The Ethics of Selling Violent Video Games

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Barry Gunderson, vice president of marketing at Take-Two Interactive Software, exhaled as he leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. He reflected on how he had arrived at his current position and on the recent events that led him to reconsider his current line of business.

Barry was selected to his present position at Take-Two in 1999. He felt honored to have been chosen, as the job was in an incredible growth industry with an up-and-coming company. Prior to Take-Two, Barry worked at a major record house, promoting seven different labels during his time there. The job opening at Take-Two seemed like a breath of fresh air, though, and a perfect way into an industry with a brilliant future.

Take-Two Interactive Software

Take-two Interactive Software designs, manufactures, and markets video games for both personal computers and home gaming consoles, such as the Sony Play Station 2 and the Microsoft X-Box. The recent explosion in the video gaming market has meant incredible profits for those who succeed in the industry, and Take-Two has been on the cutting edge for some time now. The company’s stock has tripled in value since Barry joined, and its sales are steadily increasing. Take-Two’s 10 largest video game titles make up 75 percent of their principal product sales. Their two current top games, Grand Theft Auto 3 and State of Emergency, make up over 50 percent of the company’s total sales.

The Video Games: Meeting Consumer Demand

The company has successfully marketed several genres of games, ranging from bass fishing simulations to role-playing games. In their recent hit State of Emergency, players take part in a citywide riot, destroying everything in their path. Take-Two has become infamous, however, for their recent series of Grand Theft Auto (GTA) games. These games allow players to wander through computer-generated towns, acting out the life of a mobster. With each new title, the violence becomes more realistic, the criticism grows louder, and sales increase. Antiviolence advocates have specifically criticized the GTA 3 video-game player’s ability to purchase sexual favors from a prostitute and then murder and rob her to receive their money back. In Take-Two’s much anticipated upcoming release, players will be able to hijack cars, run over pedestrians and police officers, and utilize weapons of destruction, such as Molotov cocktails, rocket launchers, and assault rifles. The company willingly admits these games tend to be ultraviolent but points to the fact that all the games are marketed with “Mature” ESRB rating. Take-Two’s mature audience argument also relies on the fact that over 70 percent of Play Station 2 owners are over the age of 18.

While Barry does not like to think of games such as GTA 3 in the hands of minors, he also believes that the growing video game market has a right to play a violent video game if
they so desire. R-rated movies have become an entrenched part of American culture, and Barry views “Mature”-rated video games in the same light.

Barry abruptly snapped back to reality when his secretary called to remind him of his meeting at 7:00 P.M. that night with the rest of the management team. Unfortunately, real-life events and video games fantasy have once again collided, and now Barry must weigh in on an incredibly important issue.

**Video games Meet Real Life**

The date is October 15, 2002, and the Washington, D.C. area is in a state of panic. Since October 2, a sniper has been randomly targeting individuals in the area, and as of yet, few leads have been generated in the case. Besides the obvious tragedy, the case also weighs heavily on Barry’s mind for other reasons. Take-Two has slated the release of *GTA: Vice City*, the latest in the line of GTA games, on October 25. Four million copies of the game have already been presold by retailers, and the projections indicate that sales could top 10 million copies. If these projections are correct, *GTA: Vice City* will generate $400 million for the company. As the critical holiday shopping period inevitably approaches, Take-Two is relying on this product to keep the company profitable in the coming year. The sale of *GTA: Vice City* has been planned for over a year.

However, even in light of the past controversy caused by the GTA series, a particular facet of *GTA: Vice City* troubles Barry in light of the recent events in D.C. The new game allows players to utilize a sniper scope and indiscriminately kill people in parks, on street corners, and at gas stations. This eerily coincides with the manner of the recent attacks by the D.C. sniper. Certain consumer and antiviolence groups have demanded the postponement of the game’s release. Barry knows his input at the meeting will be critical in determining if Take-Two will push back the release date of the game. Barry also knows that if the company delays the release date of the game, the financial impact on the company will be enormous.

