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Violent Video Games are What We  
Make of Them: An Ideological Perspective

Harrison Wallace

Georgia Southern University

November 21, 2006

### Abstract

This paper goes over the rhetorical notion of ideology and analyzes two reviews for the violent video game Saints Row on the Xbox 360 console. The notion of ideographs are applied in order to derive an overall message from the video game reviews and the two reviews, one from a Christian video gaming website, the other from a video game website owned by Fox Interactive Media, are compared to each other. Their ideographs are analyzed so that it can be understood as to why different points of view look at violent video games differently. The notion of immediate gratification versus delayed gratification is also analyzed in order to better understand why a Christian perspective and a corporate perspective are so different.

### Violent Video Games are What We Make of Them: An Ideological Perspective

The purpose of this criticism is to explore the nature of violent video games and how they are perceived by the public's eye. Furthermore, the report looks at the perception of violent video games and how a person's frame of mind shapes how they feel about violent video games. One of the simplest ways to do this is to explore two reviews of the same video game, in which both reviews come from different perspectives. The two reviews come from the Christian Centered Game Reviews, known as CCGR, website and the corporate sponsored gaming review website Imagine Games Network, or IGN. The game in question, Saints Row, is a game developed by game company Volition and published by game company THQ and released during the summer of 2006. The game has been chosen because of its similarity to the violent video game Grand Theft Auto. This study is guided by the rhetorical notion of ideology and more specifically the concept of ideographs and how they reinforce our "instructions" on how to react to violent video games. *This study finds that the Christian perspective uses ideographs to put Saints Row in a negative light in order to uphold Christian and moral values whereas the corporate media perspective uses ideographs to put Saints Row in a positive light in order to generate interest in the video game, causing readers of either review to be in conflict with one other.*

#### Justifying the Research

This study is relevant because violent video games have been a hot topic over the past few years, especially due to politicians such as Hillary Clinton who have used the violent video game issue in their platform (Conroy, 2005). The violence behind violent video games is what drives the motivation behind both the moral and corporate point of views. Video games have had a cultural impact on American society, especially the American youth. 35% of video gamers are 18 years old or younger (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2005). With the increasing

amount of animated violence in modern video games, it is inevitable that audiences, especially teenagers, will be exposed to violence via this medium where 45% of the games are of the fighting, shooting, and action genres (ESA, 2005). While the homicide victimization rate for teens aged 14 through 17 increased by 150% from 1985 to 1993, the rates from 1993 and beyond have declined to rates compared to 1976 through 1985. Recently, as of 2006, the offending rates of teens aged 14 through 17 have fallen below the rates for people aged 25 to 34, and the offending rates for children under 14 is at an all time record low (United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2006). Despite the decline of violence in youth, even the United States government has gotten involved with research concerning violent video games in today's society. Bills such as House bill HR 1145 which requires "the Federal Trade Commission to study the rating system of the video game industry and assess their labeling practices to determine if such practices are unfair or deceptive" have already been passed by congress (The Library of Congress, 2005). Because of these studies and investigations, the sale of violent video games to consumers under the age of 18 is now heavily regulated and violence in video games is closely monitored by numerous nonprofit and government bodies.

Of course there is plenty of hard research that claims violent video games affect children. Numerous scholarly studies about communication and electronic media have found that there actually is some sort of correlation between teen violence and violent video games. A journal article about the meta-analysis of the effects of violent video games on aggression says that the effect of violent video games has less to do with how much time is spent playing the game, but more to do with the nature of the violence in the video game. The article claims that "this study cumulates findings across existing empirical research on the effects of violent video games to estimate overall effect size and discern important trends and moderating variables" (Sherry,

2001). Another journal article yielded that “hierarchical regression analyses indicated that gender, sensation seeking, aggression, and frequency of Internet use had relatively strong contributions to explaining the use of violent media content composite and the measure of violent website content use” (Slater, 2003). A third article uses the linear structural relations model to find that “heavy use of computer games is associated with negative rather than positive outcomes in terms of academic achievement, self-esteem and sociability” (Roe & Muijs, 1998). Finally, to counter the fact that while youth related violence has actually declined compared to the statistics 15 years ago, a fourth journal article found that video games 15 years ago were much less violent in nature compared to games available in today’s market (Lachlan, Smith & Tamborini, 2003).

