VIOLENCE, ADDICTION, AND M-RATED GAMES

Violence is present in all media – some books describe gruesome murders, films show blood and guts, and some music contains aggressive lyrics,, peppered with references to weapons and illegal drugs. But over the years, especially when a tragic, violent event involving a young person occurs, video games have been examined with a particularly strong lens.

Violence in Video Games

There are a number of differences between violent movies and violent games that result in an increased level of concern by some parents, lobbyists, and politicians. Video games are of an interactive nature and the scenes that unfold can be directly due to the human player behind the controller. When you watch a murder in a film, you are not complicit in the death; however, there is a sense of both immersion and responsibility in video games. Often you control the character with the gun, staring down the scope and targeting other beings.

Many modern games also allow the player to act as he or she wishes; for example, in *Fallout 3*, you may choose a number of responses when conversing with other players, from being extremely rude to being kind. You can also kill almost anyone you encounter. While these actions do have consequences, and your character has a karma rating, the game is not necessarily set up as a test of good versus evil, and there is no obligation for the player to be 'good.'

Video games have been a part of popular culture for over 30 years, and "the average age of gamers is 35 and rising" (Danforth, 2008, ¶ 13) – some who have grown up with games and others who have only recently become involved. Yet one of the arguments used most often to censor video games is that they are for children and should not contain offensive content.

One of the most controversial games in recent years is an independent title called *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!,* where the player experiences April 20th, 1999 as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. In 2007, it was selected by a jury to be a finalist in the Slamdance Film Festival's competition for independent game creators, the Guerilla Gamemaker Competition, but the festival's founder decided to cut the game. This move was heavily criticized by not only by gaming blogs such as Kotaku and Watercooler Games, but also by Newsweek. Creators of five other finalist games, including *Braid* and *flOw* – which both went on to achieve mainstream success – pulled their games in a show of solidarity with *SCMRPG*'s creator. They did not necessarily agree with the game's sentiments and intentions, but they felt that *SCMRPG* deserved to be a finalist in the competition. The Guerilla Gamemaker Competition no longer takes place.

The ESRB

In 1994, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board was founded to determine and publish the age ratings for games released in North America, similar to the MPAA's film ratings. Video game retailers are not supposed to sell or rent M-rated games to anyone under the age of 17, and certain US states have tried to impose very harsh penalties for stores that are caught – rulings to this effect have thus far been overturned by the Supreme Court. Presently, the ratings of the ESRB are not enforced by law in the U.S., and are followed voluntarily by the major retailers. Some retailers do not sell games with M or AO (Adults Only) ratings, and the three major console makers have stated that no AO-rated games will be licensed for their machines.

In Canada, the ESRB ratings are enforced by law in several provinces, including Nova Scotia and Ontario. The Nova Scotia Theatres and Amusements Act states that: "A video-game outlet or employee or agent of a video-game outlet must not sell, lease, rent, exchange, distribute or otherwise make available any video game classified as 'Mature' by the Entertainment Software Rating Board to a person who is under 17 years of age" (Province of Nova Scotia, 2008, § 13.2). For more information on video games and North American legislation, visit www.gamepolitics.com.

When a game is rated, a number of people are drawn from a pool of potential reviews to assign a rating, based on the game's most extreme footage as provided by the developer. The people assigning the rating are not involved in the video game industry and come from all walks of life. There have been a number of ratings controversies over the years, so while the label on the box (including the content descriptors on the back) is a good indicator of the game's subject matter, it is vital to research the game yourself, playing it if possible in order to determine its appropriateness for your needs. Some M-rated games are widely accepted as being suitable for those under 17, such as *Halo*, while Teen-rated games sometimes have more violence and objectionable content than parents expected.

Violent games have not been proven to *cause* violent behaviour, but teens playing M-rated games are involved in problem behaviours more often

The biggest problem with studies attempting to link violent games with aggressive behaviour is that they have not been able to identify a causal relationship between the two. Ultimately, this is a very complex issue that cannot be adequately addressed in a short article. The book *Grand Theft Childhood* is an excellent resource on this topic and contains original research by its authors, Dr. Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson. They did find a relationship between teens who played M-rated games and an increase in problem behaviours (2008, p. 97), but it could be true that people with aggressive and hostile tendencies are more strongly attracted to violent games in the first place – just like a successful young hockey player might gravitate towards sports-themed games (p. 103).

One of their observations is that "violent crime has steadily decreased since the mid-1990s, over a period when video games – including violent ones – became increasingly available to children" (p. 95). However, they also note that "simple assault (actual or attempted attack, without a weapon) increased by 106 percent for boys and 290 percent for girls between 1980 and 2004" (p. 95).

