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Recreating the Virtual Bullets that Pierces Through the Soul of Gaming:
Video Games and its Cultural Perception on America's Violent Homefrontier

For the past fifty years, video games have been around as a form of entertainment we consume on a daily basis. Unlike the books and movies seen in pop culture today, video games take us on virtual journeys where people participate in unique gameplay objectives based on player involvement. Because the idea of player engagement was rare at the time, it was inevitable that video games would revolutionize the way we view entertainment onwards. With video games becoming increasingly popular throughout the years, the debate of whether they are truly violent in nature has rubbed many people like myself the wrong way.

Over the course of two decades, media outlets would blame video games as the cause for multiple tragic events that transpire on American ground. Murder, an act that was never associated with video games to begin with, is the most vindictive crime humanity can commit. Americans often wonder what makes an individual want to commit such an act of cruelty. As individuals living in an American driven society, the belief of being born a murderer is not entirely true. Because of this mentality, speculations on where violent tendencies originated from continue to expand as Americans continue to suffer through more acts of gun violence and terrorism. Eventually, video games being the blame for violence would become a very widespread claim from various media sources. While it is true that the media has made valid points that pertain to video games being a factor to violence in America, various people in the gaming community have defended video games as a way of opposition. With both sides of the

spectrum of either blaming or defending video games becoming a controversial topic, video games and its impact on the modern world must be explored in order to reach a conclusion. By understanding the appeal of video games, analyzing the tragedies coincided with video games, and comparing cultural perceptions on video games, society as a whole will gain better insight on whether it is truly justifiable to say that video games are at fault for ongoing acts of violence across America.

Before delving into why media outlets believe video games are the main influence of violence across America, it is important to understand how video games are designed to appeal to a massive audience. As stated previously, video games are seen as an escape from reality for most people. Many are drawn to them because they are presented in a variety of different aesthetics and mechanics that can appeal to different people's interest. Although there are many different genres of games ranging from life simulators to RPGs, first and third person shooters are generally idolized in most video game communities. Given that the nature of these types of games include game mechanics through use of firearms alone, it is fascinating to believe that these types of video games can gain a mainstream following in a society where killing is taboo. According to a 2019 study on video games and the brain by Angeles Quiroga, a psychologist from the University of Madrid, a sample of 147 participants were given various video games to engage with (Quiroga, 2019). After gathering data on player interaction with the video games, participants were shown to have "a more refined cognitive ability" than previously, with the increase stemming from shooter games like Splatoon (2015) and Space Invaders (1978). These cognitive abilities can be seen through improvements to a player's "sensory acuity, physical strength, endurance, agility, or dexterity." Because of these results, it can be assumed that the

fast-paced action and challenging objective are the reasons why many players admire shooter games. Regardless of what these types of video games entail, they are rewarding by giving players a sense of self-improvement and power that can not be found in the real world.

In a world that has accepted video games as a part of their culture, many communities and competitions that revolve around them have become increasingly popular. Video games, like many other forms of entertainment, give people something to talk about. Because these conversations have expanded across various forums found online, mixtures of different video game communities would be created as a platform for people to express their passion for specific games. These communities support the foundation of what makes video games great by having players constantly engaging with gameplay discussions, fanart, and other types of analysis. With the gaming community gaining a wider audience, the viewership demand for competitive video games among players have risen thanks to streaming platforms like Twitch. According to a research article on Human Behavior by Clover Matiland, studies “demonstrate that gameplay experience can be enhanced by cooperation and competition that promotes social interaction and enjoyment” (Matiland, 2019). In other words, playing cooperatively in competitive gaming environments is one way to alleviate the anti-social effects of playing video games alone. Whereas some video games that are played in an isolated manner closes players from reality, other video games that require cooperation through team synergy and social interaction can be seen as appealing to a lot of players. Popular competitive games such as League of Legends and Fortnite have given teams of players the opportunity to showcase their skills and efforts without sacrificing the fun in video games. As more players continue to support video games through

social interactions within competitive scenes, officials can make concise deductions on the origin of violence without having to blame the entire gaming community.

Throughout the past several years, innocent people in America have undergone many tragedies that were speculated to have originated from violence in video games. One example of this was the Columbine High School Massacre that occurred in April 1999. During the incident, seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 students and 1 teacher before committing suicide. While many investigators believed bullying, social isolation, and political terrorism was to blame, violent video games were also believed to a factor. Growing up, both Harris and Klebold have been fans of shooters such as Doom (1993). Because of this, many journal entries from the boys were speculated to have been inspired by gameplay elements from the game such as “everyone is just another monster from Doom” or “[similarities] between people and Doom Zombies.” On top of this, there are false rumors stating that the boys recreated Doom levels resembling Columbine High School. Despite video games getting bad exposure, several studies have been conducted with inconclusive results on violent video games and their effect on young millennials. According to a test study by Randy McCarthy at University of Northern Illinois, a sample of 190 participants were observed and asked questions about their play sessions with either Left 4 Dead 2 and Portal (McCarthy, 2016). With mixed results ranging from normal moodiness to mild agitation, there was not enough evidence to say that video games increase aggressive inclinations. Because of this, it is speculated that people like Harris and Klebold would gain violent tendencies from playing violent video games unlike the average player. Regardless of who’s to blame, the tragedy at Columbine would be the first of many shootings to occur across American schools over the next two decades.

