MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE

GAME OVER:
GENDER, RACE & VIOLENCE IN VIDEO GAMES

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content—and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them—the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We've also set it up to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video's sections with a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Discussion Questions provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for "free-writing" or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments for each section encourage students to engage the video in more depth—by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

OVERVIEW

Most of the discussions people have about media issues, whether the subject is violence or sex, tend to focus on television and movies. And while these are still the dominant media in many people's lives, an important new technology, video games, has been introduced into the media landscape without much discussion.

For young people especially, video games are perhaps the media technology they are most familiar with and enthusiastic about. Surveys have found that 90% of households with children have purchased or rented video games. And its been estimated that kids in those homes play an average of an hour and a half a day. Sales figures are another indication of the popularity of video games. When Sega introduced the Dreamcast console, it sold a half a million units in the first two weeks. In fact, in 1999, 215 million games were purchased, generating over seven billion dollars for the video game industry which is more than Americans spent on going to the movies.

Given the wild popularity of video games, it has never been more urgent to encourage dialogue about how virtual killing might shape attitudes about real-life violence. *Game Over* examines the nature and consequences of this simulated violence and encourages students to think critically about how gender and race are depicted in the video and computer games they play.

VIDEO GAMES: THE NEW MEDIA

Key Points

- Video game violence is different from other types of media violence because of how users interact with the technology. Users not only interact with the game physically, they interact psychologically and emotionally as well. They don't just watch the characters on the screen. They can become the characters.

- Video games engage players through a heightened sense of realism. The graphics are becoming more and more realistic. For example, sports video games even use live motion capture devises to simulate the movements of real players, giving gamers the sense that they're actually playing as their favorite sports hero.

- Video games have come a long way since Pong, which only used rectangular shapes and a bouncing ball. Now there are 3-D worlds and very realistic approaches to violence.

- Although the questioning of violence is extremely important, the stories of violence are always told in conjunction with other stories about gender, sexuality and race. It's vital to understand how all these work together.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you play video games? If so, why, when and how often? What do you like and dislike about video games?

2. What are some positive and some negative aspects of video games?

3. How do video games differ from other types of media? Think of a recent action movie and an example of an action video game. In what ways are the two similar and different, ie. plots, characters, scenes and sounds? In your opinion, how does the experience of playing a video game differ from watching a movie?

PLAY LIKE A MAN & BUXOM BABES

Key Points

- A common image in video game representations is a very hyper masculine male character. An affect of this hyper masculine characterization can be to link being male with being violent.

- Aggressive masculinity in video games is very common in wrestling games, where not only do you have the signature moves of the wrestler but also their taunts and bullying as well.

- Wrestling sends the message to mostly young boys that control and violence is the way to getting what they want, through both physical and verbal intimidation.

- One of the reasons why masculine images are so prevalent in video games is because the producers and designers of video games are mostly men. The images and the representations that come out of video games are coming out of a very male culture.

- One of the most traditional roles for female characters in video games is the damsel in distress. For example, in the Duke Nukem game *Planet of the Babes*, all the men on Earth have been killed except for Duke, and he needs to come and rescue all of the women from aliens.

- Another role for female characters in Duke Nukem games is that of a porn star. This pornographic landscape is not presented as extreme. The environment and values are presented as absolutely normal.

- While males are still the predominant characters in video games, female characters like Lara Croft were introduced to appeal to the main consumers of boys and men. Characters such as Lara Croft help to define femininity in a very specific way.

- Although Lara Croft doesn't need to be rescued, she is judged by the beauty standard. Croft has a large bust size, a very small waist, and weighs practically nothing.

- Male fantasy and the sexualization of female characters in video games are perhaps even more prevalent in the advertising, marketing, and packaging for the games.

- When female characters are used, most are white. When there are black characters in video games, they play particular roles.

Discussion Question

Why do you think more men and boys play video games than women and girls? What other types of game play and recreation do boys and men seem to play more than women and girls? How are these games similar to or different from video games? What might explain these differences: Are men and boys inherently more aggressive, or are men and boys adhering to the social expectations of what it is to be a man? Or, is it a bit of each?

