PART IV

A Darkness Falls

Twenty-Two *Columbine*

On a cold Tuesday morning in April 1999, two students stormed through Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, setting off homemade bombs and shooting students, teachers, and finally themselves. When the smoke cleared, fifteen were dead, and people across the United States were desperately asking how any of it could have been possible. For developers and players of games with violent content—id's games, most certainly, but even Richard's swords-and-sorcery-themed titles—the event would provoke the most significant collision to date between the industry's fantasy worlds and real life.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's actions sent American society lurching into a period of bitter self-examination, with particular attention focused on the nexus of teenagers, violence, and the entertainment media. Columbine wasn't the first school shooting of its kind. Harris and Klebold's rampage capped a string of student shootings that had occurred with alarming frequency over the previous years. This was by far the most extreme, however, and the cable news outlets that broadcast the horrifying events to a rapt nation exacerbated its impact. Images of scared children streaming out of the school and police officers surrounding the area were beamed into America's living rooms. In one particularly harrowing videotaped sequence, a young student climbed out a second-story window, desperately looking for escape. The vivid pictures of shocked suburbanites and traumatized Columbine students stayed on the nightly news and on the front pages of newspapers for weeks, while investigators, journalists, pundits, legislators, and parents pored over every detail of the two students' lives, searching for clues to what could have triggered the attacks.

Much of the subsequent soul-searching was valuable, prompting discussion about the complex and often overlooked social, familial, and economic pressures faced by modern teens. Some of it was less rigorous, as people looking for solace turned to simple answers and scapegoats. Harris and Klebold hadn't been popular kids. They had been on the fringes of a group referred to in the press as the Trenchcoat Mafia, a group of students who had been picked on with some regularity by the school's athletes. The Trenchcoat Mafia was quickly associated—wrongly, local students later said [32]—with the music of Marilyn Manson and with a Goth subculture filled with people of all ages who dressed in black and were often fascinated with thanatological images. These influences, foreign to many despite their presence in virtually every high school across the country, became an easy target for frightened parents and teachers. In the weeks that followed Columbine, students reported being disciplined or criticized in their own schools for wearing trench coats or other badges of Goth fashion. [33]

As pundits speculated as to the perpetrators' motives, news leaked that Harris and Klebold had been avid *Doom* players. The Simon Wiesenthal Center, a group that tracked hate groups on the Internet and elsewhere, reported that it had a copy of Harris' Web site in its archives, and that it contained a modded version of *Doom* based on the layout of Columbine High School. Harris had set his game in God mode, which meant that player-characters couldn't be harmed while they traveled through bloody levels that came with operating instructions such as "KILL 'EM AAAAALLLL!!!!!" The revelation that the gunmen had rehearsed their rampage using a computer game provided the apparently easy answers people had hoped for: If violent, interactive computer games caused Harris and Klebold to commit this atrocity, then parents had an easy way to protect their children from future harm.

As that narrative took hold in certain segments of the media, a cacophony of voices began targeting young people who may have fallen outside the mainstream's idea of a typical student. Kids who immersed themselves in games of *Dungeons & Dragons*, who found solace in Goth music, and who played computer games were lumped together as potential enemies of public safety.

Relatively few figures emerged to defend these young kids, who now more than ever found themselves pushed to the margins of society. In

response, journalist Jon Katz opened up his column on the Slashdot Web site to students who felt alienated and harassed by school administrators, many of whom were cracking down on student conduct by implementing dress codes and, in some cases, restricting Internet access at school. "Suddenly," Katz wrote in an essay titled "Voices from the Hellmouth," "in this tyranny of the normal, to be different wasn't just to feel unhappy, it was to be dangerous."

Teenagers from around the country wrote in, expressing their anger and confusion at the hatred being directed at them. "Brandy," identified as a New York City student, summed up much of the feeling within the game community:

> *I'm a* Quake *freak, I play it day and night. I'm really into it. I play* Doom *a lot too, though not so much anymore. I'm up till 3 a.m. every night. I really love it. But, after Colorado, things got horrible. People were actually talking to me like I could come in and kill them. It wasn't like they were really afraid of me—they just seemed to think it was okay to hate me even more.* [34]

On a broad level, the adult fear echoed earlier panics over youth violence and subcultures that had swept periodically through the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. Like their greaser and gangbanger predecessors, Goths and gamers seemed to develop a subculture, in the heart of ordinary society, in which kids created their own rules uncontrolled by any adult authority. For gamers, this world was virtual, giving players like Harris the ability to explicitly mold their experiences to fit and reinforce disturbing fantasies. Worse, critics said, game designers, movie producers, and record labels were providing the raw materials for these fantasies, essentially subverting parental influence. Some large retailers, including Walmart, took note and stopped carrying *Doom* and *Quake*.

Id Software wasn't entirely taken by surprise. The company's games had been associated, fairly or not, with youth violence before. After fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal opened fire at a school in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1997, killing three students, parents of the victims sued id and several other publishers for releasing violent video games. Although those legal claims

would eventually be tossed aside by the court—just as claims that rock music encouraged teenagers to kill themselves had been dismissed over the years—the stigma had stuck.

While few voices blamed Columbine directly on computer games, gaming culture at large was nevertheless subjected to a wave of criticism and hostile attention. Critics glossed over the differences between complex massively multiplayer worlds like Richard Garriott's *Ultima Online*, fast-paced action games, and even the vastly more popular sports games. It rapidly became clear that legislators and pundits had little understanding of the variety of play or variety of players that had evolved over the previous decades. In ordinary times that ignorance would have made little difference. In the wake of such a tragedy, this broader societal attention carried the potential to change or even destroy game communities through legislation, market pressure, or other more subtle means of censorship.

The shootings sparked some soul-searching inside the industry, too. Developers interviewed at the time often conceded they wouldn't let their young children play their own company's games, and said it was the parents' job to take responsibility for their own children's use of media. Gamers blasted Harris and Klebold on Internet bulletin boards and in private conversations, but most agreed that the games themselves bore no responsibility. Games were cartoons, graphic representations existing in a digital world that was only as real as the strength of players' imaginations. Cyberspace wasn't an actual place. It was just a construct, and if people like Harris and Klebold couldn't tell the difference between blasting digital opponents and turning guns on real-life classmates, they were clearly deeply disturbed by something beyond the games. Blaming games and condemning the entire culture was unfair.