Even though violent video games seem to get most of the attention when it comes to violence in America, it is important to consider the high stakes in a competitive gaming environment to be a possible source of agitation. One recent example of this was the Jacksonville Landing Shooting during a Madden NFL 19 tournament on August 26, 2018. To summarize the events, tournament contender David Katz shot and killed two people and injured ten more before committing suicide. Witnesses at the event reported that Katz opened fire on the crowd because he received an early loss at the tournament. Although Madden NFL 19 isn't typically known to be a violent video game, the fact that multiple people have died surrounding a sports game was difficult for many to process. Because of this, investigators have used Jacksonville as another reason for why video games cause violence among Americans. According to a study by Kevin McCaffree, it is "not only violent video games that are hypothesized to increase aggression but, indeed, any video game that encourages zero-sum competition between players" (McCaffree, 2017). In other words, the nature of comparing scores, wins, and losses in a competitive gaming environment can cause players to doubt themselves. While losing self-confidence in gaming abilities does not apply to all players in the video game community, it is easy to distinguish those who are easily agitated from a publicized loss during a tournament. Had the game surrounding the tournament been a modern shooter, media sources would continue to devalue video games and its community for a longer period.

While it is easy to shift the blame to video games for the tragedies Americans have undergone, the mass media's negative stance on the issue does not justify video games as a whole. Because of this, many would believe that the media is attempting to push video games as a controversy as an excuse to push a political agenda on violence in America. With multiple

sources continuing to push the blame towards video games, news of it would eventually change the public's perception of American citizens and politicians. For example, during the aftermath of the El Paso, Texas shooting in which 22 people were killed at a local Walmart, President Trump publicly said "We must stop the glorification of violence in our society. This includes the gruesome and grisly video games that are now commonplace." Shortly after his statement, the hashtag "#VideogamesAreNotToBlame" was trending nationally, with most tweets mocking politicians for putting the blame on video games for most recent shootings. The backlash towards Trump is likely due to there being no solid evidence for video games to be the cause of violent behavior. According to a study by Victor Strasburger from the University of New Mexico, the problem with pointing blame towards video games is that the research on it is "neither as voluminous nor quite as convincing as the other media violence research" (Strasburger, 2014). In other words, Strasburger's study questions why politicians are not putting other forms of entertainment like movies, music, and literature in the same predicament as video games. While it can be speculated that video games are an easy target because they are seen as "time wasters" by the older demographic, this should not detour the video game community from defending their passion.

Following up on perception of video games among political figures, there are many advocates who contradict accusations against gaming. In general, video games are seen as either a pastime, a hobby, or a profession. Having dedicated their entire lives to video games, these players see gaming through a different perspective unlike media sources and politicians who see it as an excuse for regulation. Based on a study from Marcus Schulze from the University of New York at Albany, it was argued from a utilitarian ground that "even if games have the effect

of increasing the risk of violent incidents, they have a number of positive benefits that may outweigh the potential harm.” Given this claim, many members of the video game community can empathise and relate to it due to the challenges they overcame with video games at their side. For example, video games can fuel the economy by action as a new technology that can help in the medical field through psychological and mental treatments. Based on a study by Jerosen Jansz, he shows that a heavily criticized game such as Grand Theft Auto can help gamers “understand themselves because of the amount of control [they] are given” (Strasburger, 2010). This study is an example of how video games can help adolescents feel more in control in how they decide their actions in an engaging environmental gaming world. With this newfound freedom, players are able to better understand themselves and the feelings they attribute to themselves in a modern setting. Nevertheless, people should not discredit the good intentions video games can bring to a still-growing economy like America.

The rise of the violence in America along with questionable claims from media outlets has stirred controversy within the video game industry for a long time. The perception of video games has ranged from fun aftertimes to violent influencers as a result of real life events and tragedies. For generations, video games have appealed to a variety of people for offering a unique form of play and community. With many people entranced by games, it was inevitable that there would be some individuals who cause chaos due to them not being able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. While there are only a handful of tragedies that happen on rare occurrences, the media and video game community will continue their debate on whether video games are truly ethical to stay relevant in today’s culture. Ultimately, it should be our

responsibility to differentiate the joy that video games bring us and the terror it can uphold in order to change the public's perception into a more positive one.

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