Who hearkens to the monster’s scream? Death, violence and the veil of the monstrous in video games

CARLY A. KOCUREK

Alternative blood is a practice in video games in which on-screen characters bleed green or other off-coloured blood when killed. The practice, intended to minimise in-game violence and reduce the depiction of gore, has become common since the release of Carmageddon (1997) and can be deployed as a means of either placating ratings boards and censors or offering players greater in-game choice, as in the case of Serious Sam 3 (2011). This article suggests that alternative blood and the more general depiction of on-screen targets as ‘monstrous’ as currently deployed in video games often serves to dehumanise the familiar and limit the presentation of death. Instances from video games in the horror, Western and war genres are examined and placed in a context that considers the history of these genres and of thematically related propaganda. This analysis suggests that the justification of deaths through alternative blood and monstrousness may not dampen the impact of violence in the way that developers and moral guardians might assume. Ultimately, this article argues that the desire to minimise the impact of in-game deaths by rendering victims as ‘monsters’ enacts a type of cultural violence by dehumanising them. This aesthetic dehumanisation of in-game victims echoes propaganda strategies used to justify historical violence and may have negative social consequences and should be further studied.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of rendering on-screen victims monstrous is a long-standing one. When Death Race (Exidy 1976; Figure 1) caused an early video gaming moral panic, the game’s publishers were quick to claim the on-screen victims were dangerous monsters, not innocent pedestrians. In the game, players operate on-screen cars and run down stick figures that shriek then turn to crosses when hit. Exidy claimed that the game’s stick figures were monsters or gremlins, both in advertisements for the game and in statements made to the press. Because the on-screen graphics were so simple, the effort required to transform the ‘symbolic pedestrians’ into monsters in need of extermination was relatively minor – a few choice words helped recontextualise the game and potentially alter its meaning (Kocurek 2012).

Exidy’s attempts at reframing the in-game victims may not have placated those critical of the game, but it does present an early instance of a now long-standing strategy.
of presenting appropriate game violence. Even in the United States, where game violence is minimally regulated, game publishers often use monstruousness to complicate in-game actions that would otherwise be read easily as murder. To kill humanoid zombies, for example, is presented less as murder and more as necessary extermination. In this way, more recent games, while much more technically sophisticated than Death Race and therefore much more highly representational, subtly deploy the same slogan used to sell that early game – it is, after all, 'fun chasing monsters' (Exidy 1976, 9). However, in presenting this neat cleaving of conquering heroes and monstrous villains, these attempts to minimise game violence may enact a different type of rhetorical violence, echoing the strategies of dehumanisation employed in propaganda campaigns.

Video games should be carefully considered as cultural texts as they may enact real harm with regard to popular beliefs and perceptions. In this article, I consider the impact of alternative blood in video games. This article begins by providing some historical context for the practices considered, then proceeds from a close reading of game titles, namely Lego Indiana Jones The Original Adventure (Traveller’s Tales 2008), Serious Sam 3: BFE (Croteam 2011) and Red Dead Redemption Undead Nightmare (Diego and North 2010). Drawing on these specific examples, I then consider the position of these practices in terms of the often problematic histories of the genres these games draw on and strategies of propaganda.

I argue that the impact of alternative blood and the dehumanisation of victims in video games is not to minimise on-screen violence, but instead to enact another type of violence. I argue that alternative blood and similar schemes often function as a type of propaganda. By dehumanising the victims of on-screen violence, alternative blood presents victims as monstrous; although this is a deliberate strategy on the part of game designers, it is one that invokes – purposely or otherwise – propaganda strategies that have long been used as a political strategy to justify the marginalisation, abuse and even extermination of populations marked as ‘undesirable’.

