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P.C. YOUTH VIOLENCE: "WHAT'S THE INTERNET OR VIDEO GAMING GOT TO DO WITH IT?"¹

ANNA EVERETT

In the wake of the Columbine High School massacre, an unfortunate target is once again caught in the mediated cross hairs of our latest societal moral panic. That perpetual target is today's youth culture and its preoccupation with the Internet and video games. Fueling much of our national discontent over and distrust of P.C. (post-Columbine) youth culture, besides a new millennial generation gap of sorts, is the traditional print and broadcast media's intense rivalry and paternalism toward their new media counterparts. At issue is the Internet and video games' captivation of that most coveted advertising demographic, the youth market, with its newly designated "tween" segment.

Tweens are those youth aged 8 through 12, and due to their developmental location between the stages of childhood and the teen years, they have been given the new moniker "tweens." Intensifying this lucrative market-share competition is the Internet's steady encroachment on TV's and other traditional media's social gate-keeping function. Not unexpectedly, these new computer and digital media startup industries have begun to significantly displace the power and influence of old teen-exploitation media controlled by guardians of what Dick Hebdige terms the "parent culture."² Consequently, this new "digital dilemma"³ is exacerbating a postmodern culture clash more familiarly described as "the culture wars." It follows that in any war, identification and demonization of an enemy are requisite. This escalating technoculture war, as I see it, is no

1. This title paraphrases popular song lyrics from Rock-n-Roll icon Tina Turner's hit single "What's Love Got to do with it?" that appear on her comeback album *Private Dancer*. The inter-generational appeal of this song makes its rhetorical narrative appropriate for this study. See TINA TURNER, *What's Love Got To Do With It?*, on PRIVATE DANCER (JVC Records 1984).

2. For a thorough discussion of the antinomies and conflicts between youth and parent cultures, see DICK HEBDIGE, *SUBCULTURE: THE MEANING OF STYLE* (Routledge 1993).

3. The concept of the "digital dilemma" comes from a recently published study by the National Research Council's Computer Science and Telecommunications Board. See *THE DIGITAL DILEMMA: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY IN THE INFORMATION AGE* (Randall Davis, et al. eds., National Academy Press 2000). They argue that, "[a]dvances in technology have produced radical shifts in the ability to reproduce, distribute, control, and publish information." *Id.* at 3. Moreover, they insist that the digital dilemma represents a nightmare for both publishers and authors, and for consumers. *Id.* at 2. For publishers, "[t]heir nightmare is that . . . the entire market can be extinguished by the sale of the first electronic copy" of data or information due to the endless reproducibility of digital texts. *Id.* They contend that, "The nightmare for consumers is that the attempt to preserve the marketplaces leads to technical and legal protections that sharply reduce access to society's intellectual and cultural heritage, the resource that [Thomas] Jefferson saw as crucial to democracy." *Id.* at 2.

different. For any cursory glance at hegemonic media representations of vid-kids (kids who play video games), cyberpunks and hacktivists (hacker-activists) betrays the generational divide and commercial biases of many mainstream reports on the activities of these newly evolving computer savvy youth subcultures. Although traditional media's hyperbolic discourse on the so-called "culture wars" functions to mask what might more accurately be described as contemporary "media wars," this discourse nonetheless fails to mask a more suspect agenda. Suspect here is the fomenting of public hysteria over contemporary youths' involvement with and mastery of the Internet, video games and other digital media technologies.

I. IS PLAYING THE BLAME GAME MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE INTERNET AND VIDEO GAMES?

Because the 1999 Columbine tragedy clearly traumatized our nation amid an era of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity, and relative social stability, it has become a conduit for legislating some dangerously repressive civil liberty infringements (California's recent passage of the so-called "juvenile justice" amendment is one particularly egregious example). As horrific as the Littleton, Colorado tragedy is, I find myself more concerned with the rhetoric of new media culpability in the national news media establishments since the Internet and video games, linked to one of the Columbine assailants, have been indicted as virtual accomplices to the mass murder. Most distressing here is the easy use of video games and the Internet as scapegoats in our national rush to assign blame in this tragedy. Since these newest mass media threaten many vested interests⁴ and strike terror in the hearts of many technophobes and neo-Luddites, the Internet in general, and video games in particular, have come under special scrutiny, and thus are particularly vulnerable to shrill public calls for accountability, regulation and, ultimately, censorship.

