Interacting With Video

Editors Patricia M. Greenfield Rodney R. Cocking

ADVANCES IN APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY 11

Chapter 3

Contextualizing Video Game Violence: From *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 1* to *Mortal Kombat 2*[1]

MARSHA KINDER
School of Cinema–Television
University of Southern California

The year 1993 ended with a deluge of media coverage on video game violence from which very little information emerged.[2] Only two questions were repeatedly raised: Is there sufficient empirical evidence to establish a causative link between media violence and violent behavior, and should a system of ratings or censorship be imposed on the video game industry. Other issues were virtually ignored.

Within a three-month period, I personally received over fifty requests to address these two questions in interviews for radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, all stemming from a one-line quote in the September 27th cover story of *Time Magazine*, "Attack of the Video Games."[3] The most disturbing request came from a public defender who wanted me to serve as an expert witness in a San Diego murder case that involved a young man who, after playing the notoriously violent arcade game *Mortal Kombat* for three solid hours, impulsively stabbed a car salesman to death. The public defender was disappointed when I told her that I could not possibly testify that *Mortal Kombat* made him do it.

A few months later a similar scenario was dramatized in the season premiere of the NBC series "Homicide: Life on the Street" (broadcast on January 6, 1994) in which a "sensitive" African-American teenager (who as a child had witnessed the murder of his father) senselessly murders a woman during a mugging as soon as he takes a gun in hand, despite the fact that he had taken the weapon away from his accomplice to prevent any violence from occurring. Although the story is driven by the female detective's reluctance to believe that this sensitive young man was actually the shooter (a reluctance shared by his mother and aunt), he actually proves to be the killer. This anomaly is explained by two circumstances. First, the story suggests that the gun itself has special power for those who have previously felt powerless as its victim (a dynamic that is also experienced by the murdered woman's husband). Secondly, a flashback shows the young killer playing a violent arcade game just before the mugging, implying that this sensitive child has been transformed into an inadvertent killer by the simulated violence of the video game. The *L.A. Times* explained

this twist in the plot by suggesting that the producers must have been hoping that the topicality of video game violence and gun control might help save the *Homicide* TV series from cancellation. Yet the plot could also be read as part of a larger cultural project to transfer some of the current heat about popular representations of violence from television to the newer medium of video games (the same way it had earlier been transferred from movies to TV).

Before any conclusions about the link between violence and video games can be reached, it may be useful to explore two closely related issues that thus far have tended to be ignored: What is unique about the representation of violence in an interactive medium (that is, what are its distinctive structures of identification, player positioning, and socialization) and how is the representation of violence contextualized in video games. To address these issues, we must take into account at least three levels of contextualization.

MEDIA SPECIFICITY

Since video games require active players who constantly push buttons or manipulate controls, they would seem to foster a different kind of identification than is found in more traditional popular media, such as television and movies, where the spectator is positioned to be more passive physically. Therefore, one might suspect that the representation of violence in video games is inherently more threatening than representations in television and cinema because (as one child I interviewed put it) "they let you control the moves . . . [instead of] only watch[ing] what happens."[4] Such interactivity provides an active sensori-motor experience that usually demands repetitive moves—that is, pushing the same buttons in various combinations and repeating the same sequences in a trial-and-error mode until victory is achieved. According to Piaget, this kind of "sensori-motor assimilation" is not only essential to perceptual intelligence but it also reveals "the affinity between habit and intelligence" (Piaget, 1960). If children's cognitive learning is accelerated by physical enactment as Piaget and other cognitive theorists have argued, then perhaps this means that the earlier they are exposed to violent video games, the more structural and habitual violent behavior is likely to become.