Just as alternative blood schemes are context-dependent and potentially fraught in the ways they transform on-screen death, so the transformation of human targets to monstrous others is potentially fraught. Monstrousness itself can be a politically charged and slippery category as has been evidenced by much research into the cultural significance of horror films. For example, in Carol Clover’s (1993) foundational work on the complicated positioning of gender in the slasher film, she compellingly argues that the young men drawn so strongly to the genre may not be delighting in the torture of the films’ heroic ‘final girl’ by a monstrous character so much as identifying with and rooting for her ultimate survival. The reliance on monstrous characters to justify violence in video games is no less thorny an issue. What does it mean, for example, if in a realistic military shooter based on a real-world contemporary or historical conflict, enemy combatants – or even civilians – are framed as monsters? The dehumanisation and subsequent devaluation of ‘enemy’ populations has been a key function of war propaganda for hundreds of years and also plays a role in contemporary cultural politics, policing practices and other important arenas. In dehumanising on-screen victims to justify their termination, game designers may knowingly or otherwise participate in a propaganda-esque presentation of on-screen victims that has broader political implications.

GENERATIONS OF MONSTER CHASERS

Concerns about video games date to the initial commercial deployment of the medium in the early 1970s. By the mid-1970s, Death Race had sparked moral outrage and marked the beginning of what has become an ongoing conversation about the impact of in-game violence. Then, as now, critics questioned whether the interactivity of the games might make them more insidious than earlier media such as film and television. Gerald Driessen, a behavioural psychologist who served as the manager of the National Safety Council’s research department, spoke out against the game, specifically citing the game’s interactivity as a problem:

From a psychological and behavioral viewpoint, the device is definitely negative. One of its most insidious and probably unrecognised characteristics is its shift from imaginary visual behavioural actions taken by the player. The person is no longer just a spectator, but now an actor in the process of creating violence.

(Young 1976)

The concerns Driessen raised in 1976 regarding the importance of interactivity for games’ influence on players have remained a hotly debated area of research.

While Death Race attracted particularly pointed criticisms, the concerns raised about that title reflected broader unease with video games as a medium, which has persisted to the present although studies of game violence have been contentious and often contradictory. In 2005, for example, the American Psychological Association (APA) adopted a ‘Resolution on Violence in
Video Games and Interactive Media’ that stated that game violence had harmful effects on youth specifically and, more generally, increased hostility and aggression among players (APA 2005). However, by the time the APA formed its Task Force on Violent Media in 2013 to reconsider the organisation’s official position on violent media, the issue had become contentious enough that 228 researchers (myself included), among them psychologists, signed an open letter to the APA asking that the organisation proceed cautiously in revising its statements. Throughout this debate, interactivity has remained a key point of discussion. However, recent research has suggested that we would do well to consider more specifically the presentation of violence as it relates to targets and victims.

Just as the debate about game interactivity and violence can be traced to *Death Race* in 1976, so can the use of monstrousness as a frequent justiﬁcation of video game violence. Many games use literal monstrousness as a defence of on-screen killings. *Death Race*, with its shreking gremlins, provides an early example of this strategy, as does *Carmageddon* with its green blood, but literal monsters, including zombies, werewolves and all manner of creatures lurching, fanged or fierce, remain popular in-game targets. One of the most inﬂuential ﬁrst-person shooter (FPS) games, *Doom* (id Software 1993; Figure 2), lets players ﬁght their way through demons and the undead, even as those targets looked recognisably, suspiciously, human. The long running *Resident Evil* franchise (Capcom 1996) sets players against a horde of zombies that turn out to be the result of illegal experimentation conducted by the Umbrella Corporation. In *Silent Hill* (Konami Computer 1999), players confront demons, phantoms and creatures that parasite human hosts, who in turn become monstrous.

While the makers of *Death Race* were able to rely in part on the game’s spare in-game graphics to reframe the game, more recent games have often dealt with more technologically sophisticated strategies for addressing similar complaints. At its most basic, alternative blood involves the conversion of on-screen blood from red to green; this conversion can be used as a means of claiming that the on-screen victims are something other than human. In the now-infamous case of *Carmageddon* (Stainless Games 1997), developers claimed the green-blooded characters were ‘zombies’; in another iteration of the game, the green zombie blood was replaced with black oil, and the characters became ‘robots’. After-market patches appeared online shortly after the game’s release, and at least some of these were ultimately traced back to the game developers. In the case of both *Carmageddon* and *Death Race*, game publishers proved eager to appeal to a player base attracted to overt violence even as, publicly, they worked to disavow or minimise those same themes. These types of strategies are still deployed by contemporary game makers.

