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Does the media have a negative bias towards the video games and how does this affect the industry?

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Declaration by candidate

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work and has been submitted exclusively to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David for marking. All of the quotes and work by others used in this dissertation have been correctly cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether the media, such as newspapers and online sources, to see if they have a negative bias against the video games industry and the games that they make. Research was conducted on the media's past to see what they were talking about before video games were created. This research was then looked at to determine if there was a link between the past articles and the new ones about video games. Research was also conducted on the media about their stories on video games to see whether they always discuss negative stories or if they give some positivity towards the industry. This paper also discusses if the media has a big impact on the video games industry, whether it be a positive impact or a negative one. Based off the results of the research there was no evidence of a negative bias towards the video games industry as the media reported on both positive and negative sides of video games. It was also discovered that the media also reported on similar stories back before video games were created. These stories were aimed at rock and roll music and other forms of entertainment. This led to the discovery of moral panics and why they are used by the media to gain popularity and get more sales.

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Introduction

This paper is to find out how the media perceives the video games industry and the games that they make. I aim to discover if the media has a negative bias against video games and how this can affect the stories and articles that they write. I also aim to see if there is a trend in the media attention, whether it be just video games or other sources as well. I also have an understanding that the media has also targeted other topics in the past, such as; Rock and roll music, Elvis and Comic books. I want to see if their stories are similar to the ones that tell about video games and if so, why that is. To do this I will be looking into old media posts about Rock and roll music and comic books to see if there is any correlation between those stories and the ones that tell about video games. I won't be targeting a specific media source in this paper, but I will be looking into a wide variety of sources, ranging from news articles online to books written about video games. Throughout this paper I will be referring to news sources and other forms of news media as 'the media' in general terms.

My research will investigate what subjects that the media has talked about in the past such as, comic books and music, and comparing them to the way in which they talk about video games today and in recent years. I want to discover whether the media talks about video games in a bad light because it sells more papers or because it is an actual real-world issue that people need to be informed on. I will also see if there has been a correlation in the way that the media talks about new trends that children are into, this can be card games or music. I want to see if these trends become more accepted throughout the years and if the media still covers them or if they move on to more popular stories. This will display whether the media industry is jumping on new trends and causing moral panics to get more sales and publicity.

Media Past

In the past, the media covered on different topics. Before video games were created, stories were written on other social trends such as music, comic books and films. Before comic books and music there was one popular trend that drew the attention of the media but also the attention of the American government, Pinball machines. In the early 1940's the American government made pinball machines illegal to own and operate. This was because they were seen as gambling machines that were very popular among young children, therefore allowing children to become addicted to gambling. This law stayed in place until the 1970's. Pinball machines were banned before they had the addition of the bottom paddles, "pinball was a considerably different game from what it is today" (KLEIN, 2016). This made the game unpredictable and more of a gamble, once the paddles were added a level of skill was required to direct the ball.

Around the time of rock music (1950's and 60's) News articles reported on the topic, saying that the music was causing violence in people and bad for people to listen to. I read a newspaper article from 1959 saying "music... a symbol of hostility between two generations" (Daily Mirror, 1959) The newspaper article was talking about how people think that rock music is bad for their children and how it can affect them. It also talks about the difference between the older and younger generations. The older people saying that the music is bad for younger generations and the younger people saying that older people just don't understand the music genre. This conflict between two generations is something we see similar today. A lot of news articles today seem to depict video games as a bad form of entertainment that can lead children to become violent or aggressive. This correlation seems to suggest that the media likes to focus on conflict between the two parties.