"That argument was never taken seriously inside the community," said Dennis "Thresh" Fong later. "I've been to so many LANs, so many tournaments, and I've never seen a fight. How could I believe it? I've spent time with the hardest of the hard-core gamers there are, and I've never seen any sign of violence."

Yet nuanced answers to complex problems take time to understand, and neither the politicians nor the pundits stumping against video and computer games had the desire to find those answers. Instead of examining root causes of violence, such as poverty, education levels, or parental

involvement, many looked for quick explanations and easy solutions. Muddying the waters further, a host of intermediaries stepped into the public spotlight, seeking to explain the game medium and the culture that had grown around it. The airwaves soon filled with media critics, public interest groups, and pundits from the right and left. Game developers and game players fired back, dismissing the cultural critics' dearth of real familiarity with the sprawling virtual game worlds that made up the industry. A whole spectrum of interpretations arose, often resulting in straw-man arguments, half-truths, and platitudes. Some of the loudest voices believed that games were in fact dangerous, and called for outright censorship of violent and explicit games. Dogmatic voices on the other side declined to give any credence whatever to the idea that violent games might have an effect on some of their players.

Lost in the din of anger and blame were the more thoughtful voices of those who argued that the effects of the games on players were complicated and not easily reducible to sound bites. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Comparative Media Studies co-director Henry Jenkins, drawn reluctantly into the public forum, argued in Congress and on TV that kids used the imagery in games as modern building blocks of age-old stories, reminding the world that even the bloodiest shoot-'em-up games were little different from the longtime backyard fantasies of adolescent boys. A thoughtful counterpoint was psychologist David Walsh, head of the nonprofit National Institute on Media and the Family, who contended that violent media contributed to a subtle—but real and potentially dangerous—coarsening of the culture.

Despite their disagreements, both Jenkins and Walsh argued that the actual impact of games and interactive media on violence hadn't been measured adequately yet. While they differed in their interpretation of what the relatively small body of existing studies actually revealed, they agreed that it was important to understand the subtleties of this new interactive medium before condemning it.

This wasn't the first time that game players and communities had been in the spotlight, but it was the first time that so much had been at stake. Young people had died in a very public manner, and the popular image of gamers had been badly tarnished. For developers and players, this was an unwelcome sign that their communities were maturing. They'd found their

way into the popular consciousness for all the wrong reasons, and now developers and players would face the same public scrutiny to which other art forms and underground entertainments had been subjected for years.

Twenty-Three *Porn and the Pinball Wizards*

Video and computer gamers had sent waves of concern rippling through a nervous culture before Columbine. Entertainment activities—pool halls, pinball parlors, rock 'n' roll, and even *Dungeons & Dragons*—had long been the focal point for underground youth subcultures, and like these predecessors, computer games had been periodically suspect in a wider culture that saw them as unfamiliar. In the medium's early years, computer and online gaming avoided public scrutiny in large part thanks to its relative obscurity. The communities that had formed had done so on computer networks that were still years away from breaking into the mainstream popular culture. Arcade and home video games, which caught the public eye much earlier, were easier targets for criticism. Simpler and less community-driven than their online counterparts, video games triggered early concerns about possible ill effects on children as much for the arcade environment that grew up around them as for the games' content.

These worries began in the mid-1970s—just a few years after Atari's release of *Pong*, the simplistic Ping-Pong-like game that kicked off the arcade-game revolution—when a little San Francisco Bay Area video game company called Exidy released *Death Race*. Aside from the lurid skeleton-headed racers depicted on the side of its cabinet, the 1976 arcade fixture didn't have realistic graphics. It was a driving game in which players used a big plastic steering wheel and foot pedals to guide little blobs of light around the screen. The game's designer, Howell Ivy, had originally created it with a smash-up-derby theme, but contract issues and hopes of making a splash on the market had persuaded Exidy to modify it. In the new version, players drove their cars around the screen trying to run down little stick figures;

success was indicated by the replacement of the figure with a cross-shaped grave marker.

The designers knew they were pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable in the market, but it was a call from a Seattle reporter that showed they might have stepped further across the line than they had anticipated. The figures were undead "gremlins," not people, Exidy CEO Pete Kauffman explained to critics. That didn't matter. The game quickly triggered national attention, garnering write-ups in the *National Enquirer* and other, more serious newspapers. It even prompted a 1985 segment on TV's *60 Minutes* probing the psychology of video game players.

Paralleling these fears over violent games, a national discussion about the potential harmful impact of *Dungeons & Dragons* was underway, fueled in part by speculation that Michigan State University student James Dallas Egbert III had disappeared after going into the university's steam tunnels to play *D&D* in August 1979. The school's newspaper initially played up the *D&D* connection, and the popular press followed. Eventually Egbert was found in New Orleans, where he'd fled after unsuccessfully attempting suicide at Michigan State. In 1981, Rona Jaffe wrote *Mazes and Monsters*, a book ostensibly about the Egbert case, which was adapted into a 1982 made-for-television movie starring Tom Hanks.

However, the exact details of Egbert's disappearance, which ultimately had nothing to do with *D&D*, wouldn't be revealed until 1984—four years after the young college student committed suicide—when the private investigator hired by Egbert's parents wrote *The Dungeon Master*. [35] Nevertheless, the event and the media attention following the disappearance and the suicide helped spark the creation of concerned-parent groups across the United States.

By the mid-1980s, the parents' movement was also calling for the regulation of video arcades on the local level, in much the same way that localities from New York City on down had once banned pinball machines. With individual arcade machines now ubiquitous everywhere from movie theaters to corner stores, parents worried that kids would skip school and be exposed to bad influences while playing. A Long Island mother and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) president named Ronnie Lamm rose to national prominence as a spokeswoman for the anti–video game cause. Her activism started with petition drives, speeches to community groups, letters

to state politicians, and even calls to the local fire department to ask them to check whether crowded local arcades were violating any fire-safety laws. Her own community of Brookhaven ultimately imposed a moratorium on new permits for arcades. [36] Other towns went further, making it illegal to place video game machines near schools, or barring video games from being used during school hours altogether.