Assignment

Research images of Gordon Freeman from the video game *Half-Life*. Also look up the warrior from the video game *Gauntlet*. Both characters are ready for battle. Compare and contrast the characters, focusing on their clothing, armor and weaponry.

1. What do you feel is the purpose of the differences in their apparel?

2. Are the differences significant? If so, how?

3. If you see Freeman alongside a female warrior, why do you think Gordon Freeman has so much more armor and apparel?

4. Part of the text on a *Half-Life* ad reads: "Intelligent characters and compelling story-line creates an experience unlike any other." The text on a *Gauntlet* ad reads: "She's been hanging around the arcade for years. Think of how much fun she'll be when you get her home." Why, according to the ads, is *Half-Life* a fun game? Why is *Gauntlet* fun?

5. To whom are the advertisers trying to appeal? Other than the text cited above, what in the ads indicate the intended audience?

NARROW VISION: RACE IN VIDEO GAMES

Key Points

- Many people of color feel that their experiences are not being represented in the media, but perhaps at an even more extreme and disturbing level in video games.

- Of the top-selling action genre video games, eight out of ten of those games featured white characters.

- Racial stereotypes are used in particular moments to show non-whiteness. For example, in the game Turok, the main character is Native American. He wears feathers in his hair, carries a bow and arrow, shoots deer, and throughout the game, his adventures are serenaded by tribal drumbeats.

- An even more blatant example of stereotypical representations of people of color can be seen in the game King Pin. The game takes place in an inner city urban ghetto, an environment full of black characters. The characters steal, mug, join gangs, and engage in many other violent crimes. What's ironic about this is that the main character is white. He must contain the black criminals and lead the city to normalcy.

- Video games promote the idea that whiteness is normal and that blackness is exotic, foreign, and bizarre. For example, in games like Akuji and Shadow Man, blackness is equated to the supernatural, often with its characters engaging in voodoo.

- It's important to ask a number of questions about video games: Who will be our guides? Whose eyes will we see the world through? Whose fears and nightmares will we experience? Whose imaginations will be trapped inside?

Discussion Questions

1. It is common in Western culture (myths, literature, film) for white to be associated with good and purity and black with bad and evil. How is this reflected in games such as *King Pin*, *Duke Nukem*, *Tomb Raider* or *Shadow Man*? How are people of color used as tokens for entire groups of people?

2. As Nina Huntemann in *Game Over* suggests, when people of color are featured as primary characters in video games, their race is essentialized into stereotypes. How are racially essentialized video game characters such as Turok and Akuji similar to characters we see in television and films?

Assignment

Read the character profiles below and match them to the correct video game character:
Gordon Freeman, **Lara Croft**, and **Akuji**.

a. _____ was brought up in the secure world of aristocracy - surrounded by servants, social events and high society. Whilst _____'s academic achievements were outstanding, a number of comments on term reports indicated that _____ could perhaps benefit from a more structured lifestyle in order to keep _____ somewhat impulsive nature firmly in hand.

b. You are the voodoo expert _____. Claw your way through the underworld to exact your revenge on your murderous brother. Savage your enemies with your razor sharp claws. Incinerate them with primal voodoo spells like Hell Blast and Spirit Strike. Transform into a panther to turn up the mayhem as you devastate over 30 enemies and 4 bosses.

c. You are _____, a young research associate in the Anomalous Materials Laboratory. You have limited security clearance and no real idea of just how dangerous your job has become, until the morning you are sent alone into the Test Chamber to analyze of a strange crystalline specimen. A routine analysis, they tell you. Until something goes wrong.

Then answer the following questions:

1. Was it difficult to match the descriptions with the characters? Why or why not?

2. What assumptions did you make about these characters, such as who would most likely be the scientist and who would know voodoo?