Yet, on the other hand, the threat of media violence is frequently assumed to be positively correlated with the realism of its representation. Since most existing video games have narrative content that is heavily dominated by fantasy and visual designs that are highly stylized and unrealistic, one might be tempted to conclude that their depictions of violence are therefore less threatening than those found in media such as television and movies that have a longer tradition and greater capacity for realistic representations[5] (Piaget, 1960). For example, in a recent poll prepared by Opinion Research Corporation for USA Today in April 1994, over 500 boys and girls between the ages of 8 to 12 from various

parts of the nation (Northeast, Midwest, South and West), were asked whether they were "scared" or "upset" by violence they saw on a wide range of television shows. The tallies showed that children in virtually every category claimed they were most upset by the violence they saw in the news and in other realistic shows (such as *America's Most Wanted* and *Cops*) in contrast to animated shows (such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *X-Men*, and *Tom & Jerry*) and unrealistic live-action adventure series (such as *Lois & Clark* and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*).[6] Even within the rating systems for video games (Sega's voluntary system as well as the new industry-wide system adopted in early 1995), realism functions as one criterion for evaluating the age-appropriateness of violent images and sounds (the more realistic the representation, the more threatening it is assumed to be). Although the lack of realism in most video games might lead players to conclude that their depictions of violence are rather harmless, this disavowal is frequently accompanied (both within the narrative and the player's reception) by a denial of the serious consequences and moral implications of violent behavior. It is this denial that is disturbing, especially when it occurs within a mode of sensori-motor interactivity that is linked to habitual action. It is the effects of this unique combination—of interactivity and lack of realism—that need empirical testing.

THE IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT WHERE GAMES ARE PLAYED

This second context can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, it can refer to *the specific platform* (e.g., standard video game box, portable unit like Game Boy or Game Gear, computer, CD-ROM drive, Internet, or interactive broadcast television) and *particular commercial system* (Macintosh or IBM, Sega Genesis, Nintendo or SuperNintendo, Atari Jaguar or Lynx, Philips or 3DO) on which the game is played. These platforms and systems carry their own cultural connotations, especially on issues of violence and gender. For example, most kids know that the Sega version of *Mortal Kombat* is more violent than the Nintendo version, and they know which characters are omitted on the portable versions. It is like a film buff knowing the various versions of *Blade Runner*.

Secondly, the issue of immediate environment can also refer to whether the game is being played *in private or public space*—that is, playing at home on your own equipment with your intimates, or in the promiscuous public space of the arcade, theater lobby, or airport where you have less control over picking your playmates. On-line games offer a combination of public and private realms, for you are playing with strangers in your own domestic space, and have the choice of whether to reveal your "true" identity, adopt a false persona, or remain anonymous.

THE LARGER CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

This third context involves *cultural and historical specificity,*—the distinctive conventions in the way a particular culture represents violence, a question explored within the context of Spain in *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Kinder 1993). This issue leads us to consider the broader cultural implications of the way violence is narrativized within video games at a particular moment in history, the way it is represented formally, the way it positions players, and the way it functions within the political economy—issues I began to address in *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games* (1991). In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard argues that the sole purpose of all sacrificial violence (whether in art, myth, ritual, or religion) is the prevention of recurrent reciprocal violence—a theory that makes violence essential to civilization. Girard claims that most societies perform this protective function by creating a distinction between an official violence that is authorized by the law and an anarchic violence that threatens to undermine the dominant social order and its structuring oppositions. Girard's theory is useful because it encourages us to ask what set of values any specific act of violence is designed to enforce or subvert. Thus, it helps us understand how violence is actually used in various settings at specific moments of history. Although most of Girard's examples were taken from so-called primitive societies, he claimed that his theory was also applicable to modern cultures, particularly when they were undergoing "sacrificial crises" that threatened the prevailing system of values. It would be easy to apply his theory to our own post-cold war era where we are currently experiencing a restructuring of values on many different registers and to read the representation of violence in video games as a way of negotiating those changes.

In many current video games (such as *Desert Strike*, *Lethal Enforcers*, *Robocop vs. Terminator*, *Street Fighter*, and *Blood Bath*), the narrative premise sets up an obviously arbitrary distinction between lawful and unlawful violence, which the action quickly undermines. Players are positioned to control the moves of good guys who are authorized to kill anything that moves. As if to strike an ironic balance between manichean morality and total nihilism, characterization and plot remain minimal. The only moral justification that appears essential are the rules of the game.

I do not mean to suggest that all video games fit this paradigm. Rather, I am interested in examining subtle historical shifts within the action genre. Thus, I want to compare how these three contexts function within two specific games: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 1*, the Konami arcade game that was the rage in 1990, and the Sega version of *Mortal Kombat 2*, a popular arcade game that invaded the home market on what the product advertisers called "Mortal Friday" (September 9, 1994) and promptly grossed a record $50 million during its first weekend in the stores.