While parents' groups fought to stop the spread of arcades, many eyes turned to a legal case originating in Mesquite, Texas—coincidentally, the same Dallas suburb that would ultimately become the home of id Software. In 1976, in part fearing connections with organized crime, the Mesquite city council had targeted arcade builder Aladdin's Castle with a variety of regulations, including one that would have blocked children under seventeen years of age from playing the games. The Fifth Circuit in New Orleans ruled that playing games was protected by the First Amendment. In 1982, the Supreme Court declined to rule on the constitutional issues, effectively granting those under seventeen the right to play arcade games.

This wave of concern wasn't wholly focused on arcade environments. Critics including Lamm bolstered their arguments with the opinions of psychologists who criticized these games for being simplistic, aggressive, and potentially damaging to children. At this point, little medical research had been conducted to study the effects of interactive games, but prominent doctors were nevertheless ready with opinions. In 1982, even Surgeon General C. Everett Koop weighed in with an opinion, saying, "There is nothing constructive in the games. . . . Everything is eliminate, kill, destroy." That opinion was widely quoted in later public debates, even though Koop clarified his remarks the following day, noting that his off-the-cuff opinion was "not based on any accumulated scientific evidence." [37]

Science and facts, though, make for boring punditry. Some critics found it easy to identify provocative elements of games even if these seemed to be drawn from the realm of the absurd. Creative readings of *Ms. Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong*, for instance, found rape metaphors hidden in the games' subtext.

That isn't to say that some video games didn't cross well over the sometimes hard-to-define line of poor taste. A game explicitly celebrating sexual violence was created by Mystique, a company that designed a series of games with sexual content for Atari's home video game system. Released

in late 1982, *Custer's Revenge* featured a tumescent, pixilated General Custer fighting his way past a hail of arrows to a woman tied to a pole at the other end of the screen. Success meant that a player had guided Custer successfully through the arrows and raped the smiling Native American woman. Groups that included Women Against Pornography, the National Organization for Women, and the American Indian Community House picketed a preview of the game at the New York Hilton. A second game by the same company called *Beat 'Em and Eat 'Em* featured similarly obscene content.

Yet those blatantly disturbing games often received a harsh and immediate rebuke from the industry. In the case of Mystique, Atari sued the distributor's parent company for tarnishing the game system's image by associating it with pornography. [38] A collapse of the console business in the mid-1980s temporarily drew attention away from industry, but this respite was no more than temporary. By the late 1980s, Nintendo's home game system had wholly revitalized the game market, and sales were stronger than ever.

Grounded in the cartoonish world of the *Super Mario Bros*. titles, Nintendo catered primarily to teens and younger children, even as arcade games were becoming ever more violent. Sega, Nintendo's chief rival in this new generation of consoles, looked to this arcade content as a way to set itself apart.

When the arcade mega-hit *Mortal Kombat* was released in 1992, the ultra-bloody fighting game found a huge audience. The game pitted two martial arts heroes against one another, featuring "finishing moves" that took the action definitively beyond the territory explored by similar games. Once an opponent was beaten, players had options such as setting an enemy on fire, punching his head off with a single uppercut, or ripping her heart out of her chest. Nintendo and Sega each wanted the game for their home systems, but didn't agree on how to handle the violence. Nintendo took out the bloodiest parts of the game. Sega didn't, and went on to sell far more copies than its more cautious rival.

In late 1993, Senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl called a congressional hearing on violence in video games. While some in the industry muttered that the hearing had been spurred in part by complaints from Nintendo, angry at seeing rival Sega gain ground with the sale of its more violent games, the lawmakers' attention was in fact focused across the

industry. In the hope of defusing some of the criticism, a large group of leading game companies, including Sega and Nintendo, announced early on the first day of the hearing that they had agreed to create a rating system for their games.

This peace didn't last long. In the hearing, a Nintendo representative attacked Sega for its release of violent games and said his own company had tried to mitigate the industry's worst excesses. In response, the Sega representative pulled out a bazooka–style gun accessory used by some Nintendo games and wondered aloud whether it was an appropriate means of teaching nonviolence to children.

Nevertheless, this move toward self-regulation pacified the industry's critics for several years, and the political and media spotlight was shifting elsewhere just as *Doom* and *Quake* were released in the computer world, kicking off a whole new genre of bloody games. The console world was no less bloodthirsty, and as computer graphics grew exponentially better and sound quality improved, the gore got gorier. Industry spokespeople countered criticism by arguing that violent games, which were rated "Mature" under the new system, constituted only a small percentage of the titles released, were not intended for children, and were outsold in any case by competing titles, such as sports games. For the most part, members of the growing game communities ignored the background hum of the outside world's opinion. It had little relevance to their daily lives unless a rating prevented a young fan from getting a game.

Then came Columbine, and the outside world's view, skewed or not, took on a new importance.

Twenty-Four *A Virtual Space to Call One's Own*

Nearly two weeks after the Colorado shootings, MIT's Henry Jenkins got a telephone call from Washington, DC. A Senate committee was holding a hearing on media violence and children in just a few days, and they wanted him to testify. He thought hard about it, having never participated in political hearings before. He looked at the witness list; it looked stacked against what was probably the officially designated wrongheaded side. He expected to be painted with the broad brush of "game apologist," but believed that the chance to defend what he saw as a necessarily complex reading of modern culture, including even the video games that the Columbine killers had played, was worth taking a risk.

This role was increasingly familiar to him. A year earlier, as co-director of MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, Jenkins had published a book on gender and video games called *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, which had helped trigger some discussion in academic and industry circles on issues of gender in gaming culture. The wider media had focused on the elements of the book that dealt with violence in games, and almost overnight he had entered media culture as the professor who defended violent games. The complexities of his argument tended to get lost in most newspaper articles, but he kept trying. Now the Senate wanted him to play the same part on a larger stage.

Of course he was apprehensive. Jenkins was an academic, used to teasing complex conclusions out of ambiguous cultural material and discussing his theories with other serious thinkers. His work was painstaking and exhaustive, and oftentimes went through both scientific and public vetting processes as he wrestled with his research and data. Academia was

the antithesis of the posturing and simplification of a Washington, DC, hearing room. But after considering the risks and potential rewards, he agreed to attend.