**Criticism and Complaints**

Barry contemplated the spotlight Take-Two’s decision would attract whatever its outcome. The video game industry has recently been a hotbed of advocate protest and government intervention. The Australian government actually refused to allow the sale of *GTA 3* in the country. Barry can repeat the statistics in his sleep; he has heard them so many times from the antiviolence campaigns. By the time a typical child reaches the age of 18, that child will have seen 200,000 dramatized acts of violence and 40,000 dramatized murders, which advocates say can lead to a blurring of the line between fantasy and reality violence for vulnerable children. Also, the advocates maintain that if children do happen to see the sniper aspect of *GTA: Vice City*, they will revisit painful and potentially damaging memories of the D.C. sniper. Of course, Barry feels the critics unfairly place the blame squarely on the video game creators and manufacturers, even though all the GTA games are clearly marked as “Mature.”

Barry is a father himself and can guarantee there is no way he would allow his 11-year-old son to play *GTA: Vice City*. Unfortunately, he also knows that in a recent government study,
85 percent of children aged 13 to 16 years were able to purchase violent video games that were ESRB rated “Mature” (only available for purchase to those over 17 years old). A policy analyst for the Culture and Family Institute has already spoken out against GTA: Vice City in the light of the D.C. events, stating that, “It’s a video game simulator that trains snipers. It’s sick.” Generally, Barry believes the advocates are simply searching for a scapegoat, but this time things felt slightly different.

**The Decision**

Barry sighs as he checks the time on his wristwatch. The conference room would be starting to fill with his peers, and they had a decision to make. He knows the release of a movie, Phonebooth, which centers on a sniper, has been postponed because of the D.C. attacks, but Barry doubts that movie accounted for over a third of the production company’s revenue. As he slowly collects the papers scattered across his desk and stands up, Barry revisits the reasons for his decision in his head one last time.

1. Should Barry recommend that Take-Two go forward with the release of GTA: Vice City?
2. Given the contemplated video game is legal, is clearly marked as “Mature” for audiences over 17, and is targeted for audiences not particularly offended by the themes of GTA: Vice City, is there an ethical issue of any kind in this case, and what moral standards are involved? How do you apply this knowledge in your own life?
3. Do video games producers bear any social responsibility whatsoever for the themes of gratuitous violence they reinforce or the messages they send about the treatments of women as sex objects?
4. If the answer to questions 3 is yes, what steps do you recommend be taken to improve the current situation regarding the marketing of video games in the United States? Demonstrate an understanding of principle-based ethics in addressing ethical dilemmas.
5. Relate an experience in your own life where you faced an ethical challenge. How did you resolve the challenge?
6. Community Involvement: describe community service you have participated in (inside our outside of school) and within your community, such as church or special community activities. Include awards and honors or offices held.
7. Academic (Cumulative GPA):
RELEASE OF INFORMATION

I will submit information (concerning my answers about my life experiences) that is true to the best of my knowledge. I agree that the Office of Financial Aid, Student Employment and Scholarships may release personal information to donors and selection committees including but not limited to directory information, financial information, academic information, and copies of essays and resumes. I also agree that this information can be used for CU publications or for news release purposes. Further, I understand that by applying for a scholarship, I may be subject to comply with Colorado state statute 24-76.5 C.R.S.

Please check the appropriate box:  □ Undergraduate student      □ Graduate student

Please sign here: _______________________________  Date: ____________________

Please contact emoore@uccs.edu for more information.
Principles

Integrity
Act with honesty in all situations

Trust
Build trust in all stakeholder relationships

Accountability
Accept responsibility for all decisions

Transparency
Maintain open and truthful communications

Fairness
Engage in fair competition and create equitable and just relationships

Respect
Honor the rights, freedoms, views, and property of others

Rule of Law
Comply with the spirit and intent of laws and regulations

Viability
Create long-term value for all relevant stakeholders