NINJA TURTLES VERSUS MORTAL KOMBAT

In July 1990 while I was writing *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games*, my research team made a video tape (shot and edited by Walter Morton) of the children we were interviewing at the Playland Arcade on the Santa Monica Pier. We were there for a 5-hour period, interviewing kids (ranging in age from 6 to 14) who were playing *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle 1*. Since no girls were playing this particular game, we interviewed the only girl in the arcade who was playing video games, an 8-year-old African-American girl, and also a 10-year-old Hispanic girl wearing a TMNT t-shirt who was walking by the arcade. Following that session, we taped three of the boys (whom I will call J, E, and V) whom we had earlier interviewed now playing video games at the home of one of the children. We observed a dramatic contrast in how these three boys played video games in the two different settings. The video tape shows that within the arcade, all three boys stood tensely at the machine, seeming to use their whole body as they played and making grimacing facial expressions (which were most extreme in J). In one shot E turns to the young observers beside him (whom he did not know and who are trying to get a better view of the screen), and angrily shouts, "One person, okay!" Later in the tape the same three boys are seen quietly seated in front of a TV monitor playing another "action" game. Although this game also allowed two players to play at the same time, only one of the boys (E, who was the most skillful of the three) was actually playing while the other two (J and V) watched and commented. The boy who had made the most extreme grimaces (J) in the arcade now remained silent and almost immobile, his face impassive.

When players go from their own video game setup at home to the arcade, the competitive field frequently broadens and the excitement intensifies. The arcade presents a safe version of urban encounters where players can compete with others of all ages and of all racial, ethnic and class backgrounds. The particular game helps to structure these relations. For example, in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 1* players are positioned as allies fighting against the villains to save the city. This camaraderie seemed important to the kids we interviewed, and at one point in the tape we see four boys (who do not know each other) playing side by side with little sign of conflict—a 7-year-old Mexican-American, a 12-year-old African-American, a 7-year-old Euro-American, and a 6-year-old Asian-American.

This mode is very different from games of one-on-one serial combat like the *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat* series where a player fights either against the game or against another player (frequently of a different race, ethnicity, or class) while others watch the competition. Frequently a player seems embarrassed when beaten in front of friends, especially when a teenager is beaten by a younger kid or a boy is beaten by a girl.

As players await their turn, they can cruise other players, observing their playing strategy for possible future encounters. Many games use ominous urban

settings as backgrounds for serial encounters with waves of dangerous strangers—scenarios that are strangely evocative of promiscuous sex in public places like piers and parks. Ironically this analogy with the public sex arena was explicit in a bill [#126] proposed by California Assemblyman Polanco, which would require arcade owners to enforce a rating system for any games deemed "harmful" to minors, as with magazine racks displaying X-rated images and in adult video establishments featuring porn.

Like the public sex arena, the arcade is gendered primarily as a male space. In our five hours at the Santa Monica arcade, not only did we find only one female videogame player, but I was the only mother present in this part of the arcade—it was mainly buddies, brothers, and fathers and sons. One striking pair was a burly father in bermudas steadily feeding quarters to his four-year-old son, who had a toy sword fastened to his waist and who was literally (and compulsively) licking his lips as he played. We also noticed that in order to play the game, he had to stand on a box so that he could reach the controls of the game, which were obviously designed for bigger players.

In 1990 what was most innovative about the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* arcade game was that it allowed four kids to play at the same time—quadrupling the income as well as the degree of socialization. Like the turtles, players were positioned as members of a team, which was structured around male bonding. But in games of one-on-one serial combat like *Mortal Kombat*, no matter whether you come to the arcade alone or with a companion, the game positions you as a loner. If you do have a playmate, he or she is necessarily positioned as an opponent. Not only does *Mortal Kombat* provide immediate gratification through quick victories but it also maximizes profit by multiplying the ways in which you can win the game—defeating all the other characters with each of the fighters as well as beating an unlimited number of players, a structure that motivates each player to play as long as possible.

Mortal Kombat encourages competition at every level and this spiraling rivalry escalates the violence: *Mortal Kombat 2* is more violent than *Mortal Kombat 1*, the *Mortal Kombat* series is more violent than the *Streetfighter* series (a point stressed in the TV ads), the Sega version of *Mortal Kombat* is more violent than the Nintendo version, the arcade version has better graphics (and hence gorier representations of violence) than the home version, the Super Nintendo version has more combatants than the Game Boy version, etc. No wonder *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* now looks so dated.