3. How do the makers of video games use these assumptions to perpetuate gender and race stereotypes?

VIDEO GAME VIOLENCE & SIM-VIOLENCE

Key Points

- Spending a great deal of time being exposed to violent video games can lead gamers to gradual thoughts of the world as a much more violent place. The images and concepts of violence can permeate the way they think about things on an everyday basis.

- There are a number of elements of video game violence that make it most likely to lead to a negative or anti-social effect. Video game violence tends to be consequence-less. There is often no grief, sorrow, regret or remorse.

- The rewards one gets for using violence in video games is very gratifying. They get to play longer, go onto new levels, and explore new dimensions, territories, and worlds. The only way to beat the game is to kill larger and larger numbers of people. Everything is conducive to using violence, and the more competently it's used, the better the player is doing.

- Another reward for using violence has to do with the weapons players can use. Early on in the game, players receive low-level weaponry, like pistols and swords. The more adept the player gets, the more high tech the weapons become: machine guns, grenades, and bombs.

- Video game violence is very graphic. Decapitations, severed limbs, spurting and splattering blood are common instances of violence in video games.

- One of the main consequences of video game violence is that violence is normalized. Violence becomes assumed to be part of the everyday fabric of life.

- Over the last thirty years, the U.S. military has undertaken perhaps the most elaborate study ever conducted on video games and violent behavior. In World War II, soldiers began firing at person-shaped silhouettes as opposed to bulls-eye targets. Now the military uses large screen televisions and plastic M-16s that fire laser beams so that when they hit the target, the target falls down.

- The Marine Corps also uses the game Doom as a training device, providing the script, the rehearsal, and the act of killing.

- Children use exactly the same devices at local video arcades and in their homes. We must think very carefully about whom we provide this operant conditioning and training to. If we provide it indiscriminately to children, it is the moral equivalent of putting a military weapon in the hand of every child in America.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that violence in video games is excessive? Do you think it teaches the players, especially the young players, to be more aggressive and that aggression is ok? Would you want your younger brother or sister to play these games? Why or why not?

2. Do you think video games teach kids to kill, as David Grossman suggests? Why or why not? What other factors might be important to examine?

3. Do you feel that increased realism and virtual reality in video games is a more positive or negative advancement? For what reasons? How important is an intensified and more realistic experience?

4. Do you feel that players are able to keep absolutely clear the line between game play and reality? Do you feel that virtually flying a plane is less problematic than virtually shooting a gun?

Assignment

Research images from the 1986 Super Mario Brothers game for the original Nintendo console. Also look at images from Duke Nukem: Zero Hour, a 1999 release for Nintendo 64.

1. How have images of violence developed and changed over time?

2. What are the most striking differences in these two characters?

CONCLUSION

Key Points

- Although the experience of playing a video game is already quite realistic, programmers have only scratched the surface so far on simulating reality. Technologies of virtual reality, and other things we can't even imagine now, may very well have very important implications for media violence.

- Video games are advancing very limited notions of masculinity and femininity. They're reinforcing the sexual objectification of women. They're reproducing the same racial stereotypes. They're teaching young boys that violence is an appropriate response to any situation.

- Nina Huntemann hopes that video games will challenge our stereotypes and really push us ahead in terms of how we think about each other and ourselves.

- Like all media, the question of whether they're good or bad, whether they have positive or negative consequences, can't be answered by looking at the technology itself. There's nothing inherent about video games that makes them violent, sexist, or racist. What's holding us back is not the technology but the values we've privileged as we've designed, produced, and sold it. So if we want video games that are truly cutting edge, that really give us new experiences, we have to privilege alternative values that will genuinely liberate the technology and possibly ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe that video games should be rated differently? Look up video games you are familiar with at the ESRB video games ratings site. Do you think the game you researched is appropriately rated? Why or why not?

2. What is an appropriate age for a child to begin playing video games? What kinds of games are appropriate for children under the age of 12? Under the age of 18?

3. What do you think video games will be like in the future?

Assignments

You are a video game designer and you need to propose a new idea for a game.