At this point, I would like to consider three relatively recent games: *Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures* (Traveller’s Tales 2008), which is the ﬁrst of two *Lego Indiana Jones* games released to date; *Red Dead Redemption Undead Nightmare* (Rockstar San Diego, Rockstar North 2010), which began as downloadable content (DLC) for *Red Dead Redemption* and was later released as a standalone title; and *Serious Sam 3: BFE* (Croteam 2011). These three games present divergent aesthetics and styles of gameplay and draw on diverse generic conventions. However, all three games deploy strategies intended to mitigate the offence of on-screen violence.

**GAMES**

**Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures**

*Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures* (Traveller’s Tales 2008) draws on the narrative world developed through the ﬁrst three ﬁlms in the *Indiana Jones* franchise: *Raiders of the Lost Ark, Temple of Doom* and *The Last Crusade*. The game depicts Jones and his escapades using a distinctive Lego-based aesthetic, often to humorous effect. Players navigate the game from a hub based on Jones’s university teaching job and access missions using maps displayed on the walls. The Indiana Jones of the games is, like the Indiana Jones of the ﬁlms, a university professor and archaeologist who escapes the seeming order of his university work to engage in international adventures and obtain important artefacts.

As in the ﬁlms, the in-game adventures are often dramatic and dangerous even while they are punctuated with humour. In the level ‘The Lost Temple’, a cut scene
places the action in ‘South America, 1936’. Beginning with this cut scene, the game reproduces the racist and orientalist worldview presented in the original films. Satipo, Jones’s Peruvian guide, is shown nervously assessing dangerous conditions, including attacks from hostile ‘natives’, as Jones bumbles through the jungle, oblivious. Ultimately, gameplay begins once Satipo and Indy are left alone – their other companions dead or fled. In this adventure, as in the other adventures in both this game and its sequel, players collect hearts and treasures, dig up buried items, solve puzzles and avoid enemies such as alligators and giant spiders. Puzzle elements often rely on the moving or building of Lego items such as bridges or ladders or the manipulation of levers or buttons. Later, Indy is, as in the film, betrayed by Satipo in a cut scene in which he, with a group including more hostile natives, takes the artefact from Indy who then escapes with Jock Lindsey. After the cut scene ends, the players continue their adventure as Jock and Indy, who almost immediately enter into conflict with hostile ‘natives’. Through the fighting, defeated characters – whether players or opponents – explode into a shower of Lego component parts. Enemies such vanquished disappear while player avatars quickly respawn.

Violence against avatars and enemies is minimised through a playful engagement with Lego bricks as medium; those ‘killed’ do not die so much as break apart, regardless of whether they are stabbed with spears, shot by guns, whipped or beaten (Figure 3). While avatars and other characters may be treated similarly, the treatment of particular types of characters – in particular, the in-game ‘natives’ – as so easily disposable is hard to separate from the film franchise’s fraught racial politics. While the game boasts literally dozens of playable characters, nonwhite characters often have character names like ‘Hovitos Tribesman’ and ‘Sherpa Gunner’. The minimisation of character-on-character violence in the Lego Indiana Jones games may make them less gory than the source films, but it also amplifies the entire franchise’s willingness to treat certain lives as inconsequential.

**Serious Sam 3: BFE**

**Serious Sam 3: BFE** (Croteam 2011) includes five separate ‘blood modes’: red, green, hippie, kids and none (Figure 4). The red blood is ‘standard’ for the game’s...
aesthetic of 'ultra violence'. The green option simply transforms the game’s standard gore from red to green. In 'hippie mode', struck figures explode in 'a cornucopia of flower, carrot and pumpkin guts', and, similarly, in 'kids mode', the gore is replaced with 'candy canes, lollipops, and sparkles' (Mallory 2011). The ease with which the player may move between these modes makes clear that they are included for player amusement and not as any kind of parental controls.

Serious Sam presents a deliberate excess of violence and delights in a camp aesthetic of death. The 'hippie mode' and 'kid’s mode' in Serious Sam 3 are humour with the very moral guardians who question the appropriateness of violent games serving as the butt of the joke. The names of the modes suggest the punchline: 'Clean' video games, bloodless video games, are for children and delusional bleeding hearts, not for real gamers. The meaning, even, of alternative blood is dependent on context. In Serious Sam 3: BFE, alternative blood is a wink and a nod to the player and a sneer towards would-be censors.