In *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* players are positioned to identify only with the turtles, who are teenage males. Their status as fantasy mutants helps children perceive their violent behavior as unrealistic, and their multinationalism and green color make them an easy object of identification for all races. (In fact, when I asked children in a daycare center why they thought the game was so popular, one little African-American girl said, "Because they're green!") Players are not allowed to identify with the turtles's Japanese rat guru Splinter

nor with their human Irish-American friend April O'Neill, who are merely captives. Not only are issues of gender and age emphasized over those of race, ethnicity and class but masculinity and adolescence are clearly privileged, for they represent either what the target audience already is or what younger kids and females presumably aspire to become. Despite April's androgynous jumpsuit and her characterization (in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* comic books, TV series, and movies) as a feisty Hawksian female who wants to be one of the boys, the arcade game doubly codes her (both through its software and hardware) as a static object of desire. Yet none of the children we interviewed mentioned those provocative April pin-ups painted on the machine.

In contrast to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, many games of one-on-one combat provide at least one active female character who is usually an androgynous twin. For example, in *Mortal Kombat 1* Sonya Blade is literally fighting to avenge her dead twin brother, and in *Mortal Kombat 2* she is replaced by two Asian twin sisters, Kitana and Mileena. These games also usually include characters of color—*Mortal Kombat 1* has several Asian characters, and *Mortal Kombat 2* adds Jax, an African-American fighter. But we cannot assume that this greater diversity represents a more progressive identity politics, for one could argue that it merely increases the racist and sexist potential of the individual fights.

In *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* the violence is positioned within a moralistic narrative of good versus evil, and players can identify only with good guys. Since this narrative premise becomes a means of justifying the violence, players are frequently reminded of it within the game, especially through kudos and kisses from the captives and comical threats from the villains that function as rewards and punishments for fighting on the "right" side.

It is very different in *Mortal Kombat 1 and 2*, where a player can choose to identify either with a good guy or villain. The booklet that comes with the game gives the backstories of the various characters, including their moral status. But most players of *Mortal Kombat* I have spoken with claim they do not bother to read the booklet and this moralizing dimension is not apparent in the game. All the characters are equally brutal, and their amoral performance is applauded by crowds or praised as a "flawless victory" merely on the basis of pragmatics.

We also must consider the basis on which players decide which character to choose for identification. In *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 1* most boys we interviewed chose on the basis of the weapons or physical powers (e.g., reach or the ability to roll), characteristics that distinguished the unique style of violent behavior performed by each of the individual turtles. In contrast, the girls responded with a more general adjective that expressed their own judgment or emotional reaction to the character ("he's cool, he's fresh and neato") but had nothing to do with violence. Perhaps this difference can be attributed to the fact that these girls were not really playing the game and therefore did not know the moves and weapons as well as the boys, but I found a similar pattern (of only

boys referring to weapons as a reason for preferring a turtle) in another study where I questioned a number of children about the turtles after they had watched an episode of the animated TV series (see Appendix 2 in Kinder, 1990).

These choices of identification are not arbitrary; they are partially structured by the game through what it chooses as the "functional difference" (color, personality, weapons). I found that the boys we interviewed seemed to take greater pleasure than the girls in demonstrating they had mastered these codes.

In *Mortal Kombat 2* most players choose on the basis of the fighter's strategy and final "fatality" moves (e.g., decapitation, dismemberment, ripping the torso in two, bisecting the opponent vertically with a buzzsaw, sucking in the opponent and spitting out the bones), which actually require a secret code to access—codes that players learn from video game magazines like *Nintendo Power* and *GamePro*, hot lines, friends, or from watching others play in the arcades. These fatality moves are the "functional difference" not only between fighters but also between the Sega *Mortal Kombat* and the less violent Nintendo version. They are what made *Mortal Kombat 1* so notorious and popular and what distinguished it from other violent games in this genre.