Jenkins wasn't an avid computer game player himself, but in some senses did look the part. Balding slightly, and carrying a little extra paunch beneath a pair of suspenders, he had a modest shuffle to his walk, and the soft voice and gentle mannerisms of a therapist. Someone catching a glimpse of him across the MIT campus in Cambridge might easily have mistaken him for a grandfather gamer, though he was only forty-two at the time of the hearing.

Growing up largely before video games came into prominence, Jenkins spent his childhood playing board games like *Monopoly* and *Candy Land*—simple games that required at least one other person. He and his friends took the same games outside on a grander scale when they tired of sedentary play. Near his house in suburban Atlanta, there was a sandlot that they could transform into a giant game board. A tree house doubled as a pirate ship, as Tom Sawyer's raft, or as a hot-air balloon that could take them anywhere they wanted. The structure was versatile, malleable, and best of all, it was his. In his years studying video games, that concept of physical play space—and particularly the loss of physical space in which children could run, play, push, and fight—would assume an important role in his thoughts.

Jenkins was exposed to video games when young, but was never a dedicated player himself. His younger brother bought a *Pong* machine while they were still kids, and in the late 1970s, his future-wife's brother owned an Atari gaming system. He occasionally played the games with her brother, but ultimately real life called, Peter Pan grew up, and the games were abandoned in favor of term papers and academic study.

By the mid-1980s, Jenkins was a graduate student in film studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He and his wife had a son, also named Henry, and when the boy turned five, he asked for a Nintendo Entertainment System game console. Having paid little attention to games' progress in the years since he'd played with his brother-in-law's Atari system, Jenkins assumed he'd be playing something similar, with blocky graphics, simple game screens, and digital bleeps and bloops playing the twin roles of sound effects and background music. What he saw instead came as a

revelation. The machine was packaged with *Super Mario Bros.*, the latest title from Nintendo's wunderkind, Shigeru Miyamoto. The lush graphics and the musical score brought to life the world and its main character, Mario—the very same Mario from Miyamoto's earlier *Donkey Kong*. With *Super Mario Bros.*, Miyamoto had created a world to inhabit and explore. "I felt like Rip Van Winkle," Jenkins said. "I thought I had taken a catnap and slept through a revolution. I felt myself in the presence of a medium that had transformed itself overnight."

Just as interesting was the way his five-year-old son and his friends began interacting with the game. They played it obsessively, talking about it all the time. They brainstormed over the best ways to complete levels and swapped information on strategy, hidden treasures, and stunts. For the boys, it was very much a social experience, with groups gathering in front of the television set, cheering each other on, and swapping the controller around so that each kid's strengths and skills could be used to best advantage. A few kids in the neighborhood became temporary celebrities as they learned how to beat particularly difficult "bosses," the chief monsters that guarded the end of each level of play. These kids would do victory tours around the neighborhood, showing off their newfound skill and knowledge on other kids' machines.

The more he watched the kids in front of the TV, the more Jenkins thought he recognized what they were doing. This was similar to what he'd done in his own suburban backyard and out in the forest as a kid. They were exploring, bonding over the territory they conquered in their imagination. "I realized they weren't doing this for points. They were exploring space," Jenkins said. "My original insight was that it wasn't about saving Princess Toadstool. It wasn't about narrative." For Jenkins, that insight was enough to add games into the body of popular media works that he would spend his life studying. It would take time before many others agreed that it was a worthwhile subject for scholarly attention.

Just as he'd met skepticism from professors when he'd lobbied to have television issues added to the film studies curriculum, he discovered that many in the academic world weren't sure what to do with his work on games. Video games fell between niches. They weren't film, they weren't literature, and it wasn't immediately clear that they were even an expressive art form at all. But as the medium advanced, others joined Jenkins, and by the late

1990s, papers and books were streaming out; conferences on the issue were being held all over the world.

Those initial observations about his son's use of games remained a cornerstone of the way Jenkins understood computer and video games. To be sure, he recognized that many games made little attempt to tell stories or produce the emotional effect created by earlier, more narrative art forms such as films or novels. Yet if the industry was given a chance to mature, he argued, games with these characteristics would likely evolve. He took time away from academia to work with game companies, including Electronic Arts, training developers to build games with character, story, and plot development. In these lessons he made reference to classic literature and film as models, trying to help developers identify what made Homer's *Odyssey* so compelling and to encourage them to incorporate those lessons into designs for their game worlds.

Still, he said, these studies in narrative and character weren't necessarily the fundamental strength of games. Many game makers from Miyamoto onward had focused on creating environments or worlds to explore rather than on trying to tell complicated stories. Watch a game being played, and it quickly became clear that it was an exercise in dexterity and movement, not the physically passive experience of reading or watching a movie. A more appropriate metaphor than film for gaming might be dance, he argued. Certainly dance productions could tell stories, but the real expressive core of the art was the relationship between motion and space. A dancer moved, and the motion *was* the story. So too in a video game, the movement of the digital character through space and the act of exploring the virtual environment could be more important than the game's superficial content.

That interpretation helped explain why kids, and particularly boys, had long been drawn so strongly to games. He contrasted his own childhood environment—which had lawns and whole forests to explore and turn into fantasy lands—with his son's world of city apartments—which offered only a tiny stretch of green on which to play. Exploration of the environment had long been a critical part of growing up, particularly for boys, and video games had become that space for urban children without access to forests and fields.

That type of indoor exploration, in turn, had helped lead to the

moral panic over violence. From the beginning, he contended, games had to be hypermasculine in order for adolescent boys to feel comfortable staying inside and playing them. No boy wanted to be seen as a mama's boy, sitting inside when peers were roughhousing outside. As the boys played these macho games, their parents—and particularly mothers—were suddenly exposed to the content of adolescent fantasies that traditionally had been kept well outside parental view. "This means that mothers are for the first time seeing the content of boys' fantasies as they grow up," Jenkins said. "They are shocked by the scatological content and by the competition. But any boy growing up in America wouldn't be shocked."

