

How Mortal Kombat (and moral panic) changed the gaming world

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Why are young people often attracted to doing what they are told not to do?
2. Which examples can you think of when young people do the 'wrong thing' for fun?
3. Which products appeal to young people by looking like they are the 'wrong thing' to do?

2 Key words

a. Match the correct word to each definition. Then find them in the article to read them in context. Some of the words may appear in a different form in the article.

fatality
bloody
combat
accuse

boost
console
moral panic
controversial

violence
ensure
era
guts

horrifying
opponent
tabloid

1. fighting during a game or in a war _____
2. a type of newspaper that focuses on exciting or shocking stories _____
3. causing a lot of discussion or disagreement _____
4. the organs inside a person's body _____
5. the person or team you are playing against _____
6. an electronic device used to play video games _____
7. action that hurts people or damages things _____
8. a death caused by an accident or violence _____
9. to make sure something will happen _____
10. very shocking and making you feel afraid _____
11. a strong fear that something is dangerous for society _____
12. to help something increase or become better _____

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13. something covered in blood or showing a lot of blood _____
14. to say that someone has done something wrong or illegal _____
15. a period of time in history with a particular quality _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. One _____ had a story about video games teaching kids to kill on the front page.
2. I prefer puzzle games and not games with _____ and fighting.
3. She always feels great after winning a game and it can really _____ her confidence.
4. The most popular fighting games often show military _____.
5. At the end of the fight, the game shows a short animation for each _____.
6. Parents hated the game because you could see the _____ come out of the body.
7. She didn't want to _____ her friend of cheating but there was no other explanation.
8. It is a very _____ game and you can kill the other players in many different ways.
9. Some news programmes created a(n) _____ by saying the games cause bad behaviour.
10. I don't like it when the computer is the _____ because I always lose.
11. The big game companies sell a new _____ almost every Christmas.
12. It is a really scary game with some _____ sounds.
13. After playing for three hours, I pressed 'save' to _____ I didn't lose my progress.

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14. The 1980s was an important _____ for computer games.
15. The scary scenes in the game were _____ and some loved them but others really complained.

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On its release in 1993, Midway's gore-filled fighting game ushered in a new era of hyperviolent gaming that continues to influence the industry to this day

Keith Stuart

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- 1 On 9 December 1993, Democratic senator Joe Lieberman sat before a congressional hearing on video game violence. The focus of his ire was Mortal Kombat, Midway's bloody fighting game. "The game narrator instructs the player to finish his opponent. That player may choose a method of murder ranging from ripping a heart out or pulling off the head of the opponent, with spinal cord attached."
- 2 Lieberman's aim with the congressional hearing had been to force the US games industry into creating a formal ratings system, preventing minors from buying violent titles. He succeeded in that, but he also boosted a moral panic that had quietly begun with the launch of the Mortal Kombat arcade game in 1992. This then took on more urgency following the high-profile home console release on 13 September 1993.
- 3 It's interesting now to watch those hearings and then look at the game they were describing. Mortal Kombat: Legacy Collection is an anthology of the first four titles in the series. The original titles are almost quaint relics of 1990s teen culture. The digitised visuals, created by filming actors performing martial arts moves then converting that footage into 2D sprite animations, are charmingly jerky and low-resolution, the controversial fatalities more bloodily amusing than horrifying.
- 4 Midway had originally assembled a four-man team, including coder Ed Boon and John Tobias, to produce a combat action game starring Jean-Claude Van Damme. However, when that deal fell through, Boon and Tobias imagined a competitor to the hugely successful Capcom hit Street Fighter II. Boon's elevator pitch was "the MTV version of Street Fighter", and the fatalities emerged throughout the development process. Straight away, the company knew that blood and guts would mean notoriety, and

no one was fazed. Talking to Polygon in 2022, Boon said, "If there was something that we would even say, 'Is this going too far?' our CEO was like, 'No, go even further.' Plus, we had [Midway game designer] Eugene Jarvis as our mentor [...] he had just done Narc, which was a pretty violent game in its own right. So if anything, we were encouraged to go even further."