Another paper written in 1957 had a headline stating that "Rock'N Roll is degrading music" (Portadown Times, 1957) This news article talked about how rock and roll music is vulgar and degrading and how it influenced contemporary life. The article goes on to talk about how rock and roll music is degrading because "music was going to be used in the worship of God" (Portadown Times, 1957). The generation of adults in the 1950's was very religious, this paper is targeting them by creating a moral panic to scare the older generation into believing that the genre of rock and roll music was bad for their children and for society. This creation of moral panic seems to be a recurring theme within media posts today. Newspapers like to paste big bold titles on the front pages to scare people into reading more about a certain topic. This could either be rock and roll music from the 1950's or video games in the modern age. The media uses a moral panic to get people hooked into reading their stories, it is a good way to get publicity and sales.

On another note, the media has also shared newspaper titles celebrating rock and roll music with titles such as "Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh were dancing to rock 'n' roll music at the Duke" (Daily Mirror, 1956). This shows that the media also shares good stories alongside the bad ones, this suggests that the media in general don't hold anything bad against Rock and roll music but uses a moral panic to create a conflict between two parties or generations to then sell more papers or get more sales/ publicity.

Another example of this would be Elvis Presley. Elvis was an icon of the 20th century, being one of the most popular artists of his time. He had songs of all different genres, including pop, blues and rock and roll. He was loved by all around the world and was in the news quite often. Papers describing his newest songs or announcing where he would be playing next seemed to be very popular, but some papers liked to cause controversy. Saying that Elvis was an over sexualised icon for teenagers. In a book written about Elvis, 'Elvis Presley: A southern Life, it states that "Elvis preyed on a group of three 14-year-old girls" (Williamson, J. 2014). This was when he was 22 years old. When playing at his shows, Elvis had to sometimes cover his ears because of all the screaming girls. The New York Daily Mirror wrote an article on girls screaming over Elvis, explaining that "when a teenager on the threshold of womanhood watches or listens to Elvis... There is only one thing on her mind--sex" (Miller and McGlinchey, 1956) This article could have been written to scare parents whose kids listen to Elvis, creating a moral panic and drawing attention to it. This is just another article creating a moral panic to gain attention and gain popularity. In contrast to this, a lot of newspapers also reported on Elvis being the King of rock and roll.



Figure 1, Elvis Dancing (ZoomerRadio, 2013)

Another trend which has sparked the interest of the media is a role-playing game introduced in 1974, the game being called Dungeons & dragons. This game involves players letting their minds roam freely to work collaboratively together to overcome trolls and monsters. The game was described as "a gateway to the essence of fantasy and narrative" (Haberman, 2016). This game was a huge among children and teenagers, getting together with friends to create stories and battle monsters. Not everyone saw Dungeons and Dragons as the great story telling game that inspired kids to create stories and memories but some people, including the media, reported on the game saying that it was linked to "accusations that the game fostered demon worship and a belief in witchcraft and magic" (Haberman, 2016). These claims became more serious when a 16-year-old boy from Michigan went missing, the media reported on this story calling the boy a "devoted D&D player" (Robbins, 1980). It was said that the young boys mind was warped by the game and it made him behave erratically. "In

reality, the boy was already troubled. After a month's absence, he was found. But in 1980 he ended up taking his own life" (Haberman, 2016). This is another case of the media pointing the blame towards a trend that children enjoy. This could have been misinformation or the deliberate act of causing a moral panic. After this story was released to the public, instead of the game taking a hit in sales, the opposite happened. The player's numbers jumped from thousands to millions. This increase in sales was in direct correlation of the articles posted about the game. The bad publicity worked in favour of the game and it became more popular than it was before.

This was not the end in the controversy against Dungeons and Dragons though as there were also other stories and articles posted about the game after more children had been killed. One story was about a student who killed himself, his mother blamed the game and created a group called "Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons" (Haberman, 2016). The game was also accused of causing murders around 1984.