Jenkins had spent much of his professional career arguing against the analyses of what he called the "media effects" establishment, by which he meant the body of doctors, psychologists, parent groups, and others who focused on a one-way line of influence between entertainment media and viewers, particularly children. In these critics' minds, there was a fairly simple cause-and-effect relationship between a child and a game of *Quake*: The game affected the child in any of several different ways, such as contributing to violent behaviors or desensitizing him or her to real-world violence.

Once studied, the audience's responses to media were much more complicated, Jenkins contended. Children and adults alike took the raw materials provided by the media and transformed them to fit their own purposes. Kids played superheroes or army as a way to exert control over the environment. Jenkins' early studies were of groups such as Trekkies (dedicated *Star Trek* fans). Just as those people had turned the world of the Starship *Enterprise* into a screen on which to project their own fantasies and theatrical productions, he saw video game players using game worlds and characters as tools for their own creativity, either while playing or in later imagining different variations on the game, as his son had done. Even the most violent games could act as catharses or as near-therapeutic tools. Games like *Doom* and *Quake* provided a welcome release of frustration over societal constraints, giving children a playing field with different rules. "All play is about liberation from constraints and taking action in an environment with less consequences," Jenkins said.

It's easy to see how Jenkins might have been portrayed as an uncritical defender of bone-crunching, mind-numbingly violent games. In fact this

was far from true. Seeking a middle ground in the gaming-content debates, he encouraged companies set on making violence a part of their games to prompt people to think of the ramifications of their actions, in much the same way that Richard Garriott had tried to force his players to ask questions of themselves and to see their in-game actions in a broader light.

"The formulaic nature of violence I don't like. It's a crutch that game designers fall back on," Jenkins said. He saw his work with companies as a potentially tempering influence: "My hope is that I may be more effective in doing some of the things that parents' groups have been trying to do."

Jenkins arrived in Washington for the post-Columbine hearings only to see his worst fears realized. The wall of the hearing room was hung with posters, mostly depicting blown-up advertisements for the bloodiest video games on the market. The room was full of reporters, legislative staffers, other witnesses, and supporters of the anti–game campaign. One section of the audience was filled with a group of women, mostly mothers, representing a group staunchly opposed to violence in children's media. He was snubbed by some of his fellow witnesses. Leery of being labeled, he stayed away from the representatives of the entertainment media and the heads of the film and video game developers' trade associations. He was on his own.

No specific bills or proposals were on the table. This was an informational hearing ostensibly aimed at shining a spotlight on the way violent images and stories were being sold to children. It was a means of putting informal pressure on the industry, but very clearly also a stage for politicians to grandstand for constituents and donors.

"We are in the strange intersection between freedom of expression and the damage that can be done when freedom is abused," said Senator John Ashcroft, the conservative Missourian who would become U.S. Attorney General just a few years later, in one of fourteen opening statements by the assembled legislators. "And it's a very difficult place to be."

The senators and successive witnesses denounced films, music, and video games for wantonly giving way to, and ultimately encouraging, the most violent impulses of the human psyche. The bloodiest bits of games like *Mortal Kombat*, *Postal*, and *Resident Evil* were shown wholly out of context,

as were short clips of a handful of movies. Former education secretary and cultural critic William Bennett excoriated films that depicted gratuitous violence, contrasting the violence of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Hollywood's *Clear and Present Danger*, which he claimed was there to serve a purpose in the story, with the mere titillation of *Scream* or *The Basketball Diaries* (an autobiographical tale of drug addiction and recovery written by poet and rock musician Jim Carroll). Former military psychologist Dave Grossman told the legislators that violent video games were literally teaching kids to kill, using precisely the same techniques the military used with its soldiers. Criticizing the dark images of singer Marilyn Manson, one senator joked about whether the musician was actually a he or a she.

Jenkins was shaken by the discourse at the hearings. The anger and fear people felt after the Columbine shootings had reached the Senate, manifesting in ways that could only make children who played in virtual worlds or participated in Goth culture feel more alienated. This was "[p]recisely the kind of intolerant and taunting comments that these [Columbine] kids must have gotten in school because they dressed differently or acted oddly in comparison with their more conformist classmates," Jenkins wrote later in an article published in *Harper's Magazine*. [39]

Jenkins nervously took the stand late in the day, when most of the reporters had already departed. He pleaded with the senators to understand that young gamers weren't puppets manipulated by media images. Instead, they were constructing their own fantasies out of the raw materials available to them. Disturbed teens like the Columbine killers might create disturbing fantasies—but even the darkest images could wind up being used in positive ways by kids hungry for images that spoke to them, he said.

Don't rush to judgment on the basis of twenty-second clips of violent power fantasies, Jenkins pleaded. The real issues were complicated, just like kids' lives. "Listen to our children," he told the senators. "Don't fear them."

Twenty-Five *The Very Long Trial of Computer Games*

As congressional staffers lined up Jenkins' post-Columbine trip to Washington, the phone in David Walsh's Minnesota office was ringing almost without cease. Walsh was founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family, at that time a three-year-old nonprofit group known for its measured but unstinting criticism of violence accessible to children in media ranging from television to video games. It was bad enough that Harris and Klebold's rampage drew from action-movie imagery, but when they were discovered to be computer game fans, reporters around the world immediately turned to Walsh for an explanation.

Walsh didn't give the media its most sensational headlines. "A lot of people try to imply that video games were the cause, which is preposterous," he said later. "There is no one cause for a situation like that." But he took another half-step ahead, too, arguing in words that resonated in parents' groups and Washington, DC, corridors that society needed to consider whether interactions with violence in virtual spaces were in fact related to violence in the real world in some way. Even if the available science wasn't clear enough to show a direct causal relationship, correlations seemed to be emerging, he said.

"The impact of violence in the media is not violent behavior; the real impact is that it creates and nourishes a culture of disrespect," he argued. "For every kid that finds a weapon, how many are there putting each other down, calling each other names? That creates an environment where aggressive or violent behavior is more likely to occur."

Harris and Klebold weren't the first to be teased and harassed at school, but something in them responded to the environment with a horribly

extreme reaction. The shape of that was not wholly coincidental, Walsh said. "When it came time for them to act out their anger, where did they get their ideas? Ideas come from popular culture, and media defines popular culture."