While violent games may desensitize players to real-world violence or minimize its societal consequences, they can also be an outlet for frustration and a way to experience the world of guns and crime without actually participating in the flesh. As part of their

research, Kutner and Olson asked teens why they liked to play violent video games. The top reasons for boys were "it's just fun," "it's exciting," "something to do when bored," "challenge of figuring things out," and "to compete and win." For girls, the top reason was also fun, followed by "something to do when bored," "challenge of figuring things out," "it's exciting" and "nothing else to do" (p. 113). Teens who play M-rated games are also *more* likely than teens who don't play M-rated games to play in a social setting, with friends, instead of alone (p. 130).

Video Game Addiction

Another reason that games are often vilified is the perception that they are addictive. Unlike a film, which is finished after a couple of hours, some games have over 100 hours of game-play. Other games, such as **MMORPG**s, don't have an ending and can be played as long as the servers are still running. When immersed in a game, your perception of the passage of time may be affected since you are concentrating on reaching a goal or completing a task. The more mental resources a game requires, the less attention the player gives to duration. A recent study where adolescents spent eight minutes playing *Tetris*, eight minutes reading from a screen, and then 24 minutes playing *Tetris* found that they overestimated the two short sessions (but felt that they had spent less time playing *Tetris* than reading), and underestimated the duration of the 24-minute session (Tobin & Grondin, 2009, p. 556-7). Amount of time spent playing video games is a frequent point of contention between teens and their parents.

One such disagreement ended tragically in the case of Brandon Crisp, a 15-year-old from Barrie, Ontario. Crisp had been playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* online in a **clan** with his real-life best friends. Despite being several years under the ESRB-suggested minimum age for the game, which is rated M, Crisp purchased it with some Christmas money and had been playing the game frequently during the 18 months prior to his disappearance over Thanksgiving weekend of 2008. In an article in the Toronto Star, his father mentioned having taken the Xbox 360 away from his son more than 20 times (Boyle, 2008, ¶ 16). This most recent time, Crisp had threatened to run away if his system was not returned to him.

His father believed him to be bluffing, and helped him pack his bag. But Crisp never returned home "with his tail between his legs" as his father had hoped (Boyle, 2008, ¶ 7). During the weeks when he was missing, the theory his parents gave to the media was that their son had been lured away by other players of *Call of Duty*. Microsoft even offered a $50,000 reward for information leading to his safe return. Sadly, in early November, Crisp's body was found only kilometres from his home, having died of injuries sustained after falling from a tree.

This unfortunate story received a lot of attention in both mainstream media and gaming blogs, and was even the subject of an episode of CBC's *The Fifth Estate*, which heavily criticized video games. In response, video game blog Joystiq deconstructed the episode and pointed out the flaws in how Crisp's story was handled. The article can be read at http://www.joystiq.com/2009/03/08/sensationalized-top-gun-report-blames-pro-gaming-for-death-of/

Clearly, young people's involvement with video games can lead to tense and sometimes tragic family situations – just like many other activities teens engage in while growing up. *Call of Duty,* while being the focus of Crisp's troubles at home, was just one element in this sad, but thankfully rare, circumstance. Families who suspect a child is having an unhealthy relationship with video games should seek professional help and guidance, and encourage a balance of activities and interests.

Popularity and Success of M-rated Games

In recent years many of the most critically acclaimed video games have been rated M by the ESRB, effectively preventing teens under 17 from playing some of the best games that have been produced. A report by the Electronic Entertainment Design and Research firm (EEDAR) also found that in the U.S., M-rated games were reviewed highest on average, and had the highest average sales (Alexander, 2007, ¶ 5).

However, M-rated games make up less than 15% of total games (ALA Toolkit, n.d., ¶ 12), and are disproportionally represented in the critics' top lists compared to other games. Of course, professional reviewers are by and large over the age of 18 and are rating these games from an adult perspective.

Controversial videogames: what are libraries doing?

There are numerous of points of view to consider when looking at where violent or controversial games fit in at your library. On the one hand, these blockbuster games, such as *Halo*, *Killzone*, and *Fallout* are often some of the most anticipated releases for these video game consoles. Teens have been reading about these games online, discussing them, writing FAQs and walkthroughs, and arguing on the forums over the best weapons and the best missions. In some cases, they are heavily invested in the worlds these games have created, and enjoy writing and reading fanfiction and making costumes.

The developers have put a lot of time and money into these games and they are often, according to traditional criteria such as quality of graphics, sound, and game play, the best games the systems have to offer. Games such as *Metal Gear Solid 4*, with as many as seven hours of **cut scenes** overall, border on cinematic. The "M" rating often means that the games deal with serious themes such as death, deception, heroism, and sacrifice. When you include life-changing events such as sex, love, and loss in a video game, it can offer an emotional experience that just isn't present in an E-rated game such as *World of Goo*.