Serious Sam: BFE takes place in Egypt where Sam 'Serious' Stone is part of a military Earth Defence team tasked with extracting a second team who have been protecting a scientist who has researched ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics information believed to be important to powering an artefact known as the Time-lock that might help save the planet from its current alien invasion. Sam is separated from his team, and much of the early game is Sam’s solo efforts to retrieve the hieroglyphics. As Sam, the player first enters Cairo unarmed in a seemingly abandoned building. The player collects health, armour and weapons while occasionally receiving communications via audio and fighting off alien creatures at an increasing rate.

Drawing on tropes of the science fiction and FPS genres, Serious Sam 3: BFE plays with genre conventions and engages in deliberate camp. While the blood options in the game’s early menus may provide a hint at what is to come, as the game progresses, other elements echo this aesthetic. Gore is vivid and blood is plentiful; at points, the player’s weapon and hand may be shown covered in blood for several scenes. Additionally, the aliens come in only a few types and are otherwise identical and interchangeable, even making identical sounds. One alien type has a single giant eye, and occasionally the character will wind up holding a dead alien’s eyeball aloft on screen.

While the narrative of Serious Sam justifies the on-screen violence – the aliens are, after all, invaders bent on human extermination – the representation of that violence is simultaneously playful and brutish. The game seems to suggest that violence is not something to be regretted so much as something to be enjoyed, a
suggestion only furthered by the irreverent comic blood options. As in Lego Indiana Jones’s, violence becomes cartoonish. However, while Lego Indiana Jones cartoonish violence is minimised through toy-based animation, the cartoonish violence of Serious Sam is alternately maximised in the game’s default red blood mode or minimised through alternate modes that present the same excess rendered more monstrous through colour change or surreal through the use of playful motifs as in the ‘hippie’ mode shown in Figure 5.

**Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare**

Western-inspired series Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar Games 2010) is characterised by gun violence, but that violence is narratively justified in part through the criminality and depravity of his targets. The franchise’s aesthetic – that of a Spaghetti Western – was chosen in part because generic conventions allowed for a high level of violence. That Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare (Rockstar Games 2010), one of the most successful DLC packs released for Red Dead Redemption combines the game’s established Spaghetti Western aesthetic with that of a zombie movie is, perhaps, unsurprising. The Western genre is frequently cross-pollinated by other popular genres including science fiction and horror, and at the time of the pack’s release in 2010, zombies had become a cultural fixation.

The promotional graphics and opening credits for Undead Nightmare echo those of the horror films of the 1960s and 1970s, most notably the zombie films of George Romero (Figure 6). In imbuing its antagonists with visible monstrousness, Undead Nightmare ensures that Marston’s actions are doubly justified; he is fighting to save thousands of people by finding a cure to the zombie plague, and he is only eliminating the rotting undead who threaten the living and impede his progress. However, that double justification also serves to imply that the ‘undesirables’ of the West were themselves monsters – at least metaphorically. In the case of Undead Nightmare, the depiction of the American West as a vast expanse populated primarily by monsters and undesirables is removed only by degrees from the propaganda that justified the extermination and forceful relocation of American Indians that made Westward expansion possible (Slotkin 1973, 1985). Undead Nightmare performed well enough that Rockstar later released it as a standalone disc that did not require players to own the original Red Dead Redemption game.

Undead Nightmare is only one of many games that echoes the propaganda of Westward expansion, but it provides a particularly provocative example as it makes explicit the imagining of the Wild West as a vast expanse just waiting to be vacated and properly repopulated (Figure 7). Monstrousness may make Marston a hero, but alleged monstrousness also justified the aggressive depopulation and taming of the western wilds. At the opening of Undead Nightmare, Marston is just beginning to put his life back together, and he is called, in sinister voiceover, ‘a man ready for anything, well, almost anything’.

