

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

### Level 3: Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

##### a. Discuss these questions.

1. Why are young people frequently attracted to doing what they are told not to do?
2. Which examples can you think of when young people deliberately do the “wrong thing” for enjoyment?
3. Which products deliberately attract young consumers 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.

|          |                |               |             |          |
|----------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|
| quaint   | boost          | arcade        | ire         | retain   |
| assemble | combat         | controversial | launch      | spin-off |
| bloody   | low-resolution | gruesome      | moral panic | jerky    |
| fatality | console        | horrifying    | opponent    | splatter |

1. having poor image quality with unclear or blocky details \_\_\_\_\_
2. old-fashioned in a nice or charming way \_\_\_\_\_
3. to keep something or continue to have it \_\_\_\_\_
4. a new game, show, or product that comes from an existing one \_\_\_\_\_
5. to splash drops of liquid (often something messy) in different directions \_\_\_\_\_
6. fighting during a game or in a war \_\_\_\_\_
7. causing a lot of discussion or disagreement \_\_\_\_\_
8. a place with many coin-operated games you can play \_\_\_\_\_
9. to put parts together to make something \_\_\_\_\_
10. an electronic device used to play video games \_\_\_\_\_
11. a death caused by an accident or violence \_\_\_\_\_

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12. very shocking and making you feel afraid \_\_\_\_\_
13. a strong fear that something is dangerous for society \_\_\_\_\_
14. very unpleasant and shocking, especially because of blood or injury \_\_\_\_\_
15. anger or strong annoyance \_\_\_\_\_
16. moving in sudden, uneven, or rough motions \_\_\_\_\_
17. to release something new to the public \_\_\_\_\_
18. something covered in blood or showing a lot of blood \_\_\_\_\_
19. to help something increase or become better \_\_\_\_\_
20. the person or team you are playing against \_\_\_\_\_

**b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.**

1. The studio plans to \_\_\_\_\_ the new game before the end of the year.
2. In the building game, you must \_\_\_\_\_ your robot before the battle starts.
3. Some players said the horror level was too \_\_\_\_\_ for younger gamers.
4. The sudden price increase caused a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ in the gaming community.
5. The character's movements were \_\_\_\_\_ because of the bad animation.
6. The new game feels like an old \_\_\_\_\_ game, but with modern graphics.
7. The graphics are \_\_\_\_\_ to make it look like the classic version of the game.
8. The village in the adventure game feels \_\_\_\_\_, with small houses and old lamps.
9. The game lets you \_\_\_\_\_ your items even if your character dies.

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10. The developer released a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ game with the same main characters.
11. When the monster explodes, green slime \_\_\_\_\_ all over the screen.
12. I always feel great after winning a game and it can really \_\_\_\_\_ my confidence.
13. The most popular fighting games often show military \_\_\_\_\_.
14. The fighting game shows a short animation when a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ happens.
15. It is a very \_\_\_\_\_ game and you can kill the other players in many different ways.
16. It is a really scary game with some \_\_\_\_\_ sounds.
17. Some news programmes created a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ by saying the games cause bad behaviour.
18. I don't like it when the computer is the \_\_\_\_\_ because I always lose.
19. The big game companies sell a new \_\_\_\_\_ almost every Christmas.
20. The final 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**

**03 November, 2025**

- 1 On 9 December 1993, Democratic senator Joe Lieberman sat before a congressional hearing on video game violence and told attendees that the video game industry had crossed a line. The focus of his ire was Mortal Kombat, Midway's bloody fighting game, recently released on the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo Entertainment System after a successful run in the arcades. "Blood splatters from the contestants' heads," he told the room. "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 – the Entertainment Software Rating Board was established as a result of the hearing – 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 – a global simultaneous launch Midway named Mortal Monday.
- 3 It's interesting now to watch those hearings and then look at the game they were describing. Mortal Kombat: Legacy Kollektion is an anthology of the first four titles in the series, in arcade and various home console forms, as well as an array of spin-offs for the Game Boy Advance and PlayStation. 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 Playing again now, the game is obviously a product of twenty-something guys brought up on 80s horror films. 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 hugely successful Capcom hit Street Fighter II, inspired by the wave of popular hyperviolent martial arts flicks such as Bloodsport and Best of the Best. Boon's elevator pitch was "the MTV version of Street Fighter", and the fatalities emerged throughout the development process, the team pulling in ideas from their favourite movies: RoboCop, Terminator and Enter the Dragon. 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. What the Kollektion shows is how adaptable the games have been, taking the original arcade concept on to handheld platforms and then into the 32-bit console era where spin-offs Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub-Zero and Mortal Kombat: Special Forces expanded into the action-adventure genre.
- 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, becoming inextricably linked with the Columbine school shooting due to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's interest in the game. 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.

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- 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 form of regulatory mechanism did Joe Lieberman advocate for in the gaming industry?
3. By what process did the creators of Mortal Kombat generate its combat animations?
4. Which fighting game held widespread popularity prior to the emergence of 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 is meant by the term '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 video games change fundamentally in the Mortal Kombat era?

#### 4 Key language

a. Match the verbs to their particles. Use the article to help you.

- |          |              |
|----------|--------------|
| 1. bring | a. out       |
| 2. fall  | b. off       |
| 3. get   | c. up on     |
| 4. pull  | d. through   |
| 5. rip   | e. away with |

b. Complete the table with the verbs below.

| do  | catch | figure | put     | think     |
|-----|-------|--------|---------|-----------|
| out | off   | up on  | through | away with |
|     |       |        |         |           |

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**a. Complete the sentences using the verbs and particles from tasks a and b in the correct form.**

1. She was \_\_\_\_\_ classic arcade fighters, so Mortal Kombat was easy for her.
2. The plan to launch a new four player mode \_\_\_\_\_ when the company pulled funding.
3. Players quickly learned they could \_\_\_\_\_ using the same combo move all the time.
4. He was desperate to play and immediately \_\_\_\_\_ the plastic wrapper from the game.
5. In the second version, they decided to \_\_\_\_\_ the core moves and create new ones.
6. It took me hours to \_\_\_\_\_ how to kill the final boss.
7. They had to \_\_\_\_\_ the release of the game until the console was ready for sale.
8. I spent the weekend \_\_\_\_\_ all the places I'd missed on the map.
9. The developers had to \_\_\_\_\_ how the violent content would affect the game's rating.
10. The team decided to \_\_\_\_\_ the health bar to have more space on the screen.

### 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss these statements.**

- Video games should be available for everyone to play, irrespective of the degree of violence.
- There is no constructive or beneficial application for video games.
- Had Mortal Kombat never existed, no one would have developed games specifically targeted at 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 phrasal verbs. Here is an example to help you.

*When Marcel Duchamp pulled a urinal off a bathroom wall and submitted it as art, he forced people brought up on traditional art to see art in new ways. By choosing an object normally meant to only be seen on a bathroom wall, he forced audiences to figure out why context, not skill, might define artistic value. Ultimately, this act did away with the idea that art must be technically brilliant or visually beautiful to be important.*

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.