In the spectrum of media critics, Walsh was far from an extremist. In the months that followed the shooting, the pair's actions were also linked to bullying, depression, and heavy-metal music. But a subset of cultural critics focused particularly on what they argued was a direct link between video games and violent behavior. Retired Marine psychologist Dave Grossman, who testified at the congressional hearings after Columbine and had studied the psychology of soldiers on the front lines of military conflicts, found that training simulating the action of killing essentially gave combat-related actions the status of muscle memory rather than of conscious decision. Simulations had helped increase the share of soldiers who actually fired their weapons in war. Games that taught players how to mow down on-screen enemies—particularly those arcade games in which the motion of pointing and firing a weapon was part of the experience—were literally teaching their players to kill, and therefore needed to be banned entirely from the retail market, Grossman contended. A resident of Jonesboro, Arkansas, where a 1998 school shooting helped set the stage for the media frenzy that followed Columbine, he had toured the country calling for programs of "education, litigation, and legislation" against violent video games.

Unlike Grossman, Walsh and his group didn't advocate for censorship or legislation that would impose new restrictions on the video game industry. His reluctance to make sweeping statements had often left him in a position like the one in which Jenkins found himself: stuck between polar opposites in the game violence debate. He had even been quietly disinvited from congressional hearings when his reluctance to support specific bills was discovered by congressional staffers. Nevertheless, his group's campaign of research and education had made him one of the most influential voices on Capitol Hill and in the medical establishment on the issue.

Walsh started his career as a high-school teacher, bouncing for a decade between schools in Massachusetts, Washington, and Minnesota. Along the way, he made the gradual transition to the role of school counselor and then to professional psychologist. In the late 1980s, he wrote a book called *Designer Kids*, which dealt with the effects of consumerism and competition on children. It sold reasonably well, and several years later

his publisher asked him to do a follow-up. This time, he chose to study the influence of media on children, focusing in part on the effects of violent media.

This second book wasn't explicitly about video or computer games. At that point, games such as *Doom*, *Mortal Kombat*, and *Duke Nukem* were just arriving on the cultural scene. Decades of research on the effects of television, movies, and other media had been undertaken, however, and *Selling Out America's Children* brought all those studies together. It struck a nerve, particularly with journalists. Bill Moyers featured Walsh on his television show, and other media outlets followed suit. The American Medical Association (AMA) even called Walsh for information when the organization was putting together a public information campaign on the impact of media violence.

Realizing the growing appetite for credible data, Walsh started to look for corporate sponsorship for a nonprofit organization focused on media issues. In mid-1995 he found funding, and the Institute was born. The group's underlying philosophy would be that the various media kids spent an increasing amount of their growing life watching and playing weren't intrinsically good or bad, but were powerful influences. He realized from talking to kids, educators, and parents, and even from watching his own three kids, that video and computer games were an increasingly important and influential part of that media tapestry.

"Whoever tells the stories defines the culture," he said. "This has been true for thousands of years. We've been telling each other stories forever. What's new is who the storytellers are. For the past fifty years, the dominant storytellers have become the electronic media—movies, television, video, and computer games. And their real impact is in shaping norms of behavior."

This was true across mediums, he said. "If we believe *Sesame Street* teaches four-year-olds something, we better believe that *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*"—a game that rewarded carjacking, murder, and killing prostitutes, among other actions—"is teaching fourteen-year-olds something. The impact is gradual and subtle desensitization, and a shaping of attitudes and values."

Before the Columbine hearings, few groups in the nonprofit world were talking about video games, violence, and media effects. The medium was still relatively new, and games were evolving so fast that people who

hadn't grown up with them still found them difficult to understand. Walsh's group was one of the first to begin speaking about the issue. The message was heard on Capitol Hill, and when Senator Lieberman's office began looking for a nonprofit to partner with on the issue, his staffers called Walsh. Walsh agreed to work with them to study the effects of games, and together they hatched a first project. They'd create a report card on the video game industry, studying how many of the companies were following the post-1993 rating systems, and measuring how much violence was still finding its way into games.

Walsh didn't know what to expect when he released his first report. Because of his association with Lieberman, the unveiling was held in one of the legislative hearing rooms in the U.S. Capitol building. Walsh walked in to see representatives from virtually all the major TV networks and newspapers. He was stunned. The report was carried by the biggest news organizations in the United States, and the follow-up report cards his group released every year continued to receive considerable attention.

Seeking further data, Walsh's group established close ties to the medical and psychological establishment that had examined the effects of media violence using traditional social psychological techniques. Games had been studied relatively infrequently compared to television and film. Indeed, the medium was in such a constant state of flux, with game styles and platforms changing so rapidly, that critics argued that the studies that were performed tended to become outdated shortly after publication.

Walsh started with research performed with other media. A long line of researchers, the same ones Jenkins had dubbed "media effects" proponents, had found links between watching considerable amounts of violent television and increased levels of aggressiveness. Other researchers hypothesized that the interactivity of modern games created a learning environment different from that of media that were experienced more passively. It was not unreasonable to conclude that participating in the violent on-screen behavior contained in video games thus had some deleterious effect on kids. "Theoretically, if television violence impacts kids, it's reasonable to assume that video game violence has at least as great an impact or greater," Walsh said.

This particular assertion, as Walsh conceded, was analogy rather than a scientifically supported conclusion. However, a small but growing

number of studies had shown correlations between the playing of violent games and aggressive behavior, he noted. In other words, people who played violent games were more likely than non-players to demonstrate aggressive behavior.

Indeed, in recent years, the interactive nature of games had driven researchers to develop increasingly complex experimental approaches to studying potential media effects. In some, researchers had brought players into their labs, had them play various kinds of games, and measured their aggressiveness before and after playing. Other researchers had used outside reports, such as letting classmates rate one other's aggressiveness, and then correlating these ratings with the time each child had spent playing violent video games.