1. What does this game look like?

2. Who are your main characters, what do they do, how do they dress, and what do the look like?

3. Where does it take place?

4. What is the basic story line or objective of your game?

5. Who do you want to buy this game?

6. How is your game similar to and different from the video games you saw in the video or that you have played?

7. Are these differences deliberate or significant?

Spacewar was created in 1962 and the first coin-op game, *Computer Space*, was created in 1971. The theme of wars in space and later of computer technology in space very much reflects the respective climates of those periods in American history with space exploration and progress becoming a greater reality. Think of some modern examples of video games from the video or from your own experience.

1. Do you think that these games similarly reflect the social and political climate of the late 1990's?

2. If so, in what ways? If not, what has changed in the video game industry or the country at large so that this reflection no longer exists?

3. Do video games reflect our society, help create it, or both?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following list of links is by no means comprehensive. Use this listing as a jumping off point, as many of the sites listed here have extensive links pages.

I. History of Video Games

A Brief History of Video Games *(www.videotopia.com)* This web site was made for the internationally touring museum exhibit on the history of video games, Videotopia. The exhibit explores the art, science and history of video games. The web site offers pictures and descriptions of the history of home and arcade games. Web visitors can also get information about the exhibit's design, medium, advising panel, booking information, a scrapbook and more.

Dot Eaters: A Classic Video Game History *(www.emuunlim.com/doteaters/index.htm)* Dot Eaters (a reference to the classic arcade game Pac-Man) is a impressive timeline of the history of video games and computing technology. The site offers pages on the history of arcade games, home systems and personal computer games, including information on the rise of violence in these mediums, a list of links and a site archive.

History of Video Games
(www.videogamespot.com/features/universal/hov/index.html) A special feature story at Gamespot written by Leonard Herman, Jer Horwitz and Steve Kent, and beautifully designed by Ethan O'Brien. Their chronology of the video game industry begins in 1889 with Fusajiro Yamauchi, the founder of the Marufuku Company (later to be called The Nintendo Playing Card Company), and takes the reader up to 1999 and the next generation of home video game consoles. Pictures and links compliment the text.

II. Video Game Ratings Organizations

Children's Software Revue *(www.childrenssoftware.com)* Children's Software Revue is a quarterly newsletter featuring reviews of children's software, electronic toys and Internet sites. The online version offers a searchable database of over 4,000 children's software titles reviewed by parents and educators. Also available: Tips for smart shopping , a gift guide for fun and safe toys, and a links page of other Internet review sites.

Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) *(www.esrb.org)* The ESRB is a board created by the video game industry to rate entertainment software products. The letter ratings suggest general guidelines for choosing age appropriate games. The board also writes content descriptors about the nature of the violence, sexual themes and language of entertainment software. The web site provides a searchable database for looking up the ESRB ratings of video games.

Internet Content Rating Association *(www.rsac.org)* ICRA (formerly the Recreational Software Advisory Council) is a non-profit, independent organization that seeks to empower the

public, particularly parents, in making informed decisions about the information children view on the Internet by means of a content advisory system. From this site parents can activate a filter that restricts access to certain web sites based on ICRA's standards.

III. Media Education & Anti-Violence Organizations

The Lion and Lamb Project *(www.lionlamb.org)* Lion and Lamb is a nation-wide, grassroots organization for and by parents which seeks to provide information about the effects of violent toys and entertainment on children. Their mantra, violence is not child's play, is the basis for their work. They provide a Parent Action Kit, offer workshops and sponsor Violent Toy Trade-Ins throughout the country. A children's book list and information about joining the group, as well as links to other resources, are available on the web site.

MediaScope *(www.mediascope.org)* MediaScope is a national, nonprofit research and policy group. The goal of this organization is to encourage responsible images in all forms of media. They concentrate on media ratings, teen sexuality, children's television, diversity in the media, media violence, the effects of video games, and artists' rights and responsibilities. MediaScope offers resources to encourage socially responsible creative freedom. Check out the links page for a variety of publications and resources.