In 2004, a young boy was murdered in England by one of his older friends. The young boy was killed after being lured into a park by his friend. The victim's mother claimed that the killer was obsessed with the video game 'Manhunt'. A horror game developed by Rockstar games. The game features the main character stalking and brutally killings victims. You earn more points by killing more people and how you kill them. "If he was obsessed by it, it could well be that the boundaries for him became quite hazy" (News.bbc.co.uk, 2004). The killing caused a massive controversy against violent video games. The game manhunt was banned in New Zealand by censorship officials six months before the killing occurred. A spokesman from ELSPA (Entertainment and leisure software publishers' association) made a statement which read "We sympathise enormously with the family and parents of Stefan Pakeerah...However, we reject any suggestion or association between the tragic events and the sale of the video game Manhunt...The game in question is classified 18 by the British Board of Film Classification" (News.bbc.co.uk, 2004). The game was rated as an 18 game and both teenage boys were under the age of eighteen, so they wouldn't have been allowed to purchase it or legally play it, so that is the parents responsibility. It was later found that the video game manhunt was in fact not found in the killer's bedroom but actually in the victim's possession, "Police involved in the Stefan Pakeerah murder case have revealed that the copy of Manhunt at the centre of a tabloid media frenzy last week was found in the possession of the victim, not the killer." (Fahey, 2004). After this new evidence the link between the killing and the video game became less apparent and the connection between the video game and the killing was removed, the motive for the killing was then deemed as robbery. The victim's mother and the media were keen to pin the killer's actions on the video game and wanted to take it further by banning video games altogether. "Giselle Pakeerah has called for a ban on violent video games" (News.bbc.co.uk, 2004). A civil servant stated, "I don't play these games but if they are influencing kids to go out and kill people then you don't want them on the shelves" (News.bbc.co.uk, 2004). The fact that they have never played video games before gives them a negative bias against the games and it is also being prejudice against them. If the connection between the video game and the trial was not removed, the future of violent and 18 rated video games could have been very different from what they are today.

Manhunt is still talking a hit to this day, with Sony re-releasing old games on the new platform with backwards compatibility. They quietly added two classic video games, Manhunt and Bully. This led to a news site creating an article titled “13 Years Later, Manhunt Remains a Jarring Reflection on Violence” (Wired., 2016). The article talks about how when the game came out it was described as encouraging violence by the media. They then talk about how “The medium of film has changed the way violence functions in our culture. It's more visible now than ever before. Carnage both real and imagined is now an inescapable part of our visual vocabulary” (Wired., 2016). This explains how over time people have become more accepting of video games and the scenes that they show, similar to how they have become more accepting of the music and other topics that has been previously been criticised by the media.

Games Past

In the game Call of duty: Modern Warfare 2 which was released in 2009, there was one mission that sparked some controversy about the game. This mission was talked about a lot in the media and was taken so seriously that the game developers made the mission skippable to players didn't have to play it if they didn't want to. This mission was called ‘No Russian’, it featured you the player as an undercover CIA agent who was working for a Russian terrorist group. You enter a populated busy airport and start shooting civilians. This mission was so graphic and featured terrorism, which lead to the media to start reporting on the game. The media created stories about the game claiming that it could cause copycat acts of the level in the real world, with real players committing acts of terrorism after possibly being inspired by the game.