A new feature in *Mortal Kombat 2* (as opposed to *Mortal Kombat 1*) is that players have two other alternative non-violent options for the final move. Instead of inflicting a "fatality," they can also choose either an individualized Friendship move that helps to stereotype the particular fighter (e.g., Jax makes paper cutouts, Kung Lao pulls a rabbit out of a hat, Johnny Cage signs an autograph, Kitana bakes a cake, and Mileena demonstrates her green thumb) or "Babality" (where their opponent is transformed into a helpless baby). For the arcade crowd, this humiliating infantilization may be a fate worse than death, especially in a medium that is so coded with a generational discourse that fetishizes adolescence, as we have aleady seen in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

In exploring the cultural specificity of the violence in these two games, we see it consistently linked with seven related concepts—a pattern that can also be found in other contemporary American mass media. First and foremost, is *humor*. The juxtaposition of violence and humor goes back to slapstick farce, American silent comedy and animated cartoons, but it became a politicized form of comic hysteria through a wide range of popular genres in the 1960s with a road movie like *Bonnie and Clyde*, a satire like *A Clockwork Orange*, and a revisionist western like *The Wild Bunch* (where nervous laughter preceded orgasmic outbursts of violence, frequently substituting for sexuality). This fusion of violence and humor reached new levels of excess in the 1980s and 1990s in a diverse array of films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Total Recall*, *Last Action Hero*, *The Mask*, *True Lies*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Pulp Fiction*, where humor frequently functioned to sever the connection with "the

real" and to disavow any guilt that might be associated with watching violent behavior, a dynamic that was satirically turned against the spectator in the satirical gangsterfilm, *Goodfellas*. This tradition helps explain why the violent excesses in *Mortal Kombat 2* often generate laughter rather than outrage.

Secondly, violence (like humor) functions as a source of *empowerment* in American media—particularly for those spectators who feel powerless like kids, which helps explain the phenomenal box office success of the *Home Alone* movies. More specifically, this empowerment is linked to *transformability* (our third concept)—not being locked into a fixed identity but being able to function like a violent transformer toy or shapeshifter, which helps explain the tremendous success not only of the Ninja Turtles but also their successors, Fox's *Might Morphin Power Rangers* (a popular television series that has generated phenomenally successful action figures, a videogame, and a movie). What distinguishes the Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers from other more traditional protean superheroes (such as *Batman, Superman,* and *Wonder Woman*) is that they provide a choice of several characters for identification so that spectators can move fluidly from one to another and thereby quadruple their own transformative power. Similarly, the power to transform enemies is one of the features that has made the violent action game *Doom* so popular with adult players. This empowering plasticity is appealing not only to youngsters as a commodified form of growth but also to adults as a means of survival in a global culture that is rapidly being restructured by economic and technological changes and that increasingly puts a high premium on transformative processes like recycling, retraining and masquerade. Even high-tech multinational corporations must adopt these transformative strategies to survive in the global economy. As Akio Morita, the founding chairman of Sony, said shortly after his company's 1989 purchase of Columbia Pictures: "We are more willing to act in the U.S. like a U.S. company, in Europe like a European company, and in Japan like a Japanese company. That's the only way a global company like Sony can truly become a significant player in each of the world's major markets."

Within our culture, empowerment through violence is also linked to *technical mastery* (our fourth concept), usually over hardware—whether it is weapons, joysticks, or generators of special effects. This pattern, which can be found in popular works from Roadrunner cartoons to *Jurassic Park*, is pivotal and all-pervasive in a cutting-edge medium like electronic games, which frequently function as an introduction to computers (a connection that is sometimes used to justify their social value). If we compare the "mutation" of the Ninja Turtles with the "morphing" of the Power Rangers, we can see how even the concept of transformation shifts from a natural process that alters the heroes to a technical process that they themselves control. Since it is identified with a specific computer-generated process, morphing is also very photogenic and therefore provides a ready source for the recurrent visual spectacle that has become one of the most popular features of the show and that is simulated in several of the Power Ranger toys.

Fifth, violence in our culture is frequently represented formally through extravagant visual spectacle and loud explosive sounds—usually generated by complex special effects that require potent hardware and that arouse excitement and pleasure. Paradoxically, this sensory extravagance helps violence become synonymous with *action* (our sixth related concept).

