impact, juvenile arrest rates for violent crime peaked in 1993, at about five hundred arrests per hundred thousand juveniles per year, and has been declining ever since. Current rates of juvenile arrest for violent crime lie at about two hundred and sixty arrests per hundred thousand juveniles per year. In 1980, before there were any violent video games, juvenile arrests were two hundred ninety-five per hundred thousand juveniles per year.^[8]

But despite these statistics, the idea that exposure to violent media can inspire real world violence is one that has intuitive appeal and so it is our responsibility to be aware that if the medium is the message, then the message is that there is a widespread perception that violence in video games leads to violence in the real world.

Shooting The Messenger

We cannot afford to pretend that just because this conclusion is at best poorly supported by the evidence that we have no responsibility to engage with it. People will believe that violent media causes real world violence precisely because we are good at our jobs, precisely because we create movies, TV shows and video games that deliver gut punches to the emotions, that terrify, that excite violent revenge fantasies, that stimulate the limbic system. Those who believe in this correlation do so because they themselves are directly

experiencing the very excitement that we mean our audience to feel.

Failure to grasp this dynamic can have disastrous consequences. In 1972, Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of Anthony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange* was released in the United Kingdom. *A Clockwork Orange* was blamed for a number of copycat incidents in England where violent youths re-enacted scenes from the film.^[9]

Stanley Kubrick's family received death threats and protests at their home^[10] and Kubrick ultimately asked Warner Brothers to withdraw *A Clockwork Orange* from distribution in the UK. Kubrick's comment on this incident was as follows:

To try and fasten any responsibility on art as the cause of life seems to me to put the case the wrong way around. Art consists of reshaping life, but it does not create life, nor cause life. Furthermore, to attribute powerful suggestive qualities to a film is at odds with the scientifically accepted view that, even after deep hypnosis in a posthypnotic state, people cannot be made to do things which are at odds with their natures.^[11]

The irony, of course, is that it is the very point of *A Clockwork Orange* that simplistic behaviorist solutions to complex social problems and active censoring of intense emotions, even highly anti-social and destructive emotions, leads to bad public policy and that we as a society must be able to absorb and confront the dark side of our nature if we are to preserve the necessary agency to be moral beings. By censoring *A Clockwork Orange* and other works, we make ourselves weaker and, ironically, more susceptible to violence and other social ills. Deprived of the responsibility of managing our own dark emotions, and thus deprived of one of the essential human experiences, we become artificial and incomplete or in the words of the novel's author, "as queer as a clockwork orange."^[12]

It should also be noted that the media used in *A Clockwork Orange* to torture the protagonist are film and music. The film adaptation allows us to directly experience the emotional stimulus that Burgess wrote about in the novel. We're supposed to feel a sense of exhilaration at Alex's crimes because that's what he feels. We're supposed to feel terror and nausea during his torture because that's what he feels. We're supposed to feel trapped and helpless in the film's final act because that's what he feels. *A Clockwork Orange* is not an exploitation film. The emotional manipulation the film engages in facilitates our understanding the very real and profound point of the story. In this case the medium truly is the message and the suggestion that we are not adult enough to be trusted with that message is simply not acceptable in a free society.

As another example, in the mid 90s, Stephen King withdrew his high school gun violence themed novella *Rage* from publication after a number of copycat crimes were committed.^[13] In his recent essay on gun control and gun violence, *Guns*, King describes his decision:

My book did not break [these teenagers], 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. You don't leave a can of gasoline where a boy with firebug tendencies can lay hands on it.^[14]

King and Kubrick make the same salient point: art does not change people, it speaks to them. Silencing the art because we do not like the way some people react to it only hides the underlying problem. It's sticking our collective heads in the sand and it is the role of art in society to keep us from doing exactly that. Violent and disturbed people are going to find ways to express their anti-social impulses. We do harm to our own understanding of their problems if we hide the stimulus they are drawn to from ourselves.

So no, you do not leave a can of gasoline where a firebug can get it. But neither do you prevent everyone else from learning how to handle gasoline safely by denying them access to it. Doing so makes society more vulnerable to firebugs, not less.