This negative effect that video games have are the driving point for the Christian and corporate parties. Each party uses the violent nature of video games in a different way in order to reinforce their stances. The Christian viewpoint and thus the video game review from the Christian gaming review website was chosen because of the ethical and moral codes held by Christianity. Christianity preaches such things as unconditional love, fidelity, and monogamy (Harkness, n.d.) while corporate institutions are known to use the glamour of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” to attract attention. The corporate viewpoint was chosen because it has been studied that corporations know that things like sex and violence sell. The name for this strategy is called age compression, and the focus is to push products considered for adults onto teenagers. An article from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation finds that “kids may not get the innuendo; but what they know is that sexy is cool” and that advertisers would tell you they are doing it because there’s a demand for it, though they avoid acknowledging that they have created

the demand (“Sex sells,” 2005). The review from gaming review website IGN was chosen because the website is owned by Fox Interactive Media Incorporated.

The Christian viewpoint was also chosen for this study because the Christian community has already had gripes with violence in today’s media. The United Methodist Church says, “We express disdain at current media preoccupation with dehumanizing portrayals, sensationalized through mass media "entertainment" and "news." These practices degrade humankind and violate the teachings of Christ and the Bible.” (United Methodist Church, 1996). The corporate viewpoint, and more specifically the viewpoint from Fox Interactive Media, was chosen because the Fox Network has been known to sell sex and violence to its audience with such shows as “Temptation Island” where unmarried couples are intermingled with others in order to test the strength of their relationships (“Temptation Island,” 2003) and “Man vs. Beast” which pits humans against animals to complete certain tasks and has come under fire from animal rights groups due to the degradation of the animals involved (“Unnatural animal acts,” 2004).

There have been studies on the role of violence and marketing and how the advertisements are “intended to attract children and teenagers” (Grier, 2001) and how the “impact of violence and of negative values” have indeed effected youths (Eagle, Bulmer & Bruin, 2002). One study in particular discusses the “Internet and its role as a marketing communications medium” in particular and also talks about the link between violent video games and violence and how they affect children (Eagle, Bulmer & Bruin, 2003). There have also been studies from Christian journals that claim “Children don't naturally kill; they learn it from violence in the home and most pervasively, from violence as entertainment in television, movies, and interactive video games” (Grossman, 2001).

The fact that readers of the Christian viewpoint would be in conflict with readers of the corporate viewpoint should not be surprising. The media can effect the way people perceive something, including a video game such as Saints Row. A journal article studied how news stories can frame the thoughts and feelings of its readers. The study had 278 participate in two studies, reading and responding to a fictitious story about possible reductions in state funding of their university. The studies found that in the way the stories were presented, whether as human interest, conflict, personal consequences, or a control version of just the news body itself, the stories “significantly affected the topical focus and evaluative implications of thoughts generated” and also “news frames also subtly could affect audience decision making about matters of public policy” (Price, Tewksbury & Powers, 1997). The Christian review of the video game will review the game in such a way as to make people think the game is bad, and the corporate review of the video game will review the game in such a way as to make people think the game is good.

The notion of interpellation should also be mentioned in regards to the two gaming reviews. Interpellation is defined as “the process by which you recognize yourself belonging to an identity,” according to Sara R. Stein (Stein, 2002). That is to say, because the entity and its audience belong to the same identity, they audience is more likely to agree with what the entity has to say. A Christian is more likely to read and agree with the Christian review, as the Christian sees itself as belonging to the Christian identity. A non Christian, or at least a Christian with less regards to Christian ethics, is more likely to read and agree with the corporate review, as this person sees itself as belonging to an identity that glorifies fast cars, scantily clad women, and violence.

## Method

The rhetorical notion of ideology was chosen because rhetorical ideology deals greatly with the symbol world that we live in, where the symbol world is defined by language and language tools and the power that symbols have, both in their influence and size. The concept of ideographs was chosen in particular because according to Michael C. McGee, as the symbol world deals with language, ideographs are “an ordinary language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal” (McGee, 1980)

Even though McGee claims that ideographs are found in political discourse, ideographs should be able to be found in any form of discourse, as the symbol world covers all basis of life, just as the social and physical worlds do. Noted rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke says that language “selects, deflects, and reflects in all three of the worlds we’ve identified together” (Burke, 1966) The concept of ideographs can also be applied broadly because as a language term, ideographs are words that we inherit, meaning these terms were already part of a system called a language. Words are more or less a label. However, languages are known as systems of word usage that encourage a certain type of behavior and so we should think of words as a highly compressed set of instructions.