As details of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's murderous rampage surfaced in the popular media, almost immediately the Internet and video games emerged as discursive objects of blame. To be sure, mass hysteria over baleful media effects on human behavior is nothing new. From the clergy's concerns about the Gutenberg printing press, to paternalists' fears of romance novels, to electrical telegraph engineers' protective guilds, to religious censorship efforts against the movies, comic books, rock-n-roll music and television, to video games and the Internet more

4. In recent years, newspapers and TV have reported on the phenomenon of new media's erosion of their lucrative audience base. See Leslie Helm, *Surf's Down on the Net, Survey Says*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 12, 1996, at D1. Despite noting findings claiming "a lot less 'net surfing' taking place than many had assumed, the article also revealed that "Internet users spend an average of 6.6 hours per week on the Net, usually cutting into their TV-watching time." *Id.* The study also found long distance phone calls, video rentals, magazine and newspaper purchases and listening to the radio were also significantly affected by the increasing popularity of the Net. *Id.*

contemporaneously, the history of Western civilization is abundant with moral panic episodes. A familiar point of contention here is the attempt of powerful groups to maintain their structures of domination by overstating the case of dire media effects on susceptible or impressionable segments of society. No one should be surprised that often it is the poor, female, and youth populations who primarily get cast as mass culture dupes in need of censorship's paternalistic protection.⁵

II. THE NET GENERATION: "GROWING UP DIGITAL" WITH VIDEO GAMES AND THE INTERNET

Driving much of the cacophonous media rhetoric condemning video games and the Internet is our contemporary fear of a looming double threat. First the familiar anxiety of an older generation threatened by the ascendancy and inevitable dominance of its independent-minded offspring. Second is the threat posed by the mass media paradigm shift that privileges the new interactive model of digital media like the Internet, CD-ROMs and video games over the unidirectional information flow of traditional media industries such as newspapers, magazines, movies, TV and cable networks. Exacerbating the potency of this double threat is the formidable cultural power engendered by the intersection of these two unstoppable forces. In his new media study *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, Don Tapscott alerts us to the high stakes informing these clashing intergenerational and intermedia wills to power.⁶ As Tapscott sees it, the "Net Generation" is different from all those that preceded it because:

For the first time in history, children are more comfortable, knowledgeable, and literate than their parents about an innovation central to society. And it is through the use of the digital media that the Net Generation will develop and superimpose its culture on the rest of society. Boomers stand back. Already these kids are learning, playing, communicating, working, and creating communities very differently than their parents. They are a force for social transformation.⁷

Not only are youths today uniquely poised and competent leaders of one of the most profound cultural revolutions in the history of western civilization, but their vast numbers all but assure a long *durée* of their increasing hegemonic sway.

5. In Carolyn Marvin's excellent work *WHEN OLD TECHNOLOGIES WERE NEW*, the gendered discourse of expertise in electrical engineering and telegraphy is convincingly presented. Similarly, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* alerts us to the masculinist condemnation of the female dominated book of the month clubs that flourished in postwar American society. In 1930, the Payne Fund studies attributed delinquency in youth to the influence of movies and comic books. For further discussion of deleterious mass media effects outlined in the Payne Fund Studies, see SHEARON A. LOWERY, ET AL., *MILESTONES IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH* 31-51 (1983).

