

# Mortal Kombat mortifyingly violent — Not for kids



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The other day I walked into a 7-Eleven store to buy a macaroon cake. I've noticed there's a lot of noise from the video games in this store, and I asked the cashier if she didn't get disturbed by all the electronic *bangs, booms, thuds, clangs and zaps* that drown every other sound in the store.

"Well, I can get used to those sounds," she said, handing me the macaroon cake with her bare hands. "It's the screams I can't stand."

I took the macaroon cake, hoping that her hands were clean. "The screams?" I asked. "Who's screaming?"

"The games, of course. Especially the new ones. They scream so awfully that sometimes I think I'm working in a torture chamber," she said.

And then I heard it: A dreadful scream pierced the air, as if someone was suffering horrifying pains. It brought back the memories of an ugly traffic accident I had witnessed a few years

ago.

I walked over to the video games section, where a couple of young boys were playing a game. They were about eight years old and wore extra-large sweatshirts, baggy pants and baseball caps turned backwards.

One of the boys was banging his fist in the control board in a violent fit. "I hate Sub-Zero!" he shouted. "He's impossible!"

I looked over his shoulder and caught sight of one of the most repulsive images I've ever seen. There, on the video screen, was a man dressed in an Asian martial arts uniform, holding a head with the spinal cord dangling from the neck.

It was my first encounter with *Mortal Kombat*.

I watched the boys play the game and witnessed the fighters on the screen give each other blood-spattering punches, rip out each other's still-beating hearts, tear off each other's heads and gore each other on long spears.

If the video game had looked like a cartoon, some of the violence might have been condonable, but this was no *Tom & Jerry*: The designers had scanned video images of real people into the game in order to give it an authentic look, and the violent mutilations looked realistic, down to the anatomical outline of the spinal cord and the color of the blood.

And I thought video games

consisted of Pac-Mans gobbling up colorful dots and Space Invaders trying to conquer Earth.

But video games have changed a lot. They've become technically more sophisticated and realistic-looking. They've begun to approach movies in picture quality and plot intricacy. They've become a major entertainment industry, grossing more than \$5 billion per year in the United States. But most importantly, they've become extremely violent.

I happen to believe that violent movies can be harmful to children. But in a way, I think these video games are even more dangerous. Here's why:

- While the viewers of a violent movie assume a passive role, video games require children to become active participants in the violence. They are encouraged to use violent means to solve problems.

- Violent video games are more accessible than violent movies. Although Sega has started a labeling system for their games, it's up to each individual retail outlet whether it will enforce this system. Moreover, everyone can play these games at the local convenience store.

- Parents have less control over the games their children play. They are often unaware of the violent content of the games they buy for their children. While most adults know that movies

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may be violent, many parents don't know that the newest video games are just as violent.

How do we prevent children from being exposed to these games? Of course, there's no way to ban these games entirely. Censorship never works, and adults should be allowed to play these games if they want to.

But these games are not appropriate for children. Sega's labeling system is a nice idea, but it's primarily a play to the gallery. If Sega really wanted to protect children, how come it never introduced a system of enforcement? Furthermore, if children aren't supposed to play the game, why is there no age limit for the coin machines? And what's the point of an "access code" to block violence, when everyone can look up the code in a video game magazine?

Or perhaps Sega and Nintendo don't want to protect children after all. Perhaps they want to cash in on a tendency they've been observing the movie industry and a correlation between violence and profit. And perhaps

that's why these companies have spent \$10 million to promote the release of *Mortal Kombat*.

The campaign seems to have worked very well so far. According to *Time* magazine, the game is expected to bring in more than \$150 million by Christmas.

The boys in the 7-Eleven store certainly seemed to be enjoying the game. They were shouting and jumping up and down as the blood and gore splattered on the screen.

One of the characters on the screen jumped up and kicked the other character's head. The blood began to gush from the injured character's throat, and the victor tore off the opponent's head and threw it into a well, in which it was pierced on a long spear.

"Yeah! I got him!" one of the boys shouted, lifting his arm victoriously in the air. "I finally got Sub-Zero!"

I didn't eat my macaroon cake that day. I had lost my appetite.

*Marius Meland is a columnist for the Emerald.*

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