



Video Game Violence: The Latest Chapter in a Long History of Complaining About Violent Entertainment

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On Thursday, President Trump held a meeting to discuss how and whether violent video games affect gun violence, particularly school shootings. Before getting into the details of this claim, perhaps we should take a step back and read a classic fairy tale from 1812, printed in the Brothers Grimm’s *Nursery and Household Tales* and titled “How the Children Played Butcher with Each Other”:

A man once slaughtered a pig while his children were looking on. When they started playing in the afternoon, one child said to the other: “You be the little pig, and I’ll be the butcher,” whereupon he took an open blade and thrust it into his brother’s neck. Their mother, who was upstairs in a room bathing the youngest child in the tub, heard the cries of her other child, quickly ran downstairs, and when she saw what had happened, drew the knife out of the child’s neck and, in a rage, thrust it into the heart of the child who had been the butcher. She then rushed back to the house to see what her other child was doing in the tub, but in the meantime it had drowned in the bath. The woman was so horrified that she fell into a state of utter despair, refused to be consoled by the servants, and hanged herself. When her husband returned home from the fields and saw this, he was so distraught that he died shortly thereafter.

The end.

Violent entertainment is nothing new, nor is the older generation complaining about it. In usual Trump fashion, he claimed to be “hearing more and more people say the level of violence on video games is really shaping young people’s thoughts.” But it’s not true. People all over the world play video games, especially young boys, and there’s no resulting correlation to acts of violence. Actually, some studies have shown that violent video games might reduce crime by keeping young men off the street and glued to their TVs.

In 2011, the Supreme Court decided the case of *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, holding that California’s 2005 law banning the sale of “violent” video games to minors violated the First Amendment. Cato filed a brief in that case that documented the history of complaints about uniquely violent entertainment and the effectiveness of industry self-regulation—such as the MPAA movie ratings, the ESRB ratings for video games, and the Comics Code—over ham-handed government oversight. The Court cited Cato’s brief in its opinion.

Due to *Brown*, any federal law regulating violent video games is likely to be struck down by the courts. That doesn't mean, however, that Trump and other government agents can't make things uncomfortable for the industry. Most likely, we'll just hear a bunch of complaining about "these kids today" from older generations. Everything old is new again, particularly when new forms of entertainment come around that are foreign to older generations.

Fairy Tales and Dime Novels

As many people know, Brothers Grimm fairy tales can be shockingly violent and disturbing. In the Grimms' "Cinderella," the stepsisters slice off part of their feet to fit the glass slipper. When the prince notices that "blood was spurting" out of the shoes, he disqualifies them. Some critics were shocked at the tales and urged parents to protect their children from the gruesome content. Later editions of the Brothers Grimm toned down some parts, but in other parts, particularly violence suffered by evildoers in order to teach a moral lesson, the gore actually increased.

In the late 19th century, "dime novels" and "penny dreadfuls" were blamed for youth violence. An 1896 edition of the *New York Times* told of the "Thirteen Year Old Desperado" who robbed a gold watch from a jeweler and fired a gun while being pursued. "The boy's friends say that he is the victim of dime novel literature," the story concludes. Or Daniel McLaughlin, in an 1890 *New York Times*, "who sought to emulate the example of the heroes of the dime novels and 'held up' Harry B. Weir in front of 3 James Street last night."

Movies, Radio, and Comics

Next, there were movies, which apparently made dime novels look tame, as the *Times* wrote in 1909:

The days when the police looked upon dime novels as the most dangerous of textbooks in the school for crime are drawing to a close. They have found a new subject for attack. They say that the moving picture machine, when operated by the unscrupulous, or possibly unthinking, tends even more than did the dime novel to turn the thoughts of the easily influenced to paths which sometimes lead to prison.

In fact, the Supreme Court didn't grant movies First Amendment protection until 1952, ruling in a 1915 case that movies could "be used for evil" and thus could have their content regulated.

Movies might be bad, but violent radio dramas actually make listeners play out the violence their heads, a fact which concerned some in the 30s and 40s. In 1941, Dr. Mary Preston released a study in the *Journal of Pediatrics* which claimed that a majority of children had a "severe addiction" to radio crime dramas. One 10-year old told her that "Murders are best. Shooting and gangsters next. I liked the Vampire sucking out blood very much."

In the 1950s, America had a prolonged scare about violent comic books prompted by the psychiatrist Dr. Frederic Wertham. Wertham exhorted parents to understand that comics were "an entirely new phenomenon" due to their depictions of "violence, cruelty, sadism, crime, beating, promiscuity," and much more. Writing in the *Saturday Review* in 1948, Wertham chastized those who downplayed the risk:

“A thirteen-year-old boy in Chicago has just murdered a young playmate. He told his lawyer, Samuel J. Andelman, that he reads all the crime comic books he can get hold of. He has evidently not kept up with the theories that comic-book readers never imitate what they read.”

Wertham’s activism led to congressional hearings and eventually the comic book industry creating the Comics Code Authority.

Since the 1950s, we’ve seen periodic scares about violent television, movies, and now video games. And although the idea that violent entertainment might cause crime can’t be dismissed out of hand, empirical studies consistently fail to show a connection, just as with video games. The most consistent correlation is that of older generations misunderstanding the pastimes of the youth, coupled with a hearty sense of nostalgia for the good ol’ days.

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