One of the most influential—and ultimately controversial—of these researchers was Craig Anderson, the chairman of Iowa State University's Department of Psychology, who had constructed a broad theory about the interaction between media and aggressive behavior, and had written a series of papers on how video and computer games fit into the model. Along with several other researchers, he had also conducted a set of studies that formed the backbone of research on the issue in the post-Columbine era. [40]

One of his studies interviewed a group of group of 227 undergraduates and drew correlations between video game playing habits and factors such as behavior, grades, and general attitudes about the world. They found a small positive correlation between playing violent video games and aggressive behavior as reported by the students—things such as "hit or threatened to hit other students" or "attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting or killing him/her."

In his published version of the study, Anderson and his fellow researchers were careful to note that this correlation didn't necessarily imply causation. It may have been true, for example, that temperamentally aggressive people were more likely to be drawn to violent games, which would indicate that the games were not producing all the aggressive behavior.

Good science requires issues to be examined repeatedly, from multiple points of view; wanting more detail, Anderson designed a second study to examine the causal link further. Student test subjects were assigned to play either id Software's *Wolfenstein 3D*, a fast-paced, first-person shooting game, or *Myst*, a nonviolent, slow-paced game requiring little in the way of

manual dexterity. In a first session, students played one or the other game for fifteen minutes, and then responded to survey questions measuring levels of hostility, agreeing or disagreeing with questions such as "I feel angry" or "I feel mean."

After a second fifteen-minute game-play session, they were presented with another task aimed at measuring cognitive effects (changes in thinking patterns). To this end, the computer flashed a series of words on the screen, and the students were required to read them out loud. Some of the words were deemed aggressive, such as *murder*. Others were various types of control words, associated with anxiety (*humiliated*), the desire for flight (*leave*), or no particular subject (*report*).

At a later session, the same students were brought back to play the same games. Afterward, they were put into a situation in which they believed they were competing in a game of reflexes against another, hidden, student; the winner would "punish" the other student with a sharp burst of sound. Increasing the volume or the length of the sound, each of which was left up to the student, was deemed a measure of aggressiveness.

When the researchers looked at the first set of data, measuring the students' hostility levels, they found no significant difference between the groups of people who had played *Myst* and *Wolfenstein 3D*. They did find a difference in the groups' aggressive thoughts. People who had played the fast-paced shooter games tended to read the "aggressive" words faster than those who had played the mellow *Myst*, while there was no significant difference for the nonaggressive words.

The study's result suggested that violent video games might prime aggressive thought patterns without making people feel hostile or angry. This didn't mean people would necessarily act upon those feelings, but the final test showed that people who had played the fast-paced, violent video game were slightly more likely to "punish" their fictional opponent with longer bursts of sound, an effect the researchers interpreted as aggressive behavior. In none of these cases was the difference large, but it was statistically significant, the researchers said. [41][42]

In subsequent years, Anderson's claims were rejected by a significant body of research scientists who not only questioned the findings, but also questioned the research methodologies. Certainly, these other researchers have argued, violent games are correlated with increased and heightened

sensitivities in short durations after playing; however, this does not amount to evidence that a single factor, like playing a violent video game, was causally connected to committing actual violence.

Even the Supreme Court, in its 2011 decision against the state of California's attempt to curtail the sale of violent video games, ultimately said this conclusion had gone too far.

> *California relies primarily on the research of Dr. Craig Anderson and a few other research psychologists whose studies purport to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children. These studies have been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason: They do not prove that violent video games cause minors to act aggressively (which would at least be a beginning). Instead, "[n]early all of the research is based on correlation, not evidence of causation, and most of the studies suffer from significant, admitted flaws in methodology."* [43]

Somewhere between the media effects research and the post-Columbine three-ring circus of politics, the subtlety of the debate was lost. Anderson appeared with Walsh at a congressional hearing specifically on video games a year after the shootings. He defended his own research and others' against critics there, noting that no study was perfect but that the body of the literature on the effects of violent media taken as a whole was at least as conclusive as the body of literature on smoking and lung cancer. "About thirty years ago, when questioned about the propriety of calling Fidel Castro a communist, Richard Cardinal Cushing replied, 'When I see a bird that walks like a duck and swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck,'" Anderson told senators at the hearing in 2000. "The TV and movie violence research community has correctly identified their duck." [44] Afterward, many in the research community questioned his claim of parallels with the level of certainty achieved by smoking research, but the argument resonated with politicians.

Walsh, along with Anderson, dismissed the idea that the games could actually serve as catharsis or stress relief. Much psychological research showed the opposite effect—when people practiced a kind of behavior, it intensified the behavior rather than lessening it, he said. An analogous example might be the scream therapy popular in the 1970s, in which people were encouraged to scream at the top of their lungs to release pent-up stress and anger. When researchers studied the effects of that therapy, they found that screamers tended to be angrier than non-screamers. That was a lesson that proponents of video game catharsis should take to heart, Walsh said. The science might not yet have proven a causal relationship between games and violence, Walsh argued, but if these games did prime players, they might trigger unintended responses in those predisposed to violent behaviors. "If you've got someone who is angry, you don't want to make them more angry," he said.

If Walsh's own work wasn't based on original scientific research, it nevertheless provided useful comparative data on an industry that was undeniably having increasing social and economic effects. In publishing his data, he found himself wading into polarizing territory: Every year, when his group released a survey or report card, he knew that angry, vitriolic gamers who discounted his media effects arguments would fill his email box. The irony wasn't lost on him as he quoted a sample email received a day after the December 2002 report was released:

> *I've been playing video games all my life and NEVER ONCE has it affected me. Maybe you were affected cause you've got your head stuck up your ass. By the way, bash* Vice City *or any other game one more time and I'm gonna come down to your wacko office and shove that biased report card so far down your throat you'll be crapping corrupt soccer moms until next Christmas.*

Twenty-Six *Seduction of the Game Industry*

The debate between Jenkins, Walsh, and their more radical counterparts barely registered in the gaming communities. For developers, the post-Columbine reality was the possibility that legislation, social pressure, or legal changes could affect games and gamer culture. The issue reached its fever pitch in 2002 when a federal court ruled that games were not entitled to the free speech protections of the U.S. Constitution, sending a chill through the industry until the opinion was overturned on appeal. The next few years saw states pass numerous measures restricting how games could be sold or marketed to children and teenagers, although the Supreme Court would eventually rule in 2011 that there was no causal link between video games and violence, and that minors thus had the First Amendment right to purchase games without parental supervision.