At the same time, some of these games glorify criminal behaviour, simulate brutal killings, and immerse the player in a world of violence where there are no real-life consequences. There can be strong language, racist characters, and drug use. Some games, just like some films, rely on shocking scenes and frightening imagery. These games are definitely not suitable for young teens, but does that mean older teen patrons should not be able borrow M-rated games? What about if they want to bring their own games for open play?

One option is to handle M-rated games the same way your library handles R-rated movies. Some libraries allow M-rated games to be checked out, but do not use them for programming. Some organizations that do use M-rated games such as *Halo* during programming have drafted permission slips that require parental approval. Be sure to look closely at the options when starting up an M-rated game – some have options to reduce the level of gore. Some libraries have started with collections that max out at "T" rated games, but after everyone has become accustomed to games in the library, they have been able to break the "M" barrier.

Ultimately, it is up to you and your community to decide on a sensible policy for your various gaming initiatives. If games are not currently addressed in your collection policy, then they should be! This will help guide your acquisitions and ease discussions with concerned parents, who may be relieved to see that you have thought about these issues.

Fortunately, there are lots of other librarians out there who share your concerns and are willing to discuss ways to handle M-rated games. There is a Google Group called "LibGaming" that is very active – simply searching the group for "M-rated" brings up numerous discussions, with new situations cropping up in libraries around the world all the time. You can pose your own questions to the group and will be treated to the expertise of people who have pioneered gaming in libraries.

The Librarians' Guide to Gaming site also has an FAQ for M-rated games, and lists some libraries that do use M-rated games in their programming (http://www.librarygamingtoolkit.org/faq.html).

Action-packed Games - Without Graphic Violence

Though many of the most talked-about and eagerly awaited games are rated M, if you do a little digging you can provide the same type of action that your hardcore gamers crave without crossing the line.

First-person shooter style, without gory headshots

The Orange Box [PS3, XBOX 360, PC] is a box-set of first-person shooter style games from Valve, which includes *Team Fortress 2*, *Half-Life 1 and 2*, and *Portal*. While *The Orange Box* is rated M, *Portal* itself is only rated Teen, and for good reason – your 'weapon' in the game is a portal gun, which can only be used to create entrance and exit portals in flat surfaces. Though one must apply many of the same skills and techniques as in more violent **FPS**-style games, there are no living opponents in *Portal*. The game is a challenge to wrap your head around at first, as some laws of physics apply but others are bent.

You do experience danger, and are fired upon by turret guns, but you disable them by opening a portal beneath them that will make them fall over rather than exploding them with a rocket launcher. Many excellent articles about *Portal* and its subversive nature have been published online, and the game was chosen by numerous organizations and individuals in the industry as the Game of the Year for 2007. *Portal* can be purchased as a standalone game for the PC, and can be downloaded by itself on Xbox Live Arcade. For programming purposes, you could have a copy of *The Orange Box* on hand, but only let teens play *Portal* during open play events if you have a policy against M-rated games.

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption [Wii] is the latest in the *Metroid* franchise, which began on the NES. In the old days, it was an action-adventure **platformer**, but *Metroid Prime 3* was re-imagined for the Wii as an **FPS**-style game. A large part of the game is still action and puzzle oriented, but you do use the Wii Nunchuk attachment to target enemies and fire on them. Because you're fighting aliens, the guts are green goo rather than human blood. The protagonist, Samus Aran, is a female, and there is no profanity or sex in this game.

Fighter games that feel fun

The *Super Smash Bros.* games [Game Cube, Wii] are beloved by many gamers. Instead of gory finishing moves such as those seen in *Mortal Kombat*, well-known video game characters (many of them cute) engage in cartoon violence and attempt to knock each other off the stage. The damage you sustain from others' attacks adds up as a percentage rather than showing a declining life bar. The game is highly customizable, and while some guns do appear as weapons, they do not resemble those that exist in the real world. Items can also be turned off.

Family-friendly action-adventure

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess [Wii, GameCube]: Though your hardcore gamers may be clamouring for *Mass Effect*, *Mad World*, or *Grand Theft Auto*, few can resist the classic lure of a Legend of Zelda game. Thanks to the franchise's long history, most gamers will have had an unforgettable experience with a Zelda game on the console of their childhood, be it the NES or the N64. This iteration earned a Teen rating – a first for the franchise – for animated blood and fantasy violence, nothing to be concerned about. The franchise's roots in gaming's infancy give it the street cred it needs with the core audience, and head-scratching puzzles, motion-sensing capabilities on the Wii version, and more complex combat system help this particular game live up to the reputation of the franchise.

Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction [PS3]: This is a stunning, 3D platformer/shooter game in a series that PlayStation fans will be familiar with. It is a single player adventure that makes use of the motion-sensing capabilities of the PS3 controller, called the SIXAXIS. It is a positively-reviewed game with an ESRB rating of Everyone 10+, which means it is suitable for most young game players but a fun, visually-pleasing adventure for older gamers too. There are a variety of interesting weapons to discover as you work your way through the game, which will appeal to those who enjoy building an arsenal.

Mostly-wholesome party games

Rock Band 1 & 2 [Xbox 360, PS2, PS3, Wii]: The great thing about rhythm and music games such as Rock Band is that they can appeal to anyone on the gamer spectrum. Newbies and casual gamers can start off on easy and will get the hang of it within a few songs, while more seasoned players will appreciate the challenges on Hard and Expert. Sometimes song lyrics reference sex, drugs, and all that fun rock n' roll stuff, and occasionally swear words are left in – but most will know (and sing) the lyrics anyway, so censoring them doesn't do much good.

Great graphics, realistic action

Though M-rated games might get a lot of developers' attention, another proven cash cow is the annual pro-sports title release. Games such as *Madden NFL*, *NHL*, *NBA Live*, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*, and *MLB* are re-released every year with improvements to graphics and game play, and with rosters and league structures that reflect real-life to the greatest extent possible. Unfortunately, the sports games – since the major ones reflect the most 'successful' professional sports – are fairly exclusive of women. *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* and *Top Spin 3* (a tennis game by 2K Sports) seem to be the only ones that include female characters.

Consult with your teen advisory group to see what sports games they love to play. It is possible to have open play and tournament programs with these games, though your audience may not be as broad as with other games. Check out http://www.librarygamingtoolkit.org/plcmcmadden.html for a description of how to run a *Madden* tournament.

ESRB Rating Symbols

EARLY CHILDHOOD
Titles rated **EC (Early Childhood)** have content that may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.

EVERYONE
Titles rated **E (Everyone)** have content that may be suitable for ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.

EVERYONE 10+
Titles rated **E10+ (Everyone 10 and older)** have content that may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.

TEEN
Titles rated **T (Teen)** have content that may be suitable for ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling, and/or infrequent use of strong language.

MATURE
Titles rated **M (Mature)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.

ADULTS ONLY
Titles rated **AO (Adults Only)** have content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older. Titles in this category may include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.
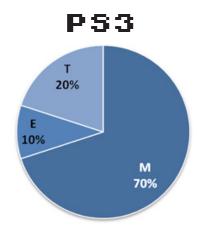
RATING PENDING
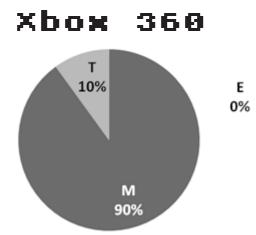Titles listed as **RP (Rating Pending)** have been submitted to the ESRB and are awaiting final rating. (This symbol appears only in advertising prior to a game's release.)

All-time highest-scoring games on Metacritic.com by system and ESRB-rating

Figures were calculated using the top 10 highest-scoring games on Metacritic.com for each major platform, based on April 2009 data.

PS3 pie chart: M 70%, T 20%, E 10%

7 of the top 10 highest-scoring games for the PS3 were rated M, and only one E-rated title (*LittleBigPlanet*) made the cut.

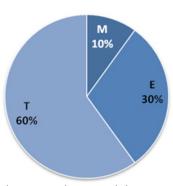Xbox 360 pie chart: M 90%, T 10%, E 0%

The top 360 games were even less family-friendly, with no games rated E in the top 10. Nine were rated M.
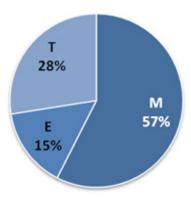
PC

PC games had a slightly more balanced ratio, but M-rated games still held the majority of the top 10 spots.

Wii

The Wii's lower graphics capabilities make it an attractive dumping ground for lower quality-games, but the most critically acclaimed are far more family-friendly than the top games on any other system.

Overall

Across all major gaming platforms, M-rated games make up the majority of critically acclaimed games.

Gaming Addictions
How to Recognise Them

Like anything else habit forming, over exposure to gaming can lead to an addiction and it is important to be able to recognise this problem in patrons. Video game addiction, like any addiction, can lead to negative effects on the addicts ability to function in the social, familial, educational and economical parts of their life (Pejovic-Milovancevic, M., 2009).

The Symptoms:

1. Increased number of hours in front of the system
2. Sleep inversion
3. Neglect of hygiene or other social requirements
4. Dissocial behaviour

There is very little we can do to help an addicted patron, but making them aware of the symptoms is non-invasive. Posting a list of these symptoms up in your computer or gaming area would be a good way of providing the information, but not over-stepping your role as a librarian.

\<unassigned variable\>
Finger-Ingested Crack