- 5 In effect, the moral panic over Mortal Kombat was to the early 1990s what the video nasty controversy was to the early 1980s. It also ensured the success of the series. Mortal Kombat became the biggest-selling game of the Christmas season and beyond, shifting six million copies across multiple machines.
- 6 For the industry itself, the Mortal Kombat panic simply became a new front on which to fight the console wars. Sega courted the controversy, allowing Mega Drive owners to access the full gore of the arcade version by inputting a "secret" code. By contrast, Nintendo sought to bolster its family-friendly image by removing fatalities and turning the game's blood into grey "sweat". Unsurprisingly, it was the Sega version that sold best.
- 7 There have been many media panics since this one. Doom remained a tabloid fixture for the entire 1990s. Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty were regular targets throughout the 2010s, and more recently, Fortnite has been accused of leading a generation of schoolchildren into addiction. But the sight of Joe Lieberman in that wood-panelled senate room describing gruesome images from Mortal Kombat – as well as Night Trap and Lethal Enforcers – retains its unique fascination.
- 8 This was a turning point for the games business – it was the era in which the focus shifted from children to teens, from abstract puzzlers and platformers to graphically rich shooters, bloody fighting games and adult-oriented action adventures. Midway set out to discover exactly what it could get away with. The answer shaped the entire industry.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Which two ways of finishing an opponent were described by Joe Lieberman?
2. What did Joe Lieberman want the gaming industry to have?
3. How did Mortal Kombat create the animation of the fighting?
4. Which fighting game was popular before Mortal Kombat?
5. What do you think was meant by 'the MTV version' of a game?
6. How is Mortal Kombat compared to video nasties?
7. What were the console wars?
8. Why did Sega sell more copies of Mortal Kombat than Nintendo?
9. Which other games have been blamed for affecting young people negatively?
10. According to the article, how did games change forever in the Mortal Kombat era?

4 Key language

a. Match the verbs to their dependent prepositions. Use the article to help you.

- | | |
|------------|---------|
| 1. accuse | a. at |
| 2. begin | b. in |
| 3. force | c. into |
| 4. look | d. of |
| 5. succeed | e. with |

b. Complete the table with the verbs below.

believe	agree	guess	break	think
at	in	into	of	with

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c. Complete the sentences using the verbs and dependent prepositions from tasks a and b in the correct form.

1. Before making your next move, _____ the map at the bottom of the screen.
2. The games company _____ signing a five-year contract.
3. I can't _____ a better strategy than using long distance attacks
4. After dozens of attempts, she finally _____ defeating the final boss.
5. She was _____ getting game ideas from the competition by her boss.
6. The game _____ a practice of the main moves.
7. She truly _____ using games in education.
8. To win the game, you have to _____ the museum and steal the painting.
9. I _____ your decision to let your child play this game.
10. Try to _____ the best way to beat the final boss.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- Video games should be for everyone, no matter how violent they are.
- There is no positive way to use video games.
- Without Mortal Kombat, no one would have created games for teenagers.

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6 In your own words

a. Complete the table with the examples of controversial media.

Art	Books	Music	TV programmes	Video games

- *Mortal Kombat* by Midway (1992)
- *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie (1988)
- *Big Brother* by Banijay Entertainment (2000)
- *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp (1917)
- *WAP* by Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion (2020)

b. In groups, add other examples of controversial media to the table.

c. Choose one of the examples of controversial media and describe the influence it had on your life or on culture in general. Try and include verbs and dependent prepositions. Here is an example to help you.

Today, many artists and historians agree with the view that Fountain is one of the most controversial and influential artworks of the 20th century. When people first looked at the work inside an exhibition, many were shocked that an artist might believe in the idea of presenting an ordinary urinal as art. It was one of the first times that an artwork had made people think of art not as something technically brilliant or beautiful, but as an idea.

d. Present the piece of controversial media that you chose to your group and explain its influence. Decide which example of controversial media was the most influential in the group.