As Jenkins had feared, much of this was the most theatrical kind of politics. Legislators saw they could win easy political points by bringing in game company executives, showing clips of the games' most violent elements, and then forcing the witnesses to defend their practices. Despite the legislature's inability to stop the distribution of violent games, the theater could have real consequences: Jenkins worried that games would be derailed at a critical point in their development, not unlike comic books in the mid-twentieth century. Then too, a culture worried about corruption of its children found something to fear and criticize in a new entertainment medium, and comic books had suffered for it.

In the early 1950s the comic book industry looked much like the computer game industry in the early part of the new millennium. Comic books had started out as an entertainment medium for children decades

earlier, but World War II had helped take the industry in a darker direction. Superheroes and shadowy detectives turned their attention to fighting the forces of Hitler, Mussolini, and international communism, and as a generation of children raised on comics grew up and went to fight overseas, they took comic books with them. War themes became common, and the art grew more violent. When the war was over, many companies kept publishing titles for adults featuring war or gory horror themes.

Meanwhile, fan communities were rising up around the comic books, in much the same way that contemporary fan communities gathered around TV's *X-Files* or Garriott's *Ultima* series. The comic book publishers helped support many of these. Author Robert Warshow later wrote of his own son's membership in a club called the National EC Fan-Addict Club, which cost twenty-five cents to join and entitled its members to such perks as a membership certificate, an ID card, various paraphernalia bearing the Fan-Addict logo, and a newsletter that included gossip, articles, and interviews with authors and artists.

Not everyone was enamored with this growing pop culture phenomenon. A crusader against the comics rose to speak for broader parental concerns. Psychiatrist Fredrik Wertham believed that the bloody titles were a dangerous influence on children. Working as a consultant to ambitious senator Estes Kefauver, he helped spur high-profile hearings in 1954, spotlighting the excesses of the comic book industry. Just a few months before the hearings, he published a book outlining his thoughts on the issue, titled *Seduction of the Innocent*.

At those hearings, the psychiatrist testified that his own research, which was done without any financial support from either side, showed that comic books were certainly a contributor to juvenile delinquency. He went further than most other critics, focusing even on relatively tame *Superman* comic books along with the over-the-top horror and crime comics. It made "no difference whether the locale is western, or Superman or space ship or horror, if a girl is raped she is raped whether it is in a space ship or on the prairie," he told legislators.

Wertham's arguments badly conflated correlation and causation, but his conclusions' flaws were overshadowed by the comic book industry's almost laughable inability to defend itself (a failure echoed years later by game and film executives in similar straits). Taking the witness stand, EC Comics

publisher William Gaines defended many of his bloody horror comics as having important moral lessons about intolerance and racism, even if told in ways that might make some people in America uncomfortable. He said he drew the line at publishing anything that fell outside the bounds of good taste.

Kefauver turned on him, and in an exchange that was widely publicized in the media, held up a comic cover that showed a homicidal man holding a bloody axe and the severed head of his wife. Trapped in his own words, Gaines avowed that the cover was in good taste, and that *bad* taste would have been if the head had been held at a different angle, and showed blood dripping out of the severed neck. It wasn't an argument that went over well, any more than did a video game advertisement shown on the Senate floor in 1999 describing the game to be "As easy as killing babies with axes."

Gaines' argument was so ill-conceived his company was driven out of business just a few years later. He became a cautionary tale within the industry for those who were called to Congress.

Also testifying at that mid-century hearing were sets of psychiatrists on both sides of the issue. Those who defended comic books, saying that they found the graphic violence "more silly than shocking" were attacked and ultimately discredited in the newspapers as paid consultants for the comic book industry. It was true, although at least one witness's remuneration for serving as an advisor to a comic company had reached no more than the princely sum of $150. [45]

Jenkins, who worked for several video game companies, found himself wary of similar treatment following the Columbine hearings.

In the case of comic books, no legislation was proposed or passed, but the intense public criticism ultimately helped push the medium into a kind of publishing ghetto until the artistic resurgence of the mid-1990s [46]. By that time, enough artists were creating complex, psychologically sophisticated stories that graphic novels, as they had come to be called, had begun climbing back to respectability. However, the years as culturally despised child's things may not have been inevitable. In Japan, where no Wertham or Kefauver ever emerged to question the medium's legitimacy so

successfully, graphic novels had long been among the best-selling books in the country for adults and children alike.

To be sure, the financial power of the game industry argued against this kind of ghettoization. After a period of relative quiet following the Columbine shootings, the violence in video games debate re-emerged in late 2002 as critics drew parallels between violent video games and the weeks-long sniper attack in the Washington, DC, area. The success of the violent *Grand Theft Auto III* and its sequel, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, was bitterly condemned by critics, including Walsh. His group launched a petition drive against the second game, spotlighting its developers' decision to reward players for having sex with and then killing prostitutes.

"My own take is that the industry had better be careful," Walsh said. "If developers push the envelope too far, then they make it tempting for politicians to jump on an absolutely no-lose issue."

What neither Jenkins nor Walsh could see at the time was that it wasn't the developers who would control what happened next inside game worlds. This debate over violent video games and minors was and remains unlikely to be settled in the court of public opinion anytime soon, as it has always been just a skirmish in a decades-long cultural war that extends far beyond gaming.

When random acts of violence like Columbine happen, the public wants—*needs*—an answer to the questions of why and how—an answer that appears to bring logic to the illogicality of terrible events. At times, games have appeared to offer just such an answer. They have made an easy target, because for many years they sat outside the typical experience of many adults, and could be criticized without introducing more contentious issues such as child-rearing practices or gun control. In moments of panic, genuinely reasoned arguments are often drowned out.

At least in the United States, the only protection game companies have—and it's the most important protection that a medium with any artistic ambition can have—is the First Amendment. But, as with other mediums, this has proven a powerful shield indeed. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly argued that games not only have the privilege of First Amendment protection, but that minors too must be accorded the right to play those games. Though criticism surges every few years, this protection has given the game industry a broad and sheltered space in which to mature.