In the opening cutscene, Marston is shown at home with his wife and son, who is worried about his missing uncle. After the family has gone to bed, they are surprised by the uncle’s return as a zombie. Marston is forced to kill him, but not before both wife and son have been infected. Marston ties up his remaining family members. This early scene establishes the narrative of Undead Nightmare while also building sympathy for Marston, who would want nothing more than to be home safe with his wife and son, but instead must make a desperate attempt to find a cure to save not only his family, but the entire Wild West.

In Blackwater, Marston finds eerie graffiti saying ‘The dead have risen’ and ‘God save us’. The first survivor Marston meets, the Professor, is promptly attacked by a zombified Mr. Nastas, who the Professor has referred to as an ‘Indian fellow. Dumb as bricks but, a good sort’. While the attack results in part from the Professor’s own poor judgement in leaving Marston’s side without a
weapon, the scene also suggests that it is the Marston’s own rugged intelligence and common sense that can, and should, prevail over the professor’s university education. Marston kills Uncle, the Professor, Mr. Nastas and a finely dressed woman from Blackwater in the game’s early scenes. While he struggles to save his own wife and son, he has little compunction dispensing with the other infected. The game doubles the rationale for these deaths – the west must as always be won and preserved through violence, and the undead must be eliminated. However, through these early attackers, the game seems to make suggestions about who rightly can and should survive in the West. That Marston, an embodiment of rugged ideals of masculinity, is cast as the hero against zombified academics, women, and ‘Indians’ echoes and forwards the established values of the Western genre.

VIOLENCE OF DEHUMANISATION

Marston, like Sam, like Indy, is the rightful hero of the narrative and players are intended to both understand and embrace their judgement. And, while Undead Nightmare and the other games discussed work hard to rationalise the violence in which they engage players, this violence remains fraught. Dehumanisation of on-screen targets is, in theory, supposed to lessen the impact of on-screen violence, making the games less psychologically dangerous to players. However, the dehumanisation of targets is, itself, a kind of violence and one frequently practised as part of military campaigns and other types of cultural and social violence. By engaging in the dehumanisation of targets, games attempt to dampen on-screen deaths while engaging in a different kind of violence, effectively ranking and devaluing the lives of both of in-game targets and the real people they may represent.

The three games most closely considered here utilise various means of mitigating violence; Lego Indiana Jones relies on cartoonish, rather than realistic violence, Undead Nightmare relies doubly on the genre tropes of the Spaghetti Western and the splatter horror film to locate its violence within accepted cultural forms, and Serious Sam 3: BFE may draw on science fiction tropes, but it also relies on broad humour and deliberate excess to present its violence with a particular kind of glee, which is only heightened by the playful deployment of alternative blood.

Many violent games fit within accepted cultural narratives of violence: the necessary policing of urban crime or the righteous, orderly violence of war, both of which are framed as essential to the preservation of order (Kocurek 2012). In the United States in particular, violent games often present military conflicts, Wild West-style vigilantism, policing activities (or, conversely,
criminality) or horror as marked by monsters. Games within all of these thematic genres – war, Western, cops ‘n’ robbers, horror – draw on established media genres with their own conventions, tropes and histories. They are framed by established cultural narratives of violence, which means that violence presented through such stories is more palatable. However, stories presented through these narratives also carry with them the baggage of their genres. The war games, like war movies and other war stories, present nationalistic and jingoistic tales of valour and perseverance; Westerns rely on white imaginaries of the West, marked by the extermination and removal of indigenous populations; cops ‘n’ robbers games and other games based in policing practice define and conscribe criminality while justifying the action of state agents; and horror games rely on tropes mired in racist and gendered anxiety even as they present fantastical antagonists.

Horror video games draw on established generic conventions that pre-date the medium and have precedent in horror literature, horror films and other media (Kirkland 2011). The dehumanised monsters of horror films and books, even when presented sympathetically, are frequent, justified targets for narrative violence, and this violence often reflects broader cultural conflicts surrounding gender, race, ethnicity or socioeconomic class (Auerbach 2012; Cohen 1996; Poole 2011; Worland 1997). In video games as in these earlier media, killing monsters may be more acceptable than killing people, but those monsters can stand in for marginalised or pathologised people. As presented by film-maker George Romero, for example, zombies become an apt metaphor for class conflict, enabling a critique of consumerism (Bishop 2010). Vampires are a frequent stand-in for ethnic or sexual others and can reflect anxieties surrounding blood-borne illness (Fink 2010; Heidenreich 2012; Khader 2013). Race and gender conflicts are encoded into many if not most monster movies (Clover 1993; Gonder 2003, 2004; Skal 2001).