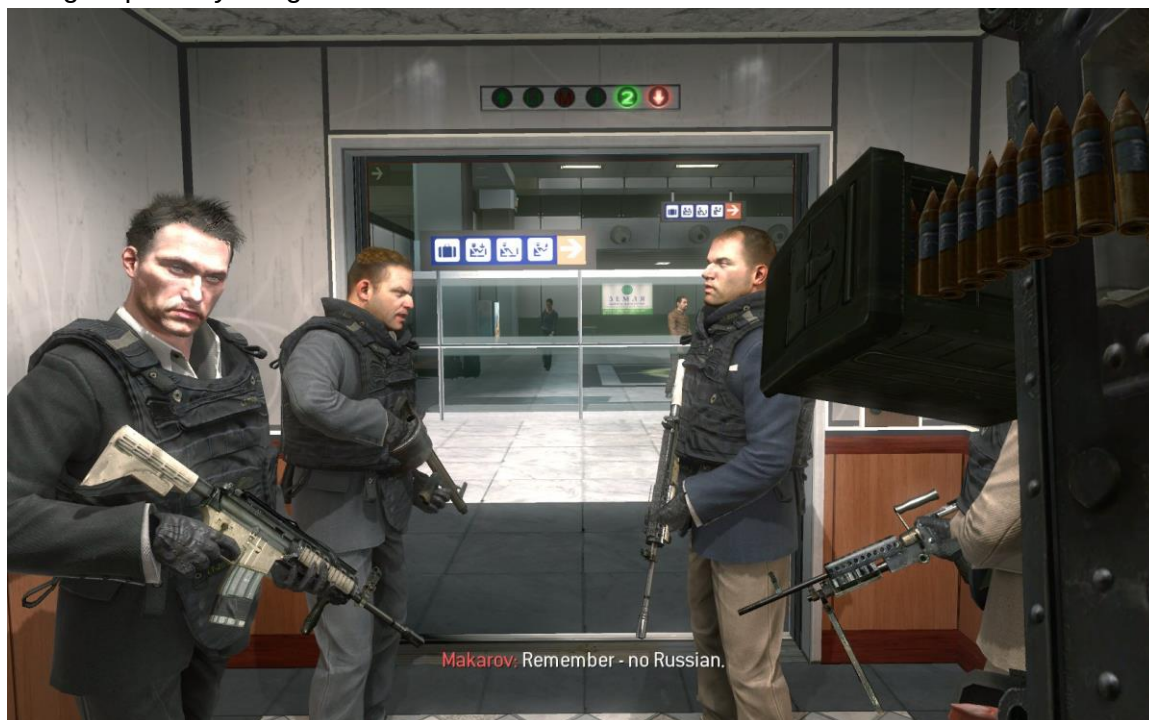


Figure 2, Call of duty elevator scene in 'No Russian' mission (Infinity Ward, 2009)

In the year 2019, infinity ward released a new game in the Call of Duty series, titled 'Call of duty: Modern Warfare'. This game is similar to the previous title and features more controversial elements within the missions. This was intended by infinity ward to spread awareness about some of the horrors that take place in the world today. With this caused more controversy between the game and the media. The news reports on the similarity between one of the in-game missions titled 'The highway of death'. The media are claiming that there is a link between this mission and the real life highway in Iraq where "In February 1991, US-led troops attacked Iraqi soldiers, leaving hundreds dead" (BBC News, 2019), in the mission 'The highway of death' the player takes on the role of Russian snipers that commit a similar act. The games creators have commented on this claiming that the "storylines were fictional" (BBC News, 2019).

Grand Theft Auto 5 (GTA 5) is a popular video game title across all platforms. It allows the player to access a fully open world to explore. The player can buy houses and cars and explore what the world has to offer. The game is rated 18 and for good reason, this game features a lot of content that is not suitable for a younger audience, such as graphic violence, sex and drugs. The game does also feature a campaign story mode where you take on the role of three separate characters which all take part in illegal activities, from stealing cars to killing targets in hitman missions. In regard to this, the media haven't really criticized this game as much as they have with other games. A lot of the stories that the media have talked about Grand Theft Auto has mostly been about how successful it is and how many copies they have sold. One news article written in 2014 when the game was released stated that one retailer had banned the video game from being sold as it featured graphic violence against women. This story was written by The Telegraph, "One of Australia's largest retailers has banned controversial video game Grand Theft Auto 5 from its stores because of its graphic scenes of violence against women" (The Telegraph, 2014). On the other hand, another source claimed that "GTA V is the most profitable entertainment product of all time" (GamesIndustry.biz, 2018). This is strange as this game is arguably the most violent game currently available. You can get drunk, drive around the open world shooting civilians, Rob banks and visit strip clubs. The fact the media hasn't commented in a negative way on this, as much as they have with other video games raises the question of do they actually have a negative bias against video games and the industry? The time difference between these articles could be a factor of why the media now talks about the game in a positive way as they have possibly become more acceptable towards the game's contents.