National Institute on Media and the Family *(www.mediaandthefamily.org/home.html)* This organization is a national group for research, education and information regarding the impact of media on children. Their resources include: Video and Computer Game Report Card, Parent Guide to Electronic Games, research on video game violence, reviews of movies, television shows and computer games, resource materials to provide strategies for combating powerful media forces and a list of appropriate children's books.

IV. Online Video Game Magazines and Fan Sites

Gamespot *(www.gamespot.com)* A huge online magazine for reviews, news, hints, articles, discussions, contests and downloads of the latest video games.

Gamer's World *(www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/5290/gaming.html)* Gamer's World offers links, pictures, game cheats and information about video games for the Apple Macintosh platform.

Happy Puppy *(www.happypuppy.com/)* Another video game enthusiast's site for cheats, hints, reviews, previews and downloads.

V. Other Online Resources

Beyond Black and White: Examining the Portrayal of Race in Video Games and the Entertainment Media *(www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/991021thursday.html)*
A lesson plan for grades 6-12, developed by the New York Times on the Web "Teacher Connections" unit. Overview of lesson plan (from the NYT site): In this lesson, students critically examine the portrayal of minorities in video games and other forms of entertainment to assess whether or not these portrayals further perpetuate racial stereotyping.

Kid Source Online: Video Games and Children
(www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/video.games.html) This article from Kid Source discusses video game use by children, the ratings of video game violence, and the effects of violence and other characteristics in video games.

Interactive Digital Software Association *(www.idsa.com)* The Interactive Digital Software Association is a US professional association that serves the business and public affairs interests of video and computer game publishers. Their members include many top entertainment software companies. The IDSA formed the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (see link above).

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BIOGRAPHIES OF INTERVIEWEES

Lt. Col. David Grossman is one of the world's foremost experts in the field of human aggression and the roots of violence and violent crime. Colonel Grossman has testified before US Senate and Congressional committees and numerous state legislatures. He is a former West Point Psychology Professor and Army Ranger who has combined his experiences to become the founder of a new field of scientific endeavor, which he has named "killology." Col. Grossman's newest book, Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence (with Gloria DeGaetano), has received international acclaim for its information on the impact of media violence. Col. Grossman has also authored a Pulitzer Prize-nominated book, On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society, and has contributed entries to scholarly reference works. His work has led him to be featured on many major network news shows and radio programs.

Nina Huntemann is assistant professor at Westfield State College and a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Her dissertation is tentatively titled: *Policy and Culture in the Digital Age: How Telecommunications Reform Transformed Radio*. She has published several articles on women's use of the Internet for social change. She is also a contributing writer for The Women's Guide to the Wired World: A User-Friendly Handbook and Resource Directory. She co-designed a nationally award-winning web site for the Media Education Foundation and is the producer and director of the MEF video Game Over: Gender, Race and Violence in Video Games.

Michael Morgan is professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He has authored or co-authored more than 50 national and international scholarly articles and chapters on the effects of television on images of violence, sex roles, aging, health, science, academic achievement, political orientations, and other issues. He has directed or collaborated on international comparative research projects on media and adolescents in Argentina, China, Russia, Korea, Taiwan, and other countries. His most recent book is Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research (with James Shanahan).

Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. has worked as a professor at the University of Miami since 1976, earning the university-wide undergraduate teaching award in October 1991. He earned a Ph.D. from the Graduate Institute of Education in the Philosophy and History of Education in 1976. He has taught social studies at the secondary level and has NCATE lifetime certification. His research on computers and video games has been reviewed in multiple newspapers and he has been interviewed on National Public Radio and many major network news shows. Provenzo has published numerous books and articles on the history, philosophy and theory of education, electronic media and curriculum development.

Erica Scharrer is assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She studies the social impact of mass media, specializing on the effects of media representations of gender and violence on audience members. She is co-author of the book Television: What's On, Who's Watching, and What it Means (with George Comstock) and has written several articles and chapters on such topics as television violence and "hypermasculinity," the effectiveness of a media literacy program focusing on issues of media violence, and the portrayal of the sitcom father.