6. DON TAPSCOTT, *GROWING UP DIGITAL: THE RISE OF THE NET GENERATION* 1-2 (1998).

7. *Id.*

What complicates, frustrates and ultimately de-legitimizes traditional media constructions of a retro 1960s-era generation gap glommed onto today's generational divide is the untenable nature of the forced equivalence. To begin, Tapscott finds that "for the most part kids [today] think their parents are pretty cool. 'Nearly half of children think their parents are 'up to date' on the music they like' The children surveyed also say their parents' opinions matter most to them when it comes to drinking, spending money . . . sex and AIDS."⁸ Because today's vid-kids (as video game analyst J.C. Hertz and others label them)⁹ not only trust but admire adults over thirty, Tapscott cautions against believing that "we're in some era of transgenerational bliss."¹⁰ Unlike parents in the 1960s, parents today do not worry about their kids' embrace of revolutionary an anti-establishment ethos; instead they are frightened by their kids' mastery of revolutionary new technologies that they (the parents) barely understand. While much of the previous era's ideological schism between parents and youths has been bridged, the preponderance of old media reportage emphasizing the "0.5 percent of online material that is violent, racist, or sexual in nature"¹¹ still engenders a sort of generational divide that is no less alienating or profound. Most striking in the televisual rhetoric of crisis, catastrophe and technological culpability in the Columbine tragedy is how quickly the tropes of criminality emerged and became entwined with new media in TV's round-the-clock coverage.

In the early hours of the continual news flow of the Columbine High School massacre, particularly on cable and broadcast television coverage, the Internet and video games became easy targets of blame. MSNBC, the first of what we now recognize as a new media convergence company, led the onslaught. One lead-in to a hastily assembled segment on the role of the Internet in this tragedy (presented by Mary Kathleen Flynn, the cable company's newly created Internet expert) that was legitimized by MSNBC news anchor Brian Williams is telling indeed.¹² In a concerned tone Williams remarks, "there is no shortage of hate-filled Web sites on the World Wide Web. But this one of course has attracted a lot of attention and it was jammed earlier today just by journalists and members of the law enforcement community who were looking at it, trying to glean some evidence from it."¹³ The fact that a plethora of "hate-filled" Web sites exist on the net is hardly news, but Williams's revelation that the website might constitute "evidence" certainly is noteworthy, and begs the

8. *Id.* at 43-44.

9. J.C. HERZ, *JOYSTICK NATION: HOW VIDEOGAMES ATE OUR QUARTERS, WON OUR HEARTS, AND REWIRED OUR MINDS* (1997).

10. TAPSCOTT, *supra* note 6, at 44.

11. *Id.* at 44.

12. Brian Williams and Mary Kathleen Flynn, *The News with Brian Williams* (MSNBC March 20, 1999).

13. *Id.*

question, "evidence of what" exactly? Immediately, television viewers are encouraged to view the program's ensuing Internet imagery as threatening, at best, and criminal, at worst. For her part, Flynn begins by observing that first rule of journalism, authenticating her information source (a local Colorado reporter), and legitimating his informant status by noting this reporter's close proximity and access to the unfolding news event.¹⁴ Positioned next to a large but soothingly familiar TV screen displaying a now-menacing website identified as belonging to one of the then-suspects, Flynn fulfills her function as trustworthy Internet de-mystifier and confident modern maven. Domesticating this latest Internet threat, Flynn's segment consists of reading aloud the site's disturbing boldface-type messages, interpreting a troubling scanned-in hand drawing depicting combat signifiers of boy culture, and contrasting TV journalism's self-restraint with the suggested dangers of the Internet's unrestricted and too-often toxic content.¹⁵

Plugging into society's distrust of the high-tech World Wide Web apparatus' apparent hold on today's youth while championing, at once, traditional keepers of the social good, was Williams's reassurance that Flynn, other reporters and law enforcement easily located, accessed and jammed this dangerous website. Additionally, Flynn's "discovery" that the site featured disturbing content from KMDFM, a defunct Seattle industrial rock band, reactivates society's paranoia over the baleful influences of modern youth music culture that recalls the "legacy of fear"¹⁶ and culture panics that rocked the parental world of the Eisenhower 1950s. That the site highlights the following disturbing lyrics from the KMDFM song "Son of a Gun," only adds fire to adults' burning contempt for present day youth's captivation by all things techno-centric. The "Son of a Gun" lyrics under scrutiny were, "Shockwave \ Massive Attack \ Atomic Blasts \ Son of a Gun is Back \ Chaos-Panic \ No Resistance \ Detonations in a Distance \ Apocalypse Now \ Walls of Flame \ Billowing Smoke \ Who's to Blame." Moving on to the drawings that fill the next page of the site, and singling out another of the song's phrases, Flynn points out "Anything I don't like, SUCKS." These lyrics are mentioned as an instructive and evidentiary summation of the website's dangerous lure that contrasts unfavorably to broadcast journalism's implicit socially responsible practices.