In 2008, Fox news made a story on a video game called Mass Effect. This game was a mature rated game set in space. Late in the game there is a cut scene which features sex. Fox news commented on this and gave false information about the game, saying that the game was full of nudity and sex, when "that the M-rated game was not filled with sex, just one network-TV-friendly sex scene late in the 30-hour game" (MTV News, 2008). At the time this caused a lot of controversy against the game, but a week later the news reporter backed down on her claims after the community who play the game gave her backlash for her comments. The news reporter said later on that "I would have liked to have had the opportunity to play this game before appearing on the program" (MTV News, 2008). This information tells you that the reporter had not even seen the scenes for herself before she made the claims towards the game, because of this the game had bad press. On a similar

note, another game in recent years also features sex scenes but has not had any backlash from the media has been, The Witcher 3. The Witcher 3 features multiple sex scenes throughout the game but has had little to no backlash from the media about them. This could possibly be because the game is much less mainstream compared to Mass Effect or because the age rating for the game is set at 18. The Witcher 3 also did get released in 2015, 8 years after Mass Effect, this could also show how people's thoughts towards these issues can change over time and how we have become more accepting of scenes such as these in games and movies.

Another form of games that have been criticized for being dangerous are racing games. One news article says, "German psychologists think you should be extra cautious next time you get behind a real-life wheel" (Philipkoski et al., 2007). All racing games feature a message in their splash screens that state not to replicate scenes from the game in the real world, especially street racing games such as Need for Speed. A lot of the street racing games require the player to win races set on busy city streets. To win the race, the player has to drive between moving cars and violate traffic laws. This sort of driving in the real world can be very dangerous and the racing games specifically add a warning message to the splash screen to warn players about these dangers.

A lot of people and news articles have concerns about video games, most of these concerns are about the violence that is featured in these video games. In recent years another concern has been made, this time with online gambling. Most games these days feature a form of gambling using the term micro transactions. These micro transactions are small payments usually around £5 real world money that can be spent inside of the game. These transactions can be used to buy cosmetic items for your in game character or in some games allow the player to gain a significant advantage against other players. This term is known as pay to win. Micro transactions are a good way for a smaller game company to make money on top of their game sales. This extra income allows them to have a higher budget for their next titles.

In some games the micro transaction system can be classed as gambling. Games such as Overwatch and CS:GO allow the player to purchase loot boxes. These boxes have a chance to give the player a piece of rare cosmetic loot. The odds of getting a rare piece of loot are very low and the player also isn't guaranteed to get one. Some countries such as Belgium have banned this loot box gambling system as it makes gambling easier to access for children, "Belgium's Minister of Justice, Koen Geens, was keen to focus on how children are confronted with loot boxes, calling the mix of gaming and gambling dangerous for mental health" (BBC News, 2018). This is important as gambling is strictly for people over the age of 18, but these loot boxes are being implemented in games that are rated as 16 and lower. Some games get around the legality of this by adding in the chance percentages of the loot items, this then doesn't class it as gambling as the player knows the chance of getting each piece of loot. A game that has implemented this is CS:GO, they have added a percentage chance which is visible to the player next to each of the items that they can get. Games such as the massively popular Fortnite feature micro transactions. In Fortnite they are purely cosmetic and don't give the players direct advantages in the game. The fact that Fortnite is a popular game among young children and teenagers is important as they do not feature loot boxes but allow the player to pay money for specific items in game. This method of micro transactions can be found in other games such as Rainbow Six Siege.