Strict Scrutiny and Freedom of Expression

Okay, but are video games truly art? Are they a form of expression worthy of protection? Yes. In the case of *Brown v Entertainment Merchants Association*, in which the EMA sought to overturn a California law banning the sale of violent video games to minors without their parents' permission, the Supreme Court found for the plaintiffs. Speaking for the majority, Justice Scalia wrote:

The Act does not comport with the First Amendment...Because the Act imposes a restriction on the content of protected speech, it is invalid unless California can demonstrate that it passes strict scrutiny...California cannot meet that standard. Psychological studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively. ^[15]

This is an encouraging result because it places video games squarely under first amendment protection, but it also contains a significant caveat: strict scrutiny. Strict scrutiny is the legal principle that says that constitutionally protected rights may be limited if there is a compelling state interest in doing so, if the law in question is narrowly tailored to address that interest and it is constructed in the least restrictive way possible. ^[16]

To obtain a license for a fully automatic firearm, for example, you have to jump through a boatload of legal hoops and subject yourself to a high degree of governmental oversight. These laws would pass the strict scrutiny test because there's a compelling state interest in controlling access to machine guns, the laws are narrowly constructed to regulate those particular firearms, and the availability of other options means that this law infringes on the second amendment in the least restrictive manner possible. Another typical example of strict scrutiny would be laws against incitement to riot, such as yelling fire in a crowded theater.

In this case, the court has left the door open for future restrictions that may pass strict scrutiny if the scientific evidence is persuasive. This makes it absolutely vital that the state have the best possible quality information when seeking to regulate speech so that we may discern between truly compelling interests and moral panic.

Moral Panic

Moral panics are extreme societal reactions to the perceived threat of one form or another of social deviance. They result from a failure of social responsibility.

The archetypal examples of moral panic are the Salem Witch trials, the red scare and anti-Semitic pogroms and other forms of ethnic scapegoating, but we have seen many other moral panics in our time. Examples include the Dungeons and Dragons scare of the late 1970s, when D&D was blamed for a number of suicides among depressed teens^[17], the recovered memory and satanic ritual abuse scares of the 80s and 90s^[18] and the current war on terror. ^[19]

In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen identifies four key players in the typical life cycle of a moral panic: the mass media, who present the problem in a sensationalistic and stereotypical way, 'moral entrepreneurs' who propose (frequently dubious) remedies to the problem, the societal control structure (politicians and government officials) who implement public policy and the public itself, whose opinion

ultimately drives all the other players.^[20]

Not all social reform movements need devolve into moral panic. The campaign against drunk driving started by Mothers Against Drunk Driving in the early 80s is an example of a successful reform movement that on the surface had many of the hallmarks of a moral panic.

Drunk driving was identified as a threat to society by the media. MADD took on the role of moral entrepreneur, advocating for increased social consciousness around drunk driving, tougher legal penalties for drunk driving and increased legal responsibility on the part of bartenders and other alcohol merchants. State legislatures responded with effective, even-handed remedies that met with the general approval of the public and have resulted in a 50% decrease in drunk driving deaths since 1980.^[21]

Contrast this with another social phenomenon from the 1980s, the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare or so-called "Satanic panic." In 1980, Michelle Smith and her husband and psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder published *Michelle Remembers*, an autobiographical book detailing Smith's recovered memories of having been a victim of Satanic ritual abuse during her childhood.^[22]

Following the publication of this book, widespread allegations of Satanic ritual abuse and child molestation began popping up, supported by little more than the memories of victims recovered using highly suggestive therapeutic methods intended for use only when the therapist has certain knowledge of the underlying truth of the case.^[23]

Hundreds of day care centers were shut down and their owners charged with outlandish and even physically impossible crimes for which there was no evidence but the word of children whose testimony had been coerced by adults. The most famous was the McMartin-Buckey pre-school trial.^[24]

It's ironic to note that at the same time, there actually was widespread molestation of children going on that was being covered up by some of the very same institutions who eagerly blame Satan for everything from war to bad weather.