Monsters are frequently coded as social undesirables – as racial or ethnic minorities, as sexual deviants, as those living on the margins of society. While the monstrousness of characters may make the presentation of their persecution and death more palatable to viewers or players or even ratings boards, the dehumanisation of monsters – whether green-blooded zombies or insidious humanoid demons – as a means of justifying on-screen deaths is often reflective of or even a further instance of the dehumanisation of real people. Because horror so frequently targets the members of marginalised groups (Auerbach 2012; Bishop 2010; Poole 2011; Worland 1997), it is worth considering that the dehumanisation of these groups through aesthetic monstrousness is itself a furthering of social and cultural violence.

While horror games are an obvious arena for presentations of monstrousness, horror is not the only thematic game genre in which monstrousness is deployed as a means of justifying in-game violence. Games about war, crime-fighting and the North American ‘Wild West’ of the late 1700s through early 1900s frequently present in-game killing as necessary and justified. At the same time that Death Race was provoking outrage, a number of other violent games were appearing at local corner stores and bars. These games, however, largely fell within established cultural narratives of violence, including the Western (Kocurek 2012). The theme of Westward expansion, like the theme of military conflict or of horror, is one that draws on a rich tradition of propaganda and provides an acceptable framework for in-game violence.

Many video games necessarily rely on a neat cleaving of allies and enemies, of good and bad, a cleaving which, when coupled with monstrousness, can become particularly disturbing. Monstrousness heightens the dehumanisation of in-game enemies and justifies their execution. Players are right not to feel sympathy for the monsters darting across the playing field of Death Race or the zombies lurching across the Wild West of Undead Nightmare; they are, by design, unsympathetic characters, mere impediments to game victory. However, the monsters on-screen, like monsters elsewhere, often represent human actors. For example, the zombies of George Romero’s films represent unthinking masses seduced and subsequently consumed by capitalism (Bishop 2010), and, as Rick Worland (1997) argues, the monsters of Second World War era horror films often reflect propaganda that would make monsters out of US wartime enemies.

The Wild West’s legacy of violence is justified in part through the efforts to establish state order. And, like games in the Western genre, military games present violence justified through its alliance with state efforts at establishing and maintaining order. Military games, including many games in the popular ‘FPS’ genre, also utilise monstrousness. The presentation of military conflict – particularly military conflict based on real-world historical events – as a conflict with monstrous others can be particularly disturbing as it echoes long-standing military propaganda strategies. Modern warfare provides ready examples of the deployment of propaganda as military strategy. During the Second World War, for example, anti-Japanese propaganda in the United States fuelled Americans’ racist hostility towards
Japanese and Japanese-American people alike. Tin Pan Alley churned out two anti-Japanese songs, ‘You’re a Sap, Mister Jap’ and ‘The Sun Will Soon be Setting for the Land of the Rising Sun’, within days of the Pearl Harbor bombing (Moon 2003); the songs were soon joined by newspaper articles and editorials, comics, films and other pop culture propaganda. The propaganda helped justify both the forced relocation of American citizens of Japanese ancestry to internment camps and the eventual atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Dower 1986; Moon 2003; Sheppard 2001). Racist, orientalist beliefs about Japanese civilians and soldiers drove the American people to consider both as threats that should necessarily be managed through the deployment of extreme tactics (Dower 1986; Moon 2003; Sheppard 2001). Anti-Japanese propaganda is only one well-known example of dehumanisation as military and political tool and is not even the best-known example from the Second World War. The use of propaganda in Nazi-led Germany, to demonise people who were Jewish or who were part of other ‘undesirable’ groups, to brand Hitler’s regime, and to justify state actions, has been widely documented (Annaler 2008; Bytwerk 2005; Moore 2010; O’Shaughnessy 2009; Welch 2004).

