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# Bad object 2.0

## Games and gamers

### ABSTRACT

This is not a history project. Nor is it about video games and the people who play them. Instead, this project focuses on the cultural discourse surrounding digital games as they have been refracted by the lenses of American film and television. This study considers a broad cross-section of Hollywood's depictions of games, tracing their evolution from objects of fascination and technological possibility in the 1970s and 1980s to catalysts for antisocial behavior in the 1990s and 2000s. This evolution maps revealingly onto the changing economic circumstances of the games industry, describing a direct correlation between the economic viability of the industry and its critical depiction in Hollywood.

The chronological trajectory mapped by this project moves through recognizable stages with the goal of placing equal emphasis on specific media examples as well as broad patterns. This illuminates important but easily overlooked distinctions among various genres and platforms of games and how they are imagined on film and television. Arcade games, for example, were subjected to much less withering critiques than their home console counterparts; PC-based games were likewise more commonly granted nuanced treatment in the eyes of Hollywood. How can we explain these differences? A closer look at the evidence offered by film and television at various points in time, viewed in light of the material circumstances of the industries involved, may provide some answers.

The basic contours of this project's argument are simple. From its origins in the 1970s and continuing through the end of the 1980s, Hollywood's vision of games was remarkably accepting; narratives were largely balanced in terms of gender, and the youth culture emerging around games was portrayed with relative dignity. During this time, the games industry was still establishing its foothold in the homes of North America and making its way into the leisure time of families. In spite of stunning profits in the earliest days of the 1980s, the industry suffered a massive collapse in 1983, followed by a rebound of home consoles in the 1990s that placed it in more direct competition with the film and television industries. By the 2000s, console games were thoroughly integrated into American homes, posing for the first time a viable threat to the hegemony of the film

and television industries for domestic entertainment. Throughout this period of ascendance, cinematic tropes of gaming grew more critical, with gamers increasingly associated with a range of antisocial behaviors, especially violence, addiction and repressed sexuality. Ultimately, the project argues that depictions of games on film and television include both a dominant discourse of denunciation and notable exceptions that allow for more complex, alternate readings.

This project was created using the electronic authoring platform Scalar, which allows for the inclusion of a large number of clips – probably too many to expect any individual reader to watch them all. Whenever possible, the argument put forward in each of Scalar’s “paths” has been conceived with minimal dependence on adjacent elements. Readers may also explore this project’s complete collection of clips via the Media Chronology page. The goal of this structure is to enable readers to explore the project according to their own areas of interest rather than by necessarily following a sequence of linear arguments. In addition, the collection of clips included in this article constitutes a sub-archive within the critical media sharing site Critical Commons, where all original media files may be viewed or downloaded for further use. Reader-viewers are thus invited to investigate the media and arguments put forward here not as definitive or exclusive readings, but as interpretive beginnings, which will hopefully be generative of further discussion and research.

## INTRODUCTION

This is not a history project. Nor is it about video games and the people who play them. Instead, this project focuses a narrow beam on the cultural discourse surrounding game culture as it has been refracted by the lenses of American commercial film and television. The primary evidence considered in this project is thus not games themselves, but a multitude of examples drawn from film and television in which games and gamers have been envisioned by Hollywood over the past four decades. This study considers a broad cross-section of cinematic and televisual games, tracing their evolution from objects of fascination and technological possibility in the 1970s and 1980s to objects of derision and catalysts for antisocial behavior in the 1990s and 2000s. This evolution maps revealingly onto the changing economic circumstances of the games industry, describing a direct correlation between the economic viability of the industry and its negative depiction in Hollywood. These examples also evince a marked distinction between the consistently critical depiction of home console games and the more generous treatment of games that are PC-based or located outside the home, in arcades or other contexts.