One game that has sparked some controversy not only in the gaming industry but also in the UK parliament is a game called Runescape. This game was introduced in 2001 by the developer Jagex. The game is a fantasy massively online multiplayer game that is now available on nearly all devices, including mobile and PC. Runescape has sparked up some controversy within the UK parliament as it was “revealed that one player has spent \$62,000 USD” (Yeung and Team, 2019) on the games in-game loot box micro transaction system. The parelen report focuses on how the games micro transaction system has caused significant financial damage to the player and his parents. This being the case the UK government has now called “for Parliament to regulate video game micro transactions under gambling laws and ban their sales to children” (Yeung and Team, 2019). This could change how micro transactions are implemented in video games in the future and could possibly see them being used less often or even not used at all. This would be good for the consumers and players because all content for the game will be free but this will also impact the video games developers, especially smaller companies because they rely on micro transactions for their income.



Figure 3, Loot box system in Runescape (Jagex, 2001)

A popular arcade game that could usually be found in almost every bowling alley and arcade was a game called House of the dead. The game allowed the player to hold a gun controller and shoot at the screen. The game was a on a set path and the player had to fight off zombies. This style of game was very popular in modern arcades and would often have a queue to play. The game house of the dead was created by SEGA in 1996 for arcades but was reinvented in 1999 as a typing-based shooter. The typing-based shooter had the same mechanics as the previous arcade game but instead of aiming and shooting a gun, the player would type out words that popped up on the screen over certain enemies. This allowed players to increase their typing skills. One news article about the game from the Verve said, “the best way to learn typing has unquestionably been killing zombies” (The Verge, 2013). This shows that even though the aim of the game is to kill zombies and does in fact feature violence, it also allows the player to enhance their ping skills and allows them to have fun whilst they’re doing it.

Media and Video games

The media has covered numerous stories on video games. A lot of stories in the past year have been based around the very popular video game 'Fortnite'. This game is very popular among children and teenagers. This being the case it makes it a good talking point for the media because they can get the attention of worried parents. Articles such as "Fortnite player admits attacking pregnant wife" (The Independent, 2019) make parents believe that the game can cause violence, but when the article refers to the person as 'player' it doesn't address the fact that the player was not a child but was in fact a 26-year-old man.

Looking more into the stories that The Independent have written I found some interesting articles, one being about how the president of the United States has blamed video games for mass shootings with the title "Trump rushes to blame video games for mass shootings" (Draper, 2019). In the article it displays quotes from Mr. Trump, "This includes the gruesome and grisly video games that are now commonplace" (Draper, 2019). The article goes on to explain how politicians arm themselves with unconvincing evidence about video games, "politicians have blamed violence on video games for decades. Their rhetoric quickly ramped up in the 1990s, after games like Wolfenstein 3D" (Draper, 2019). The media in this case is defending the video games industry and bringing light towards a usually dark topic that is often talked about. In the article there is evidence that video games cannot be accused of violence because "Researchers have extensively studied whether there is a causal link between video games and violent behaviour... there is broad agreement that no such link exists" (Draper, 2019). From looking into other articles that have been written about video games by The Independent, there is no clear evidence to prove that they have a bias against video games of the video game industry because most of their articles talk about video games in both lights. There are articles discussing how video games are bad but there are also other articles which shed light on the subject and show new findings in research.



Figure 4, Fortnite logo displaying playable characters (Epic games, 2017)

Other stories have been written about 'Fortnite', this time being positive. The Guardian wrote an article stating, "Don't fear the rise of Fortnite and other video games – they bring young people together" (Gera, 2019). This article explains how the game has brought so many players together and find new friends in this new game. This suggests that not all forms of media portray video games in a bad light. Looking into this news source, the Guardian, I found other articles talking about video games. Most of the articles posted were positive, giving praise to video games for allowing children to find an outlet from day to day life. One article stood out to me though, "How a video game community filled my nephew's final days with joy" (the Guardian 2019). This article was written from the perspective of the boy's father, he explained how the community behind a video game allowed his son to be happy even in his final days of his life. The article says that the community showed a "magnificent display of empathy, kindness and creativity" (the Guardian 2019) towards the young boy in his final week. This story shows how some media sources can talk about video games and its community in a good light, and not always in a bad light.