As *action* games become the dominant genre, there is a continuing rapid acceleration in violence to make them more exciting. If a game is not violent, it is considered boring. For example, several kids we interviewed said they liked the violence in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* because it was action! Violence provides the main pivots or climaxes in the video game narrative, and thus paradoxically it both interrupts and drives the plot forward. It functions like the production number in the musical and the sex scene in pornography, whose structural similarities have been noted by Linda Williams (1989) and which also serve this dual narrative function of suspension and propulsion.

Finally, violence is associated with *masculinity*. In these game narratives, violence is frequently narrativized as the primary testbed of male competence. Most of the violence is inflicted by males while females are usually victims or captives. Even when females are formidable fighters like Mileena and Kitana in *Mortal Kombat 2*, their bodies and moves are highly eroticized. As the proverbial castrating woman, Kitana decapitates her opponents with her deceptively feminine razor-sharp fan. She also uses a mortal kiss to inflate her opponent and blow him to bits. Conversely, her sister Mileena (whom *Nintendo Power* calls a "man eater") sucks in her opponent's body and spits out the bones—a high powered kiss that evokes *vagina dentata*. To devour their opponents, these twin sisters do not have to be transformed into dragons (like one of their male rivals Liu Kang) because *all* aggressive women in this video game genre are depicted as dragon ladies bent on destroying phallic power. Thus the violence is always related to the issue of masculinity, even when performed by a woman. No wonder, then, her triple decapitation is repeated three times in the game's most extreme instance of excess.

Moreoever, whether the winner is male or female, the disembodied voice-over authorizing the murderous moves is always the voice of the patriarchy, which sounds very much like Darth Vader. Players are positioned not only to please and obey this voice of violence but also to internalize it (Daddy made me do it!).

If violent games are culturally gendered male and if violence becomes synonymous with action, then it is assumed that games specially targeted at girls will lack any action at all (violent or otherwise) and therefore be boring, as in fact, most of them are.[7] Some examples are *Kiss* and *The Girls' Club* by Philips and the games based on Barbie, Little Mermaid, and Beauty and the Beast, none of which has been a big commercial success.

The gendering of games occurs not only through narrative content but also through formal means, such as direct address and point of view. In the notoriously misogynyist *Night Trap*, not only do male vampires with high-tech phallic

drills drain the blood out of scantily clad coeds, but the coding of direct address helps gender the player male. Whereas male characters use direct address to command the players, supervising their participation on a male rescue team, female characters use it to plead for help. They move close to the camera as if looking directly into the player's eyes, and then pathetically (or flirtatiously) make an appeal to their rescuer whom they presume is male. Thus, even if the player is female, she is expected to occupy a player position and to play a role that has been gendered male by the behaviors of the characters in the game.

In *Prize Fighter* (another adult game like *Night Trap* using digitized live-action footage of real actors), you are positioned to identify with a new boxer called The Kid through subjective point-of-view shots. This illusion is intensified as you control his moves because your own performance in the ring determines the behavior of other characters and how they address you as The Kid—whether your manager praises or insults you, and whether sexy groupies proposition or heckle you.

The gendering of games is also transmitted through advertising, promotion and packaging. Most television ads show only boys playing video games. For example, the television ad for *Mortal Kombat 1* shows a crowd of young boys running through the urban streets to play (or buy) the game. If you look very carefully in the crowd, you might spot a couple of girls dressed like boys, but the victorious kid in the foreground is definitely male. Eugene Provenzo (1991) has analyzed covers of 47 top Nintendo games and found that 90% show no females at all—on these covers he found 155 males and only nine females.

The ancillary products are also targeted at boys. There are at least six large-circulation magazines addressed to video game players, whose readership is at least 90% male (e.g. *Game Pro* has 1 million readers per month, 95% of whom are male).

One finds a similar approach in the promotions for Sega and Nintendo, whose platform systems are now widely perceived by children to be essentially masculine, a process of gendering that has accelerated over the last couple of years along with the proliferation of "violent action" games.[8] According to their own figures, 30% of Nintendo owners are female, whereas only 15% of Super Nintendo users (the 16-bit model) are female, which is around the same percentage Sega cites for female users of its Genesis system. Apparently the more high powered the hardware, the more male oriented it is assumed to be; the portable systems (Game Boy and Game Gear) are perceived as more user friendly to females.

