

Scapegoating Video Games- The Comics Code Authority 2.0

Two years ago, I watched a 1988 documentary entitled *Comics Confidential*, which gave a brief history of American comics. It was fun to see old interviews with Will Eisner, Frank Miller, Stan Lee and Art Spiegelman in all their 1980's glory, but the really interesting part was the focus on the 1954 Comics Code Authority and how completely it shaped the comics industry. There were clips from a black-and-white TV show about the evil influence of comic books, complete with a narrated and scored mini-drama in which kids are apparently hypnotized by the violent images in a comic. They immediately start stabbing trees and smashing rocks, and then run off to torture another kid with fire, sticks and pocketknives. Other clips showed an actual McCarthy-esque Senate hearing in which lawmakers and psychiatrists preached about the dangers comic books pose to children. As a lifelong comics fan, I was horrified and fascinated and had to know more.

I learned about psychiatrist Fredric Wertham and his 1950s crusade against comic books, culminating in his best-selling book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). That same year, the newly-formed United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency held televised public hearings on the effects of comic books on America's youth. Representatives from all the major comics publishers appeared to defend themselves and their industry.

The most disturbing part of the hearings is the blatant lack of meaningful evidence. Most of it consisted of "look how many comics are sold every month" and "look how scary these comics are," with lots of "in my opinion," "I believe" and "it's possible" peppered in. Fredric Wertham himself was a prominent witness, but even the data cited from his own book was misleading and, in some cases, completely untrue. (Wertham's methods and findings were widely criticized in his own field.) Another witness submitted a document stating the perceived contribution of motion pictures to juvenile delinquency, and suggested that the same principles would probably apply to comic books as well. Pretty scientific stuff.

Despite the lack of real data, the televised hearings went a long way in the court of public opinion. Within six months, the Comics Magazine Association of America was born, a self-censoring body set in place by the comics industry to avoid government regulation. Its appointed leader was New York Magistrate and juvenile delinquency specialist Charles Murphy, who established the Comics Code Authority, a list of guidelines that all CMAA-approved publications must follow. I immediately recognized the CCA stamp from pretty much every comic I read as a kid, but whose meaning I had never questioned. Here are just a few of the CCA guidelines:

"Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority."

“In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.”

“No unique or unusual methods of concealing weapons shall be shown.”

“Restraint in the use of the word ‘crime’ in titles or sub-titles shall be exercised.”

“Special precautions to avoid references to physical afflictions of deformities shall be taken.”

“All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.”

“The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.”

“No comics magazine shall use the word ‘horror’ or ‘terror’ in its title.”

“Advertising for the sale of fireworks is prohibited.”

Although it went through occasional revisions, the CCA stood for decades. I learned all this with a detached sense of “I can’t believe this happened,” but it was tempered by the knowledge that it was a long time ago. People were dumber back then, right? That craziness would never fly these days. No way.

Then the Sandy Hook shooting happened. In the weeks that followed that nightmare, the news was dominated by the debate over how best to prevent such tragedies in the future. Predictably, the most common conversations were about gun control and mental illness. As the issue became more and more politicized, the debate took a hard swing towards gun control.

And... video games?

On December 21, one week after the Sandy Hook shooting, NRA executive vice-president Wayne LaPierre said in a press conference: “Guns don’t kill people. Video games, the media and Obama’s budget kill people... There exists in this country a callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people through vicious, violent video games.” LaPierre went on to propose a nationwide program to have every school in America guarded by armed volunteers, somewhat overshadowing his earlier condemnation of the “shadow industry” of video games.

Surprisingly, the NRA’s video game attack seemed to catch on. Tennessee Republican Representative Diane Black later attributed the Sandy Hook shooting to “unprecedented levels of violent games, music and so on.” Democratic Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia introduced one of Congress’s earliest

Sandy Hook-related bills: a bill to study the impact of violent video games. California Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein recently said at a public affairs forum that “[video games play] a very negative role for young people, and the industry ought to take note of that.” She followed with this passive-aggressive little threat: “If Sandy Hook doesn’t do it, if the knowledge of these video games this young man played doesn’t, then maybe we have to proceed, but that is in the future.” Senator Feinstein’s public attacks on the gaming industry continue.

Unfortunately for our opinionated lawmakers, many studies relating video games to violence and aggression have already been conducted, going back as far as 1984. While violent games do lead to slightly heightened aggression in the short term, no ties to real violence have ever been shown. Furthermore, the number of violent video games sold in the U.S. continues to grow, but for years, violent crime in the U.S. has steadily gone down.

Another study won’t help. Experts put out statement after statement saying “mass shootings occur too rarely and randomly to effectively conduct a group study”; “these things happen as a result of many factors, not any one factor”; “any new study would take many years to glean any reliable information.” Since the data tying gaming to violence doesn’t exist, any new “study” would likely turn out much like Fredric Wertham’s book, and the televised hearings that followed: rife with skewed, misleading evidence masquerading as science, with a politically-motivated and pre-determined outcome.

If we’re not vigilant, the Comics Code Authority will be reborn in the gaming industry. The 1954 comic book scare saw book-burning rallies all over the United States and Canada. Following Sandy Hook, there have been collection drives for violent video games, which are later destroyed. Connecticut State Representative DebraLee Hovey has called for a “sin tax” on M-rated video games. Are games really what we should be talking about? The “sin” would be to allow another art form to be creatively strangled by political bullying and manufactured outrage. The “debate” over gaming is a false one, and we should ask why it’s been put in front of us at all.