Although this source does talk a lot about games in a good light, there are also some articles which touch on the darker side of video games, not so much on the effects of video games but on the real world issues that they have done. There was one article about how big video game publishers have been "avoiding millions in UK tax" (Holmes, MacDonald and Stuart, 2019). This article talks about how some video games companies have avoided paying tax by claiming "up to £60m in corporation tax relief" (Holmes, MacDonald and Stuart, 2019).. Even though this story isn't positive towards the videogames industry, it isn't creating a moral panic by targeting the players who play the games but rather the company itself. This sort of story can still cause some backlash towards the videogames industry and could possibly cause some damage to their reputation but at least it isn't targeting the player base or manipulating research to make video games look bad when in fact they are not.

There is a possibility that the media industry can be bias towards video games and the people who play them. This can be seen from the numerous negative headlines towards video games. Headlines such as "Video game violence linked to bad behaviour" (Cbsnews.com, 2014) aim to create a moral panic in parents whose children play video games. Although there are numerous headlines which seem to suggest a bias towards the bad side of games. In recent years since video games have become more accepted and studied, more and more headlines seem to be moving away from accusing video games for causing violence and bad behaviour and in fact have been promoting games as a good way to connect with people and meet new friends. An article about the link between video games and violence was published by Forbes, an online news media source, with the title "New Study Shows That There Is No Link Between Violent Video Games and Aggression in Teenagers" (Barder, 2019). This shows that video games are becoming more accepted in society today and aren't the causes of previously accused claims.

In terms of media bias, the media has been biased before. Especially when it comes to important things such as elections. This can be seen clearly seen in American elections. The Washington Times wrote in an article "we have had biased media. The problem today is that it is so drastically one-sided that it is tipping election results" (G. Del Beccaro, 2016). This media bias then has a big impact on the way that the elections are run in the US and it is

affecting the results. The article goes on to explain how the media has been biased in the past as well, talking about the American Revolution and how it was “sparked by an intensely biased or partisan media” (G. Del Beccaro, 2016). This media bias changed people's perceptions of the revolution in favour of the American Patriots. If the media wasn't biased, then there could have been a totally different outcome.

Conclusion

During the research it was discovered quite early on that there didn't seem to be a direct link between the media and negative bias towards video games. There were an equal number of both positive and negative articles and stories about video games in general. From looking back into what the media has reported on in the past, it was also discovered that the media had reported a lot of trends and what was popular at the time, being positive and negative. This helps us understand how the media seems to work and how they create articles based on likeliness to be read or be trending. Video games in the modern day are just the next trend that the media are reporting on. This being the case we can expect a similar result as the previous media stories in the past. Eventually the media will stop discussing video games and move on to the next trend that will bring in more viewers. The media don't seem to have a negative bias towards any subject topics such as video games or films. They are more interested in creating a moral panic, to get more people talking about a subject and therefore getting more publicity from it and selling more stories.

The video games industry like all other industries that have been talked about by the media are not negatively affected, as most of the time all publicity is good publicity. Whether the story be positive or negative, the video game in question still gets talked about and more people are likely to go out and purchase it or talk about it with others. This therefore can have a positive impact towards the video games industry.

Further work

Moving on from this subject topic. More research could be conducted into the psychology of moral panics and how other people are influenced or affected by the stories they read or are exposed to. Most of the time we think about how the topic being talked about is affected by the media, but possibly the most important thing is how are the people who read these stories being affected. When the media seek out to create moral panics for publicity or sales, people are reading those stories and are becoming influenced by what the media has to say. More research could also be conducted on moral panics to get a deeper understanding of why they are used and who are they used by.

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