William R. Brown says, “ideologizing is presented as the function of innate intrapersonal and interpersonal categorizing of experience. Ideologies flourish in open systems and decline in closed ones.” That is to say that words, or the instructions behind them, are defined by the experience associated with the word through the symbol world in which the word exists. For example, Iowa Hog raiser Paul Willis brings up the terms “hog farmer” and “pork producer.” Paul Willis would define a hog raiser as a “hog farmer” because it draws to mind the free-range

pasture procedure used in raising hogs. Since we are raised to understand words as a set of instructions, there would be a great deal of difference between “hog farmer” which brings to mind the farm and barn imagery, as compared to “pork producer” which brings to mind the systematic process of butchering hogs for meat. A member of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals may even call a hog raiser a “murderer.” Even though we are still talking about the same hog raiser, different phrases can be used and each phrase brings about a different set of imagery, which only enforces the fact that terminology in language is very powerful (Zinkand, 2001).

The concept of instructions can be tied back to the concept of ideographs suggested by McGee. Ideographs are “not a tangible thing, but rather a term we use to try to express certain conditions in life experience.” McGee uses the word “liberty” as an example of an ideograph as he says “we’ve probably never seen a liberty while walking in the mall.” Yet people still say things like “I don’t have enough liberty.” This is possible due to the quality of systemic metaphors, which give us common ways of expression topics, such as “time is money” or in this case “liberty is an essential possession” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since we can talk about liberty in such a manner, it reinforces that when we hear the word liberty, or any ideograph for that matter, we are reminded of a set of instructions on how to treat the word. McGee suggests that an ideograph, like liberty, is a normative goal that is often in dispute. Most importantly, ideographs are used by opposing sides to dispute something (McGee, 1980). There is no reason that something has to be political in nature in order to be disputed. An example of something that could be disputed, but is not political, and still uses ideographs, are two reviews for a given video game. The ideograph of family values could be used to argue against the ideograph of freedom of expression.

The IGN review describes Saints Row as fun. “It starts out fun and it stays fun. It gets deeper and more engaging, and the storyline and the characters come to life, and you're compelled by seeing the narrative unfold.” IGN even praises the ease of controlling guns in the game when they say, “Volition did several things very right, especially with gun controls. It worked tenaciously on nailing a good control system down.” The game’s story deals with gang life or as IGN says, “In the single-player game, you follow the story of four gangs fighting for power in the imaginary modern day town of Stilwater, and you start as a no-name, low-level innocent whose life is saved by Julius of the 3rd Street Saints and eventually play a major role in the gang's rise to power.” IGN calls this “a surprisingly good story” and gave the game a rating of 8.5 out of 10 (Perry, 2006) In sum, IGN uses the term “fun” as an ideograph.

The CCGR review says, “from small random acts of violence to massive shootouts, this game puts you in control as you kill endless amount of innocent and not-so-innocent citizens of Stilwater.” Unlike IGN, CCGR brings up a mission where the objective is “calling an ambulance and shooting the driver for respect.” In regards to profanity, CCGR mentions “If you were to count just the F words alone, I'm sure the total tally would be 1000+. The cutscenes are full of cursing, and the main game play is full of cursing.” As for sexuality, CCGR says, “This game is not about sly innuendoes or "wink-wink" sexuality, expect full on depictions of the dirtiest forms of sexual interaction and dialogue. Absolutely disgusting, and if I wasn't planning on reviewing it, I would never have finished single player.” Unlike IGN, CCGR does not think that the gang theme is a good story, but rather “the ethical portion of the game is another sinkhole. You are required to kill cops in some missions, and it is unavoidable in some others. You can easily kill pedestrians any time you want with minimal repercussions.” Finally, CCGR says that the game

has “a terrible sense of morality, racial stereotypes, and choices that go against traditional values” (Shy\_Guy, 2006) In sum, CCGR uses “traditional values” as a ideograph.

“Fun” and “traditional values” can easily be in dispute of one another, like McGee says they should be. IGN uses the term fun to represent the concept of “living in the fast lane” where there is no regard for morality and pleasure comes first. An example comes from a religious article about pop music and gospel music. Calvin M. Johansson describes pop music as immediate gratification and gospel music as delayed gratification. He describes delayed gratification as looking forward and new discovery and is consistent with God’s dealing of humanity. Immediate gratification deals with the here and now and has no lasting appeal. Johansson says, “Popular music’s standard is determined by the lowest common denominator of public taste. Gospel music he says consists of high standards. “Scripture, too, calls for high standards. They are easily seen, for example, in the Ten Commandments and in the Lord’s requiring Israel to remain separate from surrounding cultures” (Johansson & Bacchiocchi, 2001).