An interesting case is the popular educational game *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*, which has a female villain and was designed to appeal to players of both genders. While this game was very popular with female players as a computer game, the Sega version was not. It was as if female players assumed that the Sega version of the game (like most other Sega products) must be targeted at boys, even if it had essentially the same content as the computer game. This strange discrepancy suggests that both the software and the hardware can be separately gendered. The gendering of commercial systems like

Sega and Nintendo is particularly disturbing since they function like genres or cognitive schema—that is, as ways of categorizing perceptual data or mapping the world beyond the games.[9] Many people fear that this masculine gendering of video game hardware is being generalized to all computers.

In emphasizing media specificity in the representation of violence, I do not mean to essentialize video games, which, like all forms of cultural production, are always subject to historical change, not only in their technology, form, and content but also in their modes of reception and socialization. As video games increasingly absorb movie technology and incorporate the latest developments in virtual reality, their powers of realistic representation and modes of interactivity will undoubtedly be transformed. Such changes will provide all the more reason to continue expanding the discourse on video game violence—to keep asking new questions and to continue seeking answers in a broader range of contexts.

ENDNOTES

[1] This chapter is based on a paper that was presented at the Console-ing Passions Conference on Television, Video and Feminism in Tucson, AZ, April 1994.

[2] For example, in December 1994, the *Los Angeles Times* daily featured stories on this topic headlined, "Video Games Will Be the Next Venue for Debate on Violence" (December 9); "Most Say TV Violence Begets Real Violence" (December 18); "Tracking the Media-Violence Explosion"(December 26); "Fears Cloud Search for Genetic Roots of Violence" (December 30); and "Nipping Violence in the Bud" (December 31). On December 3, 1994, Mediascope, a southern California nonprofit organization, mobilized a phalange of experts drawn from 200,000 members of the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine to send a letter to 125 leaders in the entertainment industry offering "their assistance in lessening the harmful effects of violence in films, television, music, and video games."

[3] The quoted line read: "It's worse than TV or a movie. It communicates the message that the only way to be empowered is through violence."

[4] These interviews were conducted in July 1990 in conjunction with the writing of *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1991) and are described at length in the appendices.

[5] For a fuller discussion of this issue in the context of television, see Luke (1990).

[6] "Violence on Television Poll of Youths," ORC Study 31084. Out of 255 males (from age 8-12), 58.1% said they even were "scared" or "upset" when "someone gets hurt on" the news; 53.4% on *America's Most Wanted* or *Cops*; 15% on *Power Rangers* or *Lois & Clark*; 7.8% on *X-Men* or *Tom & Jerry*. Out of 245 females of the same age, 70.6% said they even were "scared" or "upset" "when someone gets hurt on the news; 74.5% on *America's Most Wanted* or *Cops*; 27.2% on *Power Rangers* or *Lois & Clark*; and 14.4% on *X-Men* or *Tom & Jerry*.

[7] One exception is *Hawaii High, The Mystery of the Tiki*, distributed by Sanctuary Woods, a Nancy Drew type adventure game targeted at girls over the age of eight, which was developed as a CD-ROM interactive comic book drawn by Trina Robbins (the first woman in comic book history to write and draw *Wonder Woman*).

[8] To change this perception, Sega produced a new television commercial in June 1995 that was specifically targeted at girls.

[9] No wonder then that kids from an early age see videogames as "boy toys." One of the most comprehensive studies from the 1980s (Wilder, et al., 1985) surveyed almost 2,000 students from kindergarten through college freshmen and concluded that "as early as kindergarten, boys and girls viewed videogames as more appropriate to boys."

REFERENCES

Kinder, M. (1993). *Blood cinema: The reconstruction of national identity in Spain.* Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kinder, M. (1991). *Playing with power in movies, television, and video games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Girard, R. (1970). *Violence and the sacred* (translated by Patrick Gregory). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 134.

Luke, C. (1990). *Constructing the child viewer: A history of the American discourse on television and children, 1950-1980.* New York: Praeger.

Piaget, J. (1960). *The psychology of intelligence.* Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, & Co.

Provenzo, E. F., Jr. (1991). *Video kids: Making sense of Nintendo.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wilder, G., Mackie, D., & Cooper, J. (1985). Gender and computers: Two surveys of computer-related attitudes. *Sex Roles, 13* (3 & 4), 215–228.

Williams, L. (1989). *Hard core: Power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible."* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.