This incident is one of the most shameful failures of social responsibility in our nation's history. Hundreds of lives were ruined needlessly. Had the media bothered to scrutinize the allegations rather than feed on the sensationalism, had organizations of psychiatrists and psychologists spoken out against the use of suggestion to elicit information, had the owners of daycare centers recognized that they were under attack and organized an effective response, the harm caused by this widespread public panic may have been mitigated or prevented altogether.

So what distinguishes the reasonable and effective campaign against drunk driving from completely outlandish and overblown moral panic of the Satanic ritual abuse scare?

First, and most importantly, the problem identified was real. Driving while impaired represents a serious danger to the public and there is no excuse for it. By contrast, there was no actual widespread Satanic ritual abuse. What Satanic symbology is found at crime scenes is easily accounted for by the fact that everyone knows who Satan is. It is precisely because Satan is a well-known figure that Satanic symbols make for a useful instrument of public terror.

Second, the moral entrepreneurs (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) suggested narrowly tailored, proportional remedies to the problem, staying well within the bounds of strict scrutiny. By contrast, the moral entrepreneurs in the Satanic Ritual Abuse case could only suggest suspicion and paranoia as interventions.

Third, the societal control culture, well-armed with pertinent facts and reasonable remedy proposals, was able to respond in an effective and measured manner. By contrast, the response of public officials in the Satanic Ritual Abuse could do little more than waste time investigating conspiracy theories and charge innocent people with the worst of crimes based on the flimsiest of evidence.

Don't Panic

Unfortunately, not all issues are as cut and dried as drunk driving. While there was some resistance from organizations of bar and restaurant owners, ultimately there was no Council of Responsible Drunk Drivers (CRUDD) whose interests ran contrary to the campaign.

For this reason, it is incumbent on those of us who are knowledgeable and interested in effective public policy to create circumstances like those that existed in the drunk driving campaign when our industry comes under this kind of public scrutiny. We must strive to bring light where there is only heat.

First, we must have a voice in the media. Moral panics are fueled by media narratives that thrive on sensationalism. But the media is just as interested in skepticism. The media loves a good story.

Second, we must participate in the marketplace of moral entrepreneurship. We must defend free expression not just on mercantile, but on social and moral grounds as well. Censorship doesn't just infringe on our right to earn a living, it weakens society as a whole.

Third, we must engage with the societal control structure. Each and every one of us in a free society is a lobbyist. We have the guaranteed right to speak to our lawmakers. And contrary to popular myth, you don't need a bag of money to get their attention.

And lastly, we must be ever mindful of public opinion and resist the urge to argue against it when we think it is ill-informed. No one ever wins an argument public opinion. If we lose credibility with the public, we will not be well-received by the media or by lawmakers.

The Mess In Our Yard

I want to leave you now with a suggestion for where we can begin. Vital to maintaining our public credibility is policing our own community and we have a problem with violence in gaming. I am not speaking of the dubious indirect connection between violence depicted in games and violence in the real world, but rather the very real and direct verbal violence endemic in online gaming. Online game dialogue frequently devolves into a slurry of hate speech that would find no place anywhere else in polite society.

In his recent editorial in Jezebel, "A Call to Arms for Decent Men," game designer and educator Ernest Adams called upon the gaming community, in particular men, to stand against the virulent misogyny in online gaming. I want to associate myself with Mr. Adams' comments I would add racism and homophobia to this list.^[25] In his piece, Mr. Adams urges his readers to sign the online petition at Sam Killermann's site Gamers Against Bigotry dot org.^[26]

If we hope to protect the interests of our industry in the process of engaging with the public, this is exactly the kind of movement we have to support among ourselves. Whatever the connection between video games and criminal violence, and whatever public policies will emerge from this issue, it is undeniable that there is a high level of aggressive antisocial expression in online gaming.

Our active participation in campaigns such as this accomplishes several goals. It makes online gaming a safer, more welcoming environment for a broader customer base. Not only does more customers mean more money, but more customers also means a more informed public more likely to support effective public policies and less likely to be susceptible to moral panic. And campaigns such as this also create a

milieu for gamers, both developers and customers, to discuss not only online bullying but the whole host of social challenges that face our industry and art form. If we expect the public to take our good citizenship seriously, we have to begin by cleaning up the mess in our own yard.

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