As Flynn navigated the site, she clicked on a linked file containing disturbing drawings of violent symbols and iconography too frequently associated with bad boy cultural expressions.¹⁷ The drawings' poor ren-

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.* This idea centers on social scientific findings on the harmful effects of films on children conducted in 1929 to 1932. A full discussion of the Payne Fund Studies appears in SHEARON A. LOWERY, ET AL., MILESTONES IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH 31-51 (1983).

17. Brian Williams and Mary Kathleen Flynn, *The News with Brian Williams* (MSNBC March 20, 1999).

derings and their indecipherable scale necessitated Flynn's descriptive voice-over as the TV camera zoomed in for close-ups on sketches of a hand-drawn machine gun, a knife-wielding male figure atop a mound of skulls, and more. Flynn's ability to make sense of the difficult to decipher images foregrounds the segment's visual rhetoric that reasserts television's primacy as public information agent bar none.¹⁸ As if to underscore mainstream journalism's deserved veneration and conscientious reportage by juxtaposition, Flynn concludes her website critique by stressing MSNBC's refusal to show a page of the site with pipe bomb instructions because it divulges the identity of an unindicted suspect, or innocent family member.¹⁹ However, when Flynn verbally recounts some of the bomb-making details found on the site, she compromises her claim to journalistic integrity by broadcasting to a mass audience such putatively destructive information.²⁰ Notwithstanding this breach, MSNBC's "liveness" and "crisis and catastrophe" discourses convey well its self-authenticating message that management of national crises requires television's ever-vigilant gaze and the responsible reporting of its trusted cadre of unflappable, investigative journalists.

The following morning, as MSNBC settled into its cyclical rebroadcasts of Flynn's cybersleuthing, ABC's *Good Morning America* (*GMA*) program upped the rhetorical ante by bringing video games into the heightened blame game. *GMA* co-host Diane Sawyer primed the ABC network's morning audience for its day-after coverage of Columbine by suggesting their show's uncovering of a new development in television's over-saturated coverage. The unspectacular nature of the now-exhausted suspect's text-based Web site visuals, and the diminished shock-value of the all-too-familiar footage of terrorized Columbine High School teens rushing into the streets with their arms over their heads underscored *GMA*'s more visually fresh images of digital media violence and mayhem.

Distinguishing its more limited temporal engagement with the Columbine story from that of MSNBC and CNN's more extensive catastrophe coverage, *GMA* augmented the narratives of its talking-head experts on youth violence with difficult to ignore graphic and stylized images of new media violence. In her influential article "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," film scholar Mary Ann Doane informs us that "[t]elevision knowledge strains to make visible the invisible. While it acknowledges the limits of empiricism, the limitations of the eye in relation to knowledge, information is nevertheless conveyable only in terms of a *simu-*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

lated visibility—"If it could be seen, this is what it would look like."²¹ What was "invisible" that *GMA* and Diane Sawyer "strained to make visible" on the morning of March 21, 1999 was a tenable culprit to explain this latest act of school violence perpetuated by suburban white, male youths. Drawing on latent social anxieties over the presumed unique contribution of video games to what is widely regarded as post-modern society's aesthetic culture of violence, *GMA*, its youth violence experts, and Sawyer found an easy sell for its video game indictment, because, again, to quote Doane, "Television deals in potentially visible entities."²² And given video games and digital media's spectacular special effects, these "visible entities" can be counted on to grab the attention of groggy, early morning audiences stumbling toward that first cup of coffee.

In our look at *GMA*'s crisis and catastrophe rhetoric surrounding Littleton, it is important to bear in mind the inter-media rivalries that inform the subtext of one media's assessment of blame or culpability against another. As you may recall, in the years leading up the rash of schoolyard killings, the broadcast television networks were embroiled in controversy over public denunciations of their own violent programming. To stave off government regulation and threatened consumer boycotts, the networks reluctantly agreed to a self-policing strategy²³ to quell public demands for accountability that included such parental guidance tools as voluntary program content labeling analogous to, yet significantly different from, that of the movie industry's ratings system. An additional appeasement held out by the networks was a promise to engineer the V-chip program-blocking device in all newly manufactured TV sets. With this historical backstory, our discussion of network and cable TV's participation in the blame game to explain the Columbine tragedy gains some much-needed context. This stress on context is important to our analysis because as Mary Anne Doane puts it, "television is the preeminent machine of decontextualization. The only context for television is itself—its own rigorous scheduling. Its strictest limitation, that of time, information becomes measurable, quantifiable, through its relation to temporality."²⁴ Or put more plainly, since time literally *is* money by American commercial television standards, important and necessary time-consuming explanations of complex issues too often are exchanged for pithy platitudes, dramatic pictures and startling sound bytes.

Returning to *GMA*'s day-after coverage of the Columbine tragedy as a case in point, we refocus attention on the ABC network's rhetoric of blame directed at the Internet and video games. After establishing its

21. See Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) at 222-239.

22. DOANE, *supra* note 16, at 226-27.

23. To this end, the TV executives borrowed a page from the 1930s film industry.

24. DOANE, *supra* note 16, at 225.

ability to provide instantaneous coverage from various pertinent locales in this story, *GMA*'s live coverage shifts from that of co-anchor Charlie Gibson's remote stand-up report from Columbine High School, to news reporter Antonio Mora's update from the hospital caring for the young victims, to Diane Sawyer's talking-heads interviews in the program's New York headquarters. Situated within the tranquil yet authoritative space of the familiar studio, Sawyer and her cadre of experts on violence and youth buffer the program's strong visual appeals to fear by structuring such self-serving questions and answers presumably on the minds of traumatized early morning viewers. Among the questions Sawyer poses are: 1) What can we learn about "the young men who committed the terrible crime and then turned their weapons on themselves?" 2) "Who could these young men be?" 3) What is known about "the outcast group known as the 'Trenchcoat Mafia,' a suburban gang of sorts noted for their dark clothing and dark disposition?" and 4) Sawyer's loaded question that, "In a comfortable middle-class setting like Littleton, Colorado, where do the young people find the models to form a gang based on anger and violence?" With visual cues featuring concert footage from Rock star, Marilyn Manson, hate sites from the Internet, disturbing scenes from the films *The Basketball Diaries* and *The Matrix*, graphically violent segments from wildly popular video games such as *Doom* and *Quake*, and Sawyer's editorializing remarks about society's failure of "the disenfranchised students, the white, suburban, troubled boys," *GMA*'s implicit indictment of contemporary youth culture toxins, dissociated from TV messages, is stark.

For *Good Morning America*'s Sawyer, it seemed important to suggest, in hindsight, that these new, non-televisual symbols of male alienation somehow affected "this whole question of a culture of violence being a true cause" in the string of horrific schoolyard shootings gripping the nation. Since Sawyer's gender-inflected concern about the representational extremes in present-day boy culture was situated in the very presentness of *GMA*'s live broadcasts of still-unfolding events in Littleton, her professionally controlled alarm seemed in step with and symptomatic of our much-lamented postmodern condition²⁵, or our devotion to a society of the spectacle. These views insist that our affective abilities (or abilities to empathize or identify) *vis-a-vis* others' pain and suffering are manipulated by the dictates of our hegemonic commercial media interests. In fact, television's preoccupation with liveness and instantaneity in its news broadcasts often comes at a high price, the price of historical memory. How different from Sawyer's plaintive remarks is the historical utterance that follows: "Why is it that there must be a period in the lives of boys when they should be spoken of as disagreeable cubs [or disenfranchised youths in today's vernacular]? Why is a gentle, polite boy

25. See FREDRIC JAMESON, *POSTMODERNISM, OR THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF LATE CAPITALISM* (1991); GUY DUBORD, *SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE* (Black & Red 1983).

such a rarity? . . . If your parents are willing for you to be the 'Goths and Vandals' of society, I shall protest against it. You have been outlaws long enough, now I beg you will observe the rules." This "angry attack on the boys of America," comes from popular, 1853 etiquette writer, Mrs. Manners.²⁶

While the experts, an FBI profiler and a child psychologist, were careful in their discussions of media influence versus domestic environment as causal agents in youth violence episodes, the segment's powerful visuals of the gun-play in the *Matrix* and the *Basketball Diaries* clips, and the *Doom* video game sample shifted the rhetorical balance against teen-oriented films and video games. Again, if public scrutiny is directed at one scandalized media, its vigilant gaze on another is temporarily averted. So, if we are worried about the stylized, and aestheticized fictional violence in films and video games, the "if it bleeds, it leads" charge leveled against television news shows and TV networks' other violent programming drop from the public radar screens, at least for a time. Displaced onto the threat of newer and deadlier media products, fear of the ubiquitous television violence gets a reprieve. More important, however, is that TV gets to define and disparage its competition while laundering its own violent and sensational images through the news and information departments. The endlessly recycled image of the bloodied young man making a daring escape from a Columbine High School window is but one sensational image that comes to mind.

In the same way, when we stop to consider the televisual flow of the Columbine coverage, upcoming show promotions, and commercials, we begin to recognize the old media's (particularly TV's) schizophrenic discourse on its new Internet and video game media rivals. For instance, even as MSNBC's round-the-clock, and the ABC network's *Good Morning America*, *Nightline*, and *20/20* programming characterize the Internet as responsible for corrupting youths at Columbine, it runs a commercial featuring a young, professional male benefiting from the Internet as a result of e-commerce. This commercial actor is placed inside an Internet icon frame, as the voice-over extols the saving-grace of the Internet. Similarly, during ABC's *20/20* coverage of the "day-after" news from Littleton, charges of video game violence were undermined by the network's decision to run a Brisk iced-tea commercial that features a violent, claymation spoof of a Bruce Lee martial arts film. Here is TV's brand of stylized violence, targeted at a youth market, playing alongside condemnations of the video game *Doom*. These examples illustrate the point made earlier about the need for balanced and sober discourses on the role of *all* media in this Colorado tragedy. This is not to absolve the video game and film industries of responsibility in contrib-

26. E. Anthony Rotundo, *Boy Culture*, in *THE CHILDREN'S CULTURE READER* 337, 337 (Henry Jenkins ed., 1998).

uting to the so-called culture of violence. The point, however, is to point up the counterproductive nature of myopic blame games where the psychosocial health of our youths and our larger society are concerned.

It is absolutely the case that the depiction of graphic violence in video games is often alarming, gratuitous, and unsuitable for many segments of our youth and adult populations. But I wonder why there is not as sustained a focus on the myriad forms of other destructive influences that plague and damage our culture, like the culture of domestic violence, the culture of guns, the culture of racism, the culture of sexism, the culture of classism, the culture of ageism, the culture of anti-intellectualism, the anti-youth culture, the culture of anti-multiculturalism, and on, and on. There are no easy answers or quick fixes to this devastating pathology that has gripped our nation in recent years. But, if we get caught in the crossfire of the media wars, our capacities for reasoned deliberations on the issue of youth violence will be the true casualties.

In conclusion, it is important to note how the endless loops of televisual footage of the Challenger explosion and the now-familiar of scene of Columbine students fleeing the most infamous school killings enact television critic Margaret Morse's suggestion that the past is not so much remembered via narrative as it is through TV reruns embedded as undisputed archival cultural images.²⁷ And it is these images that embody our society's simultaneous fascination with and fear of our ever-increasing technological present and future. The technology genie has been let out the bottle, and we need to figure out a way to get our three wishes, an end to youth violence, educational reform and workable gun control.

27. See Margaret Morse, *An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television*, in *LOGICS OF TELEVISION* 193, 193-221 (Patricia Mellencamp ed., 1990).