If gospel music versus popular music is applied to gospel values versus popular values, it can now be seen how the Christian review goes against the corporate review. The CCGR calls these gospel values “traditional values.” IGN calls the popular values, or immediate gratification, “fun.” One can now set up IGN and CCGR as opposing sides and say that traditional values will be argued against fun. In regards to Saints Row, IGN says that Saints Row upholds the goal of being fun while CCGR says that Saints Row violates the goal of holding traditional values.

Through IGN’s ideograph, Saints Row should be shed in a positive light. Through CCGR’s ideograph, Saints Row should be shed in a negative light. No matter how Saints Row is looked at, the game does not change. It is what it is and that’s all that it is. It is because of our instructions on how to interpret words that Saints Row is deemed good or bad. This is a good

example of rhetorical ideology because you can wind up with two different polar extremes. Similar to how the same hog raiser can be considered a “hog farmer” or a “murderer” depending on whose talking about it, Saints Row is either fun, which is good, or it violates traditional values, which is bad.

### Conclusion

While only two different viewpoints have been discussed, they are the two most important viewpoints when it comes to video game reviews. IGN has been around for 10 years and has gained so much popularity that it was bought by Fox Interactive Media, a leading media giant. CCGR on the other hand, while a small, independent gaming review website, has the respect of others in the Christian gaming community (Slick, 2000).

Saints Row violates Christian values such as unconditional love, as killing innocent people and unconditional love are in no way compatible with each other. Christianity would call the values such as fidelity and monogamy as traditional values and in Saints Row, prostitutes litter the streets and cop killing is encouraged. These are in direct conflict with the traditional values and so the game therefore has a terrible sense of morality. This is only justified of course if you view things such as cop killing and prostitutes as bad. Rhetorical ideology would have that people who are raised to interpret the word prostitute as bad and the word cop as good would fall in line with CCGR’s ideograph of traditional values and how they should not be violated to make something good.

Saints Row upholds popular values on the other hand, because gangsterism, prostitution, and drugs are all glorified in Hollywood movies and popular music. A person raised to interpret the word prostitute as good and the word cop as bad would definitely agree with IGN’s ideograph of fun. It should be considered though, that those who agree with CCGR’s ideograph

will typically be Christians themselves. This brings up the notion of interpellation, where a person agrees to something so that they may be identified with that group. In essence, someone raised with Christian values and that are instructed in how to interpret certain words are predestined to go along with something like CCGR. Someone growing up in a very secular household where popular culture is entwined into every aspect of life will be preprogrammed to accept violence as something that is fun and agree with something like IGN because they already belong to that identity. At the same time however, many teenagers raised in devout Christian households will enjoy the “fun” that Saints Row offers and ignore their “traditional values.” This can be viewed as a phenomenon because they are ignoring their instructions on what the words prostitute and cop mean. They could perhaps have a desire to understand or learn about a different physical, social, and symbol world. Patricia H. McNamara with the Journal of Marriage and the Family suggests that the insentience upon by children for “freedom” and “rights” erode the authoritative hierarchical norms that usually govern family relationships that is consistent with Christian teachings. (McNamara, 1985).

Forsaking one’s own symbol world to learn about another should not be considered a bad thing. If words are arbitrary and its their interpreted meaning that has significance, a person should explore other worlds in order to get the best understanding of the concept at hand. To call back to the hog raiser, a person should put themselves in the shoes as the person who raises hogs and sees themselves as a “hog farmer,” the person who orders pork and views the raiser as a “pork producer,” and the animal rights activist who views the raiser as a “murderer.” Only then could a person agree on a deeply held value, or ideograph, that holds true across all interpretations. This of course would be severely hard to do, because that person is essentially throwing a new meaning behind an arbitrary word. Hog raiser shifts from pork producer to

murderer. In terms of Saints Row, a prostitute suddenly shifts from being an adulteress to a woman in position of power. Cop killing shifts from being a crime to merely swatting a fly that gets in your way.

This could explain why a person who leaves the Christian faith generally never returns, and a person who becomes a Christian never loses that newfound faith. An article from the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* seems to agree with this, as the study finds “religious experimentation is not an isolated phenomenon but is rooted in broader cultural disaffection and is closely associated with other kinds of countercultural behavior” in college youth (Wuthnow & Glock, 1973). Another study from the same journal suggests that “Religious commitment, it is argued, is sustained by interaction with other believers after recruitment to the religious group has taken place” suggesting that a person who converts to a faith has a higher commitment as someone who is brought up in said faith (Barker & Currie, 1985). This just reinforces the fact that even if one does decide to value a different ideograph, they agree with their new ideograph just as strongly as they did with their old one, which keeps two opposing ideographs, such as the ones presented by CCGR and IGN, at odds with each other.

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