These examples make clear that we cannot assume that dehumanisation of human victims is a values-neutral means of addressing or minimising video game violence. *Doom* combines the horror and science fiction genres over military violence; the game follows a space marine who fights through demons or the undead. In *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1993), the protagonist fights Nazis who he eventually realises are producing an army of mutants – doubly monstrous for being both Nazis and undead. *Wolfenstein 3D* faced controversy in Germany, where the Atari Jaguar version of the game was eventually confiscated for the use of Nazi imagery; versions of the game for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) were heavily altered for multiple markets. The American SNES version of the game used sweat as alternative blood, and the SNES copies distributed in Germany showed green blood rather than red. When the shooting of attack dogs was deemed offensive, the dogs were replaced by giant mutant rats.

In many games, including *Carmageddon* and in localised versions of numerous games, the change from ‘person’ to ‘monster’ is accomplished through a simple change, such as the alteration of blood from red to green or black or the elimination of that visible effect of on-screen violence. These changes usually do not significantly alter the appearance of on-screen enemies, so those killed on screen still look recognisably human even as they ooze off-colour blood. This may mean that the on-screen killings retain much of their punch, as they present recognisably human targets and corpses, but it also presents a particular kind of cognitive dissonance. As they spill green blood and die in fits of green gore, the corpses are human and not human at once, both recognisable and alien. These humanoid corpses with their alternative blood are not unlike the stick figures of *Death Race*, altered, in this case, not by a few rhetorical flourishes, but instead by a quick wash of colour, a minor alteration to the game’s appearance. The implications of killing these on-screen monsters can vary greatly depending on the game’s broader narrative and cultural context. These games may be perceived as less offensive, but there is something startling in the severing of on-game violence from the imagery of that violence, particularly when that violence is replaced by a charming animation or nothing at all.

Both in cases where alternative blood options are included as a feature for consumers and in cases where the only blood provided in the game is ‘alternative’ as a means of negotiating ratings and censorship boards, the alteration to the game’s aesthetic of death is one that requires serious attention. These options may seemingly transform victims from people to monsters, but they can also add additional layers of tongue-in-cheek humour to a game’s presentation of excessive, gleeful gore. By altering the appearance of blood, games can present on-screen deaths less as deaths and more as diversions. A man is shot, and he explodes, not into a sad wreckage of so much flesh, but instead in a shower of candy. Death may also, in games targeting younger audiences or in games where gore has been deliberately cleaned up for regional release, become a non-event. Slain enemies simply disappear, avoiding the messy spectacle of death entirely. The heroes prevail and survey a field emptied both of enemies and of any evidence of those opponents’ death.

While alternative blood and other strategies of marking in-game victims as monsters are intended to minimise violence, they can often enact a separate kind of cultural violence. The effect of this particular violence, of this propagandistic effacement of humanity, should be carefully considered and further studied. The research into the effects of playing violent video games has been largely inconclusive (Ferguson and Kilburn 2009), but most of that research has focused on violence generally and not interrogated the impact of particular representations. At least one study has found that playing violent games may increase intergroup bias, particularly when those games depict violence against cultural or ethnic others (Greitemeyer 2013). The marking of these others as monstrous, as subhuman,
through the use of alternative blood may heighten this effect. History has provided enough examples of the efficacy of propaganda in legitimising the abuse and marginalisation of various groups of people that we should be wary in endorsing practices that bear the markers of propaganda. Efforts to minimise violence in video games through the use of alternative blood and an aesthetic of monstrousness are such practices, and we should be more alert to their potential ill effects.

Aesthetic changes to the presentation of death in games fundamentally transform the depiction and potential meanings of these deaths. The violent explosion that marks a particular shot can become a gout of green acid, a surrealist shower of daisies or simply nothing at all. In many of these cases, the changes in representation, the elimination of red-blooded gore, are intended to minimise violence, but they often indicate, implicitly or explicitly, that the targets are something less than human. Deliberately or otherwise, the broad deployment of monstrousness as a justification for killing in video games implicitly suggests that those who can be killed are inherently monstrous. In this, games that deploy alternative blood schemes echo long-standing propaganda strategies that have been used to justify real-world violence against marginalised groups.

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