During the 1980s, Hollywood generated a profusion of narratives involving games and gamers, sometimes as part of a central narrative conceit, other times as background or peripheral elements. A thorough history would situate these depictions as part of a dense array of cultural responses to the appearance of game consoles and personal computers in American homes that included adver-

tisements, news reporting, print and radio journalism and much more. Recurrent patterns of cultural resistance and acceptance of new technologies have been usefully documented and theorized by others (cf: Schivelbusch, McLuhan, Marvin, Spigel, et al). While these models have informed my investigation, it is important to remember that this project addresses not the technologies themselves, but the layer of popular cultural discourse that emerged around them on film and television. The overall historical trajectory mapped by this project moves through recognizable stages, but my aim is to focus on specific representational gestures rather than broad patterns. This allows us to make important but easily overlooked distinctions among various genres and platforms of games and how they are imagined on film and television. Arcade games, for example, were subjected to much less withering critiques than their home console counterparts; PC-based games were likewise more commonly granted nuanced treatment in the eyes of Hollywood. How can we explain these differences? A closer look at the evidence offered by film and television at various points in time, viewed in light of the material circumstances of the industries involved may provide some answers.

The basic contours of my own argument are simple. From its origins in the 1970s and continuing through the end of the 1980s, Hollywood's vision of game culture was remarkably accepting; narratives were largely balanced in terms of gender and the youth culture emerging around games was portrayed with relative respect. During this time, the games industry was still establishing its foothold in the homes of North America and making its way into the leisure time of families. In spite of stunning profits in the earliest days of the 1980s, the industry suffered a massive collapse in 1983, followed by a rebound of home consoles in the 1990s that placed it in more direct competition with the film and television industries. By the 2000s, console games were thoroughly integrated into American homes posing for the first time a viable threat to the hegemony of the film and television industries for commercial entertainment. A little more than two decades after suffering near total economic collapse, the games industry would surpass the earnings of the film industry and have continued to far outdistance it in the years to follow. Throughout this period of ascendance, cinematic tropes of gaming shifted to a more uniformly critical depiction, with gamers consistently associated with a range of antisocial behaviors, especially violence, addiction and repressed sexuality. Ultimately, I will argue that depictions of games on film and television include both a dominant discourse of denunciation and notable exceptions that allow for more complex or resistant alternate readings.

#### COLOPHON

We should be wary of historical models that imply causal relations or direct reflection between the real world and the worlds depicted on film and television. The goal of this project is not to prove that the rising economic threat of

the games industry in general -- or home consoles in particular -- motivated individuals or institutions in Hollywood to systematically work to discredit video games. A great many more factors certainly influence the content of films and TV shows and it is my hope to avoid making assertions that are overly deterministic or historically reductive. However, I believe these questions are worth taking seriously and it is only by viewing the original media themselves that an informed hypothesis may be made. Although the media samples included in this project are not exhaustive by any means, I have made every effort to include as many clips from the most diverse range of sources possible (given the project's parameters), dating back to 1973.

I hope it is self-evident from the project's framing as an annotated/narrativized media archive that my goal is not a scientific evaluation of the media under consideration here. Certain concepts such as the "cultural imaginary" would easily elude any desire for proof that my interpretation is true or data in support of my claims. Instead, I invite reader-viewers to investigate the arguments and observations put forward here not as definitive or exclusive readings, but as interpretive beginnings, which I hope will be generative of further discussion and research.

Finally, I recognize that this project contains a large number of clips - probably too many to expect any individual reader to watch them all. Therefore, whenever possible, the argument put forward in each "path" of the project has been conceived with minimal dependence on adjacent sections. My hope is that this will enable readers to explore the project according to their own areas of interest instead of necessarily following the linear arguments presented by the sequence of paths in this article.

Readers are encouraged to undertake their own investigation of the broad range of media included in the project chronology. The collection of clips included in this article constitute a sub-archivewithin the critical media sharing site Critical Commons, where all original media files may be downloaded for further use or investigation. In addition to the various paths featured in this project, readers are invited to explore the full collection of media samples via the Media Chronology page. Finally, readers are encouraged to deploy the Main Menu drop-down in the upper left of each page to jump